STAYING SMART:

How Today’s Graduates Continue to Learn Once They Complete College

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THE PASSAGE STUDIES

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Abstract: This report presents findings about the information-seeking behavior of relatively recent college graduates used for lifelong learning in personal life, the workplace, and the local communities where they lived. Included are results from online surveys of 1,651 respondents and telephone interviews with 126 study participants who graduated from one of 10 US colleges and universities between 2007 and 2012. Findings indicated that most graduates needed to learn a combination of basic and complex life skills during the past year, such as money-management, how to make household repairs, and how to advance in their careers and communicate better on the job. They consulted friends, family, and coworkers almost as much as the Web. Graduates preferred information sources that had currency, utility, and interactivity. They also placed a high premium on curated information systems that were organized and kept up-to-date, such as libraries, museums, and bookstores. A model of shared utility is introduced for explaining graduates’ use of contemporary social media technologies as well as personal connections they had established with trusted allies. Graduates reported four barriers to their continued learning efforts: lack of time, finding affordable learning sources, staying on top of everything they needed to know, and staying motivated to keep learning after college. As a whole, graduates prided themselves on their ability to search, evaluate, and present information, skills they honed during college. Yet, far fewer said that their college experience had helped them develop the critical thinking skill of framing and asking questions of their own, which is a skill they inevitably needed in their post-college lives. Ten recommendations are presented for improving educational strategies, resources, and services that foster lifelong learning.
Introduction

Jessica received her baccalaureate degree in finance from one of the best schools in the US in 2010.¹ The endless hours she spent studying had paid off. Unlike many of her classmates struggling to find entry-level career jobs in the worst job market for college hires in 20 years, she quickly landed a good job.² She put the books away and focused her energy on doing rather than learning.

Like most of today’s young graduates, Jessica soon discovered that questions do not end with college assignments. Real life requires constant learning. Within months of leaving campus, she found herself needing to figure out how to schedule student loan payments, negotiate a salary increase, brush up on a couple of spreadsheet functions, plan a sightseeing trip to New York, and learn how to cook for herself.

Without a second thought, she grabbed her iPad, did a Google search, and visited the sites she usually frequented, like YouTube, Pinterest, and Hipmunk. She also turned to a trusted friend for advice. These are the tools for lifelong learning in the 21st century, a flood of Internet- and human-mediated sources that help recent graduates solve basic to complex information problems.

Even though Jessica, and others in the Google Generation, may have more information outlets than all previous generations combined, today’s graduates are finding that staying informed, knowledgeable, and skilled may be more daunting than ever before.

Adding to this challenge, most graduates fight to carve out time to keep learning. Some cannot afford the expertise they want from professionals like contractors, attorneys, accountants, or career advisors. Others have trouble staying motivated to learn everything they think they should know to stay current, given the sheer volume of information they can access in physical and virtual domains. This “information transition” from college to real life may be one of the least understood challenges of the digital age.

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a national series of ongoing research studies about how today’s college students and recent graduates find and use information for solving information problems they encounter.³ This PIL report is the last in a series of special reports called “The Passage Studies.”

The purpose of these unique studies has been to investigate the information transitions that early adults undergo at critical junctures in their lives. We sought to understand the information competencies and strategies they adopt and develop as they move from one complex information landscape to the next.

In this latest study, we turn our attention to lifelong learning.⁴ We conducted a two-year study of the continued learning needs and information-seeking practices of today’s relatively recent college graduates in their personal and professional lives.⁵

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¹ “Jessica” is a composite character based on results from interviews with recent college graduates in our sample.


³ Project Information Literacy (PIL) is an educational nonprofit dedicated to conducting ongoing research about young adults and their research habits in the digital age. Alison J. Head, Ph.D., a Research Scientist in the University of Washington Information School and a Research Fellow at the metaLAB (at) Harvard, founded and directs PIL. Communication about this report should be sent to Dr. Alison J. Head at alison@projectinfolit.org.
In fall 2014, we administered an online survey to a sample of 1,651 respondents from 10 US colleges and universities, who had graduated between 2007 and 2012.\(^6\)\(^7\) We also conducted 126 in-depth telephone interviews with study participants from the same institutions to collect qualitative data about graduates' views, experiences, and motivations as lifelong learners.

Each of the colleges and universities in our institutional sample was located in one of the top 25 fastest-growing areas in the US where today's college-educated graduates in their mid-to-late 20s live. As part of our investigation, we examined whether these metropolitan areas may have graduates who are more avid information seekers than other locales.

The next section contains a summary of the study's highlights. The remainder of the report features a discussion of findings, a model of the graduates' lifelong learning process, and 10 recommendations for improving services and resources for continued learning.

**Major Findings**

Today's college campuses are awash in data about their students. From campus servers piling up posts from online discussions to detailed assessments of information literacy learning for any given cohort, the learning needs—and wants—of students are documented more extensively than ever before.

When students graduate, however, this data stream slows to a trickle. Alumni associations track former students for promotional and fundraising purposes. Campus career centers monitor where graduates are employed to broaden their own collection of internship opportunities for current students. In other cases, ad-hoc committees have interviewed or surveyed former students about their undergraduate learning outcomes.\(^8\)

While the data collected may be useful for evaluating post-college career progress, they only scratch the surface as far as assessing the learning needs today's recent graduates may have after college. Subsequently, very little is known about the everyday information worlds of today's graduates.

When asked about their information needs and challenges, the recent college graduates we studied said they spent a lot time learning career development tips and scrambling to improve their interpersonal communication and technical workplace skills. However, what kept them most busy during the past year was learning a mix of simple and complex *life skills* they needed outside the workplace. As they put their college days behind them, many graduates needed to learn how to manage their money or pick up an array of quick-fix solutions to everyday problems, like how to make household repairs, how to pay taxes, or shop for groceries on a budget.

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\(^6\) This PIL study was generously supported with a two-year National Leadership Grant (LG-06-13-0186-13) from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), [http://www.imls.gov](http://www.imls.gov).

\(^7\) For a complete discussion of methods used for this study, see Appendix A of this report.

\(^8\) For all three phases of this study, the sample comprised the same 10 institutions of higher education in the US. Nine of these schools were four-year institutions, where graduates had received a baccalaureate degree, e.g., BA or BS. The remaining school in the sample was a community college, where graduates had received either an associate degree (AA) or a certificate. For a complete list of the institutions and details, see Appendix A: [Error! Reference source not found.](#)

\(^7\) We are grateful to the PIL Research Team members who conducted telephone interviews and contributed to this study's findings: Sarah Evans (University of Washington), Kate Faoro (University of Washington), Michelle Fellows (University of Washington), Kirsten Hostetler (Central Oregon Community College), Ann Roselle (Phoenix College), and Michele Van Hoenck (California Maritime Academy).

Others began building a learning network they could tap for guidance and advice they needed in their professional and personal lives, and to a lesser extent, in the communities where they lived. Most graduates said they were surprised by how little they knew about living on their own.

Predictably, recent graduates were heavy users of Google search. They also relied on an array of sources such as Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, *The New York Times*, best-selling books, online forums, blogs, and to a lesser extent, public libraries and bookstores.

Graduates turned to friends, family, and coworkers almost as much as the Web. When weighing life’s most important decisions, such as deciding whether to buy a house, become a first-time parent, or change jobs, one-on-one discussions with a trusted confidant won out over sources they might be able to find on the Web.

As a whole, graduates preferred resources for lifelong learning that have three information qualities: currency, utility, and interactivity. They placed a high premium on lifelong learning systems that were organized, curated, up-to-date and where there was available assistance, as in the case of librarians and knowledgeable staff.

For young graduates, information utility meant sources that were useful, credible, relevant and directly and immediately applicable to the real problems in their lives. Interactivity entailed more than a Google search—it encompassed the validity and richness of solutions that come from multiple voices that can all join in, interact, or exchange ideas and information in a social space.

Most graduates prided themselves on being savvy information evaluators, competencies they honed during college. Yet, the large majority believed that formulating and asking their own questions was the one skill that they had not developed in college but found they needed in their post-college lives.

Summarizing the major findings from our interviews and survey:

1. Today’s young graduates have a diffuse set of needs after college that compels them to acquire additional competencies, strategies, knowledge, and skills. A breakdown of their learning needs indicated they had more needs in their personal lives (57%) than in the workplace (30%) and in their communities (13%).

2. More than anything else, graduates sought how-to information (75%): quick fixes to urgent problems in their personal lives. The graduates we interviewed said they needed to learn such things as how to cook, how to make household repairs, or how to read a legal agreement.

3. Over two-thirds of the survey respondents (69%) wanted to close gaps in their knowledge about managing money and their personal finances, often for the first time. Graduates said they needed to find out how to set up a personal budget. Others grappled with scheduling student loan payments. Still others had to plan a weekly food budget.

4. When it came to the workplace, more than anything else, young graduates wanted career and professional development guidance and information (69%). Most said they were steadfast in their search for information about new positions and opportunities in and beyond their current place of employment.

5. At the same time, more than half of the graduates (56%) needed to expand their interpersonal communication skills in their jobs, especially for engaging conversations with, and delegating tasks to, workers older than themselves.

6. One in four of the graduates wanted to learn how to become involved in their communities, especially how to and participate in civic life (25%); slightly fewer sought volunteering opportunities (24%).
7. Search engines—especially the ubiquitous Google—were the go-to source for quickly connecting graduates to individual pages on social sources like Facebook, YouTube, or Pinterest, especially for information in their personal lives (88%), the workplace (83%), and to a lesser extent, their community (38%).

8. Almost three-fifths of the graduates (56%) relied on blogs for guidance and how-to specifics they could put to use in their personal lives. Blogs were a good source of low-cost information (71%), current and up-to-date information (69%), and provided good summaries of the topics (61%) of interest to many graduates, according to respondents who had used blogs in the past year.

9. Nearly half the graduates (45%) had used a public library in the past year when seeking information sources for use in their personal lives. In a follow-up analysis, we found that public library users were three times more likely to be bookstore visitors and museumgoers.

10. Finding sources for continued learning did not end with a Web search. A large majority (84%) of respondents had approached coworkers in the past year to informally learn the skills they needed to succeed on the job and to advance their careers.

11. Despite the widespread promise about online learning, few respondents reported using formal learning sites such as Coursera (14%), edX (5%), or Udacity (2%) in the past year. Instead, far more used informal learning sites that required less of a time commitment, such as YouTube (79%) and Pinterest (51%).

12. Graduates found it difficult to stay informed in the rapidly changing digital age. A majority said it was hard to find the time for continued learning (88%), locate affordable sources (73%), stay current, given the volume of information “out there,” (70%), and stay motivated to keep learning (62%).

13. Half of the sample (50%) reported being frustrated by no longer having access to their former instructors and lectures as well their campus library’s databases, such as ProQuest, JSTOR, or EBSCO. Far fewer had accessed open access government databases (13%), like ERIC or PubMed, in the workplace (27%) or in their personal lives (13%).

14. Most, though not all, of the critical thinking skills learned and developed during graduates’ college experiences were adapted in their post-college lives. A large majority of the graduates believed they had transferred information skills from college for interpreting and applying search results (76%) and reflecting on the ways they learned best (74%). Yet, far fewer—less than a third (27%)—agreed that college had helped them develop the ability to formulate and ask questions of their own.

Taken together, these findings suggest that colleges and universities are turning out graduates who are specialized, employable, and relatively proficient information seekers. Yet, our results also reveal a failure of higher education to prepare lifelong learners who leave college experienced at framing and asking their own questions rather than responding to questions that had been assigned to them.

In the following pages, we present detailed findings and a lifelong learning model in four parts:

Part One: Lifelong Learning Needs. Findings are presented about the continued learning needs today’s recent graduates find they have after college in their personal lives, the workplace, and in the communities in which they live.
Part Two: Lifelong Learning Sources. Findings are featured about the information sources from bookstores and libraries to Web 2.0 sites and friends and family that recent graduates rely on for continued learning and to stay fulfilled and enriched in their personal and professional lives.

Part Three: College Takeaways. Findings are presented about the skills and competencies recent graduates have adapted from college for navigating the information universe of their post-college lives. Challenges graduates faced with continued learning are also provided.

Part Four: Modeling the Lifelong Learning Process. A model of shared utility is introduced for describing the lifelong learning process employed by recent graduates.

Throughout this report, the results of our research reveal consistent patterns from respondents that lend credibility to our findings. These results show how a sample of today’s recent college graduates find, use, and evaluate information to meet their continued learning needs once they receive their degrees and go on with their lives. Given the size of the sample and our research methodology, these findings should not be viewed as comprehensive and generalizable to all recent graduates in the US, but rather as exploratory and as another part of our ongoing research.

Approach

Project Information Literacy studies are grounded in research on information-seeking behavior. As information scientists, we focus on the ways in which people of various ages find, evaluate, and select information and the processes they use to meet their information needs. These processes are investigated through participants’ accounts, reports, and experiences. We use social science research methods—interviews and surveys—to collect and analyze data.

The purpose of this study was to investigate continued learning after college. We focused on three arenas in which continued learning needs arise and occur in recent graduates’ lives: personal life, the workplace, and the communities where they lived.

We examined the information-seeking behavior recent college graduates used for continued learning in the 12 months preceding the survey; beginning with the learning needs they had and then turned our attention to the information sources on which they relied.

Five questions framed this study:

1. What information needs do today’s college graduates have for improving skills and adding to their knowledge or competencies after they leave campus and settle into their personal lives, the workplace, and their local communities?

2. What information sources do recent graduates use for finding information about personal fulfillment and cultural enrichment, career development and staying employable, and for becoming involved in civic affairs and their local community?

3. How do today’s graduates use the myriad of sources for continued learning available from traditional information systems, like public libraries, job training sessions, bookstores, and museums as well as Web 2.0 sources, such as blogs or MOOCs?

4. What critical thinking skills and information literacy competencies learned or developed in college are adapted and applied by young graduates in their personal and professional lives?
5. How can the information-seeking process for lifelong learning be modeled? Given this model, what solutions for improving learning services and resources are feasible for meeting their needs?

These questions are posed at a critical juncture in the lives of the young college graduates living in the digital age. The global economy demands a constant retooling of skills and updating of expertise in order to stay adaptive and employable. Moreover, the sheer availability of online learning outlets has increased societal expectations to keep up to speed, relevant, and valued. For most young graduates, staying informed and current in today’s world can be more challenging than ever.

Defining Lifelong Learning

For the purposes of this study, we have used the phrases *lifelong learning* and *continued learning* interchangeably to define the activity of ongoing learning for improving skills and acquiring additional knowledge or information. This kind of continuous learning occurs online as well as in brick-and-mortar settings and it can and may occur in the in personal life, the workplace, and community and civic life.

Today, lifelong learning is an ongoing pursuit that can take place in formal, non-formal, and informal exchanges. A key distinction among these different modes is whether curricula are used and learners receive credits for participation. Two of the three modes of lifelong learning—formal and non-formal—are found in schools or in the workplace.

Formal learning consists of education and training in an institutional context. It is guided by a curriculum in which diplomas or certifications are awarded upon completion. Non-formal learning takes place in lessons, discussions, and trainings, such as in the workplace or through extension courses. A difference however, is that non-formal educational opportunities do not result in credits, degrees, digital badges, or certificates.

The third mode of learning—informal learning—is incidental, voluntary, and often experiential. It occurs when self-motivated individuals learn independently to advance their knowledge and skills. For instance, informal learning can occur in communities of practice, where interactions are highly contextualized.

The scholarly literature defines lifelong learners as curious, flexible, motivated, and reflective. Despite what these learners’ motivations may be, the pathways to learning venues are not always available, accessible, and affordable. Moreover, the level of skills and strategies that these learners bring to the process of finding and using information can be a critical barrier to their success in finding learning opportunities and to actually gaining skills and knowledge.

To better understand these competencies and what today’s graduates bring to their continued learning efforts, we used the lens of *information literacy*. Today, in the “information society,” numerous

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8 As part of this two-year study, we conducted a recent literature review of lifelong learning and participation. See: Alison J. Head, Michele Van Hoenck, and Deborah S. Garson, “Lifelong Learning in the Digital Age: A Content Analysis of Recent Research on Participation,” First Monday, 20, no.2 (February 2015); http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i2.5857.


situations arise daily, requiring competencies of exchanging, seeking, retrieving, applying, and evaluating information and a high degree of information literacy is required throughout life.

For instance, individuals need to continue to learn and grow to navigate daily life, to remain employable and to renew and update their professional skills and knowledge, and to be active in their communities and enriched in their personal lives. These information-seeking competencies and lifelong information literacy strategies determine whether or not these efforts will be successful.

We define **competencies** as the skills and knowledge needed for finding and using information, especially what action needs to be taken to execute a task and how to perform an action. These **strategies** are deliberate plans that are often highly individualized and focused on achieving an objective (within time constraints, resource availability, and cognitive abilities).

Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to investigate recent graduates' information-seeking behavior for lifelong learning, while making recommendations for improving services in higher education, public libraries, and K-12 settings to better meet their needs. We collected data for this inquiry by conducting in-depth qualitative interviews and administering a large-scale online survey to a sample of recent college graduates from between 2007 and 2012.
Detailed Findings

Part One: Lifelong Learning Needs

As information scientists, we began our study by asking the following question:

*What situational learning needs do today’s recent graduates have for taking care of business in their personal lives, staying competitive in the workplace, or getting involved in local community activities and meeting people?*

We constructed a survey instrument with a question that collected data about 16 separate learning needs. In the survey, we defined *learning needs* as the additional skills, expertise, or knowledge that graduates had needed to acquire in the past 12 months. As a first step, we examined the relationship between continued learning needs in each arena and in survey respondents’ lives (i.e., personal life, the workplace, and local community). A graphic with these results of this analysis appears in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Continued Learning Needs across All Three Arenas**

Percentages based on the 21,838 “check all that apply” responses from total n = 1,651 recent graduates.

As Figure 1 shows, graduates reported having a larger percentage of learning needs for personal enrichment and fulfillment (57%), than for the workplace (30%), or in the communities in which they lived (13%).

Initially, we were puzzled by these results. Even though a majority of interview participants in our preliminary interviews discussed learning needs they had for the workplace, the quantitative survey results—and responses from a much larger sample—suggested otherwise. This result raised additional questions central to our research.

What continued learning needs did survey respondents have in their lives, and how did those needs differ? What possible explanations could account for these differences? Moreover, what major learning needs did graduates have, extending across their personal and professional lives?

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12 The list of learning needs that we used in the survey was based on the different needs articulated by graduates during our study’s Phase One preliminary interviews.
To report on answers to these questions, we divided the first part of the report into four sections with findings about continued learning needs graduates had in their personal lives, workplaces, and communities of residence. We concluded with a fourth section that examines major learning needs across all three of these arenas.

1. Learning Needs: Personal Life

The concept of everyday life research was introduced 20 years ago in a study of adults living in a Finnish village. Researchers found that more participants spent time in their daily lives looking for practical information they could use for supporting the hobbies they enjoyed doing in their free time.

In 2010, PIL conducted its own study of everyday life research. Based on responses to a survey from 8,353 college students at 25 US campuses, we found that two-thirds of the respondents looked for information about making decisions directly related to their individual lives (i.e., purchasing something, health/wellness, finding a job, and trip planning).

Together, studies like these help to understand information seeking in daily life. To expand on this prior research, we began our study by investigating the continued learning needs today’s recent graduates had in their personal lives. To collect the data, we used a matrix question with 16 learning needs and a “check all that apply” response format in our survey.

In Figure 2, we present the data in a bar chart from most to fewest responses. (A complete data set of responses to this question appears as Figure 2A in Appendix E.)

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14 Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, “How College Students Use the Web to Conduct Everyday Life Research,” First Monday 16, no. 4 (April 2011), http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i4.3484. The sample was 8,353 students.
Summarizing the findings about personal life and learning needs:

1. More than anything else, recent graduates (75%) needed to learn how-to specifics they could apply to solving pressing problems in their personal lives. In our follow-up interviews, graduates described needing additional life skills, such as repairing a household appliance, reading the fine points of a lease, or saving money on groceries.

2. Seven in 10 graduates (70%) wanted to pick up skills for hobbies they enjoyed in their spare time, such as practicing new pieces on a musical instrument, learning a foreign language, or expanding knowledge about their coding skills for Python or Java.

3. More than two-thirds of the respondents (69%) needed to learn how to manage money and their personal finances. Receiving a steady paycheck, which was often more than they had earned in college, required graduates to learn how to set up a personal budget, schedule student loan payments, manage other monthly bills, or pay income taxes.

4. Over three-fifths (63%) looked for consumer information. In follow-up interviews, graduates said making big-ticket purchases, such as buying a car, furniture, electronic devices, and health care plans required them to be well informed, especially when it came to price and quality. At the same time, six in 10 (60%) engaged in trip planning, such as finding inexpensive flights or hotel discounts.

5. About one in five in the sample (59%) needed to find housing. In our follow-up interviews, graduates told us that they were looking for rental apartments; far fewer were ready to buy their first home.
6. The majority of graduates (56%) wanted to pick up new apps for smart phones and other mobile devices; far fewer (34%) needed information about using desktop computers and laptops for personal use.

7. Finding others who shared their interests through meetups or online dating was the kind of social contact that almost half the graduates (48%) in our sample had needed.

8. Two-fifths of the respondents (44%) wanted to brush up on interpersonal communication skills, like conflict resolution and being able to say no to friends. Some graduates said they needed quick fixes, while others wanted to learn about communication strategies in greater depth.

9. Many recent graduates (42%) reported that they looked for the availability and affordability of services from a licensed professional in the area where they lived, such as a physician, attorney, or accountant.

10. Finding out more about church or spiritual groups had been a need for slightly more than a quarter of the respondents (27%). Others needed to learn more about volunteering opportunities (26%) or participating in civic action (24%) to enrich their personal lives.

Two major trends about learning needs emerged from this analysis. Above all else, nearly all of the graduates needed to learn how to live on their own and separate from the familiar campus culture. Second, their most specific need involved compensating for their lack of financial knowledge.

Based on our interviews, we identified three types of how-to needs that graduates’ had: (1) domestic survival skills (including finance), (2) quick fixes, and (3) health and wellness information. For instance, some graduates described needing money-saving fixes like repairing a flat tire, installing a ceiling fan, or cleaning a clogged carburetor on a lawn mower. Others needed to master a combination of skills about managing their finances as their lives changed in significant ways:

   I moved across the country to a major city two days after graduation! I got married a short time later and we ended up buying a house. I’ve gone through a lot of situations where I’ve said to myself, “I got to learn all of this!” Family is always a resource for learning. But I also have a financial advisor at my bank that is a free service with my account. For me, it comes down to those conversations where I can say, “Hey, how do you do this, can you teach and show me?” If I’m given the opportunity to go online or go meet with someone to talk about something, I would like to talk to someone about my specific case, especially when it comes to finances. I can ask questions, get immediate feedback, instead of searching online.

Other graduates said they had needed to acquire a great deal of knowledge about health disorders and learn how to help a loved one with a recently diagnosed illness. Still others said they needed domestic survival skills such as how to prepare meals and stretch their weekly grocery budget. As one graduate from a small university explained:

   When I was in college, I just got into the habit of going to the grocery store and picking out whatever looked good and not formulating meals. Shopping in terms of thinking about meals, having a list, using websites like Food Network, Chef Ina Garten, and The Barefoot Contessa to generate recipes that could come in handy for a longer period of time, like a two-week period, so that I knew how much food to buy. I had to learn how to cook and this was difficult, because I had to learn how to shop effectively, too.

Taken together, we concluded that today’s college graduates have a diffuse set of learning needs—many of which involve building life skills, which they discovered they did not have in the first decade after they completed college.
While much of their time was spent on finding domestic survival skills or quick-fix solutions, many of the graduates in our sample also had taken the time to dig into learning about something that had sparked their curiosity. Graduates tended to dig deep when making life decisions such as buying a house, making a career move, or starting a family.

In the next section, we turn our attention to graduates’ learning needs in the workplace. We investigated how the graduates we studied stayed adaptive and competitive in their current jobs and in the career they hoped to pursue.

2. Learning Needs: Workplace

The rising costs of college—tuition, books, and living expenses—gives the class of 2015 the unfortunate distinction of being “The Most Indebted Class Ever.” The average college student who took out student loans graduated with a debt of $35,000. Finding work after college and making money is not just the goal of going to college but by virtue of the cost of such an education, it is a stark necessity.

In this study, the graduates we surveyed fared fairly well as far as finding employment. More than three-quarters of the survey respondents (77%) reported having full-time employment. A smaller percentage of graduates were self-employed (3%), working part-time (10%), or were currently unemployed (8%).

More than half of these respondents (55%) were working in the field they had majored in during college—slightly higher than the national average (Figure 3). Moreover, almost half the respondents were either currently enrolled in graduate school (20%) or had already received a graduate degree (28%).

Figure 3: Working in the Field Studied during College?

Not currently working 8%
Declined to state 1%
Working, but not in field from college 37%
Working in field studied in college 55%

Percentages based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities. Percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.

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16 Ibid.
17 The remaining participants (1%) declined to state their employment status. Percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding.
In light of these employment details, we focused on continued learning for the workplace and ask how recent graduates stayed professionally nimble and remained employable during the past year. We used data from a survey question with 16 learning needs to answer this question. The results are presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Learning Needs for Use in the Workplace**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Needs</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktops and laptops</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile devices</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social contacts</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing finances</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>How-to information</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensed professionals</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with children</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making purchases</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic action</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual or religious groups</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages based on total \(n = 1,651\) recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities and “check all that apply” responses. A complete data set of responses to this question appears as Figure 4A in Appendix E.

Summarizing the findings about the workplace and learning needs:

1. More than two-thirds of the respondents (69%) wanted to continue learning how to expand their career paths in the past 12 months. In our follow-up interviews, graduates discussed staying abreast of business statistics, changing industry standards, or new project management methods so they could remain valued, up-to-date, and ultimately, employable in what they considered to be their rapidly changing work settings.

2. A majority of the graduates (57%) wanted to gain more proficiency with desktop computers and laptops, especially in using spreadsheets or writing computer programs. Far fewer (32%) needed to learn about using mobile devices for supporting work tasks.

3. Over half of the respondents (56%) needed to improve their interpersonal communication skills for the workplace. Some graduates said they needed to learn negotiation and delegation techniques, especially for communicating with coworkers who were older than their college-age peers.

4. One in four graduates (25%) spent time in the past year looking for strategies to develop a professional network. In our follow-up interviews, some graduates said they used sites like LinkedIn and Facebook to keep track of current and former coworkers for recruiting or finding job leads of their own.
5. More than one-fifth of the graduates (23%) had honed their financial skills over the last 12 months. In our interviews, graduates working in specialized fields discussed the importance of remaining abreast of accounting standards, while others discussed learning new approaches to preparing marketing plans.

6. Just over one-fifth of the sample (21%) looked for travel information in the past year. Graduates discussed looking for sites with flight or hotel deals for business trips. As a whole, though, far fewer needed information for making purchases beyond airline tickets and hotel bookings in the workplace (14%).

7. Almost one in five of the respondents (18%) wanted to learn about working with children since they were in educational fields, as either students enrolled in graduate programs or new hires employed in teaching jobs.

8. Some graduates looked for ways they could get involved in local civic groups (14%) or volunteering opportunities (12%) through their workplace, though it was less common. In our follow-up interviews, some graduates discussed getting involved with local schools or engaging in company volunteer efforts to read to young children in after-school programs.

The majority of the respondents identified three learning needs for the workplace during the past year: (1) professional and career development, (2) proficiency with desktop and laptop computer programs, and (3) expanded interpersonal communication skills.

Many said they were challenged keeping up with the fast pace and demands of their workplace. They described having learning needs that were specialized and that kept them up-to-date and employable in their field.

For instance, accountants and auditors said they needed more financial skills. New teachers needed to learn more about child development and working with children. Computer programmers had to brush up on technical skills for developing algorithms and writing code. As one interviewee, now working as a young research analyst, explained:

*The pace of technology is something that makes me continue to learn, especially in the workplace. Even some of the statistical programs that I was taught when I was in college are not used anymore. I learned SPSS but at work they use SAS and I'm still just getting my feet wet learning that program. But now I'm learning a program called R on my own now through Code School, because I think that's where it's all going. What you need to know for the workplace is always changing and you have to be proactive—you have to keep learning if you want to have attractive skills.*

At the same time, many recognized they needed a set of different interpersonal skills from those that had worked for them in college. No matter what field they were in, graduates we interviewed said that negotiation and delegation skills were essential to professional success. As one graduate, now working in the oil industry, explained:

*I always knew that diversity was important, but it wasn't really applied in college. While my college was pretty diverse, my major was a bunch of white men. Now, I'm working for an international organization, and I'm learning how other cultures and personalities accept and hear information—how I need to communicate the best. If you want to succeed in this company and do well, you have to perform. In college, you can get a B or C, but after you get a degree, if you can't perform in this industry, you get laid off.*
Within months of graduating, many of the graduates found out that continued learning was an integral component of staying employable. They also began to discover that the skills learned in college for working on desktop and laptop computers and specialized software packages had a relatively short shelf life in the fast-paced workplace. In the next section, we focus on how graduates learned about becoming involved in their local communities, especially building community ties.

3. Learning Needs: Local Community

In past years, there has been evidence that today's young adults do not engage in the public sphere beyond signing online e-petitions or "liking" a cause on Facebook. One study found that only a third of students enrolled in US higher education institutions believed that college had increased their commitment to civic involvement.

Another report concluded the Google Generation voted less often than their older peers, paid less attention to politics, and was apathetic about their community. Still, a more recent report released in 2015 found almost half of US adults—at any age—are "interested bystanders." These are the individuals who stay on top of what is going on, but they do not express political opinions or take civic action, unless they have a personal or professional need at stake that aligns with their self-interest.

Studies like these are a useful starting point for investigating the information-seeking behavior graduates used when learning about—and experiencing—their local communities. How much do these claims hold up? Specifically, what additional skills, expertise, or knowledge did recent graduates need to become involved in their local communities in the past year? Moreover, to what extent, do today's graduates engage in community and civic life?

To answer these questions, we used the survey question with 16 learning needs and our follow-up interviews. The results from the survey question appear in Figure 5.

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23 The Google study concluded that almost half of their survey sample (48.9%), made up of all ages, qualified as “interested bystanders.”
Figure 5: Learning Needs for the Local Community

Summarizing the findings about local community and learning needs:

1. One in four respondents (25%) needed to learn about their local community in the past year to engage in civic life; slightly fewer (24%) reported needing to find local volunteering opportunities. During our follow-up interviews, some graduates acknowledged the importance of giving back to the community where they lived, while others said they had little time to contribute.

2. Some graduates had wanted to hone their interpersonal communication skills (16%) for engagement in local community activities, especially interacting with governmental agencies or grassroots organizations. Slightly fewer (14%) needed to find ways to reach out to other locals through online dating or meetups.

3. One in 10 respondents (10%) reported they had tried to learn more about religious and spiritual groups, with some graduates saying they had recently moved to a new town, and discussed needing to find a new church in their neighborhood.

4. Less than one-tenth wanted to learn about local resources for working with mobile devices (11%) or desktop computers (8%) or supporting hobbies (9%) or making purchases (5%).

5. Few respondents needed to learn about some of the practicalities of living in a new community, such as learning more about housing availability (10%) or finding qualified licensed professionals (8%), like physicians.
Most graduates we interviewed were more involved in figuring out the daily necessities of living in a community—where to shop, dine, or see a movie—than they were with learning about civic causes or local volunteering opportunities during the past year.

Some said a new job or family obligations kept them from joining. Others said they were interested in becoming more locally involved, but were uncertain about where to look. Still others said their interest in becoming involved was piqued as the 2016 presidential election grew closer.

Among the small number of graduates that had become engaged in their communities during the past year, some had volunteered in homeless shelters. Others worked with children in after-school reading or athletic programs. Still others continued to learn about and be involved in a cause, such as legalizing marijuana or making their communities greener:

_Heck, yes, I'd say graduates do volunteer! As soon as I graduated from college, I moved to a different community and sought out the nearest environmental group and started volunteering 20 hours a week there like I had done during college, too. I founded a "green drinks" group here where I live now. I've sat on numerous boards, numerous steering committees—civic duty is a really important thing for me._

Other graduates, like this one, wanted to engage in the public sphere in order to learn about the community and make new acquaintances. Still, others volunteered because the opportunity to give back aligned with a career-based interest. By volunteering, they could gain professional experience, which in the end could advance their careers. As one graduate, now working in retail management, explained:

_My life revolves around work and how I can get where I want to go so when I'm not working I do a lot of volunteer work. I work with Goodwill and another group that helps disadvantaged and do things that are related to putting on fashion shows so it overlaps with my work life. It's not coincidental since fashion is my passion. So I fill my time up with things I truly love to do so I feel fulfilled and I'm giving back, I guess you could say._

As a whole, we concluded that most graduates were not necessarily apathetic or averse to participation in civic action and community engagement. Rather, many were consumed with trying to remain gainfully employed without neglecting their personal responsibilities. In most cases, if graduates they volunteered it often overlapped with their need to be more employable. We end this part of the report with an analysis of the three major learning needs today's graduates had across the three arenas in their lives.
4. Major Learning Needs: Personal Life, the Workplace, and Local Community

So far, we have investigated the continued learning needs today’s graduates had in the arenas of personal life, the workplace, and the community. But how did these identified learning needs spill over from one arena into another? In this final analysis, we provide a bird’s eye view of our survey data and graduates’ top three learning needs. The results are presented in Figure 6 and Figure 7.24

**Figure 6: Top Learning Needs across All Three Arenas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Personal Life</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Communication</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>727</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How-to Information</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>1243</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7: Top Three Learning Needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Personal Life</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1: Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2: Professional development</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3: How-to information</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1735</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages based on a breakdown of the top three needs, given total n = 21,838 “check all that apply” responses, across all three arenas. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

More respondents in our sample had wanted to improve their interpersonal skills and access resources on professional development and how-to information in the past year. While it makes intuitive sense that graduates would need interpersonal skills and how-to information to use in their personal and professional lives, the need for professional development puzzled us at first.

We found, however, that the need for professional development in graduates’ lives could—and often did—spill over into different arenas, according to the graduates we interviewed. For instance, some graduates explained that they wanted to pick up coding or Web design to expand their career options and professional development. At the same time though, these same skills applied to their favorite hobbies or, to a lesser extent, their volunteer activities.

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24 We calculated the results in Figure 6 and Figure 7 by dividing the total number of “checks” respondents assigned each of the learning categories (numerator) divided by the total number of checks assigned across all three arenas (denominator). In the figures presented earlier in this section, i.e., Figures 2, 4, and 5, we calculated the number of checks respondents assigned to a learning need (numerator) divided by the total number of checks for each learning need within each separate arena (denominator), i.e., personal life, workplace, and local community.
Another telling trend from this analysis pertained to interpersonal communication skills. While graduates seek information to expand their careers and do things at home like cook and make repairs, they claimed that they were most in need of help with their one-on-one communication skills.

In other words, the graduates we studied wanted to know how to interact with greater ease and effectiveness not only in the workplace, but also in everyday situations. As noted, this result was unexpected. To understand this need, we conclude this section with a closer look at this shortcoming in young graduates’ interpersonal communication skills.

*Follow-up Analysis: A Failure to Communicate?*

More respondents reported that they needed to improve their interpersonal skills than any of the 15 other learning needs listed in our survey. In this follow-up analysis, we explore what skills graduates said they needed and why.

Based on our interviews, we identified three interpersonal communication skills graduates needed: (1) cross-generational communication, (2) informal discourse, and (3) assertiveness. Graduates we interviewed described struggling most to communicate in ways they had not necessarily encountered or experienced during college.

For instance, many graduates said it was difficult to delegate tasks to people who were older, from different cultures, or sometimes both. Some said they had trouble with negotiating in the workplace for better assignments, salary increases, or backing from higher-ups. One graduate, now working at a Fortune 500 company, explained:

> We’re coming from the college environment where we were interacting with peers that were about three to six years older or younger than your own age. And then you go into the workplace and my first job was in manufacturing and the population was entirely different, everyone was so much older than me—I was working with people my parents’ age! I know how to deal with my parents, but I didn’t know how to deal with all kinds of different people that are my parents’ ages. It’s hard working across different generations. It’s just not a small adjustment—that is learning from people I was technically hired to supervise and then needing to learn alongside fellow managers.

Others said they spent lots of time and effort trying to read between the lines of email messages, especially from higher-ups at work. This finding suggested some graduates needed not only to improve their own ability to craft messages but also to understand the meaning of the messages that they received from their co-workers. Still others said they were uncertain about how to say “no” in their professional and personal lives without repercussions:

> I find I have a hard time saying “no” to people. So how, in a professional setting, do you say “no” while still being polite and helpful? Sometimes I will be on Google, thinking, “Oh no, how do I handle this situation?” But more often than not, the resources I find through search engines are more lifestyle things like how to deal with that difficult best friend vs. ones that are geared toward business and professionalism. The advice you find online can be so sterile and cold. It’s more beneficial to talk to somebody and have that question and answer format, because while there are some similarities, every situation is different.
At the same time, others talked about needing to improve their ability to “make small talk.” They said they faced challenges when establishing rapport and a common ground with co-workers, neighbors, and friends. Still others discussed the importance of knowing how to engage in informal conversation so they could develop connections in the workplace. As one interviewee, a graduate with a business degree, explained:

I found out early on as someone who was young and very new to the office that speaking with CEOs and higher-ups was very intimidating to me. So I went to my boss and said, “I can’t talk to this guy. When the CEO just comes into the break room to grab coffee, I can’t talk to him.” My boss said, “Okay, we’re going to work on this.” My boss helped me figure out what is appropriate for me to talk to him about. My boss told me that a lot of CEOs get asked questions about themselves, and sometimes they just want to hear how their business is going for you. You’re part of the team. You’re their asset.

Taken together, not all of the recent graduates interviewed felt totally inept at communication. Rather, many wanted to develop verbal, non-verbal, and technology-enabled communication skills that were more sophisticated than what had worked for them during college.

Whatever their circumstances, nearly all of the graduates we interviewed realized that polishing their communication skills would be a lifetime undertaking. Despite the ubiquity of technology in their lives and the hours spent online, graduates had often found the best solutions to communication problems through face-to-face chats with trusted allies. In this way, the graduates we studied were not very different from the many generations of college graduates before them.

Part Two: Sources for Lifelong Learning

What information sources do today’s graduates rely on for meeting their continued learning needs? We posed this question at a time when Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have dramatically changed the information landscape of the 21st century. Together, with Google searches, these 2.0 sites have carried a whole generation along, surging forward like a tsunami; re-sculpting our conceptions of human interaction, knowing, and sharing.

With the Web, information abundance has replaced information scarcity. Every second, users post 6,000 tweets to Twitter and Google processes more than 40,000 searches. Users upload 300 hours of video to YouTube every minute. On average, Wikipedia posts an average of 800 new articles a day.

Some researchers have questioned the ability of the human mind to cope with the digital age’s deluge of data. Still others have found Internet users cannot mentally process the amount, nature, and immediacy of information the Web serves up. For instance, a 2014 report released by Pew Research

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found most respondents were grateful to have a way to share ideas with others (72%), believing the Web has improved their ability to learn new things (87%).

Drawing on studies like these, we asked a sample of recent college graduates which information sources they used to fulfill basic to complex learning needs in their personal lives, workplaces, and the communities where they lived.

Our objective was to examine the relationship between information seeking sources graduates employed and the learning needs they hoped to satisfy. Such findings can assist educators, librarians, employers, and producers of online learning tools in preparing students to be lifelong learners.

We have divided this part of the report into three sections about the continued learning sources graduates used in their personal lives, workplace, and local communities. We conclude with a fourth section on the major learning sources across all three of these arenas.

1. Learning Sources: Personal Life

We began with an analysis of continued learning sources graduates turned to in everyday life during the past 12 months. We collected survey data about graduates’ use of 28 sources.

These sources fall into three categories: (1) traditional information systems such as libraries, museums, and bookstores that offer physical and virtual access to resources; (2) Web 2.0 forms and social networking sites (i.e., MOOCS and blogs); and (3) human-mediated channels (i.e., friends, family members, coworkers, and their bosses). In Figure 8, we present the findings from the survey.

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Percentages based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities and “check all apply” responses. A complete data set of responses to this question appears in Figure 8A in Appendix E.
Summarizing the findings about the learning sources used in graduates’ personal lives:

1. Nearly all of the respondents (88%) had used search engines during the past year when they were specifically looking for learning materials they could apply to their daily lives. In our follow-up interviews, graduates called Google their “go-to starting point” or “best friend.” Many said they used Google for finding quick-fix solutions, creative hobby ideas, consumer information, or housing options.

2. Over three-fourths of the sample relied on friends (79%) or family (77%) for guidance during the past year, suggesting that most graduates still see human connections as being very important for learning. Many of the graduates we interviewed trusted allies when dealing with money matters, such as improving a credit score, setting up a personal budget, or making a decision about an expensive purchase.

3. Almost four-fifths (79%) had used social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter in their personal lives as a learning source. Some graduates said they used Facebook for fun and social reasons and to learn from friends’ posts. Others deployed the “like” feature as an aggregator tool, enabling them to receive new posts from traditional news magazines, such as Business Week or Newsweek. Still others tapped into social network sites to extend their social circle and arrange for local meetups.

4. Over two-thirds of the sample (72%) followed news sources as a way to stay up-to-date and current. Most said they read a mix of traditional media from national sources, such as The New York Times, Huffington Post, or Newsweek, through links found on blog postings, tweets, or Facebook feeds.

5. Seven out of 10 (70%) read books to fill their lifelong learning needs in the last year. Many said they had no preference for formats and used hardbound books, e-books, or paperbacks—whatever happened to be available, cost-effective, and close at hand.

6. Over two-thirds of the respondents (67%) turned to educational websites over the past 12 months. Most mentioned watching short videos on YouTube to pick up how-to information or to figure out how to use new apps on their mobile devices. Others watched TED Talks so they could hear about new ideas in science, business, or medical fields.

7. Over half of the sample (56%) reported they followed blogs. According to the blog users we interviewed, they read posts and users’ comments about topics they needed in their personal lives, such as managing money, raising babies, buying a house, improving interpersonal communication skills, or finding step-by-step instructions for hobbies, such as cooking.

8. More than half of the sample (52%) had turned to online forums, such as Stack Overflow, when troubleshooting computer problems. Others used forums for finding quick fix solutions, like figuring out how to set up a newly purchased electronic gadget, such as a new digital watch or monitor, used forums offered through sites like CNet, according to the interviewees.

31 More than one in 10 respondents (12%) did not report that they had not used search engines during the past year for continued learning in their personal lives. We acknowledge that these respondents may have used search engines for supporting other tasks, but did not use search engines to support the continued learning needs they may, or may not, have had. The same logic applies for explaining respondents’ use of other sources in this analysis, as well as the analyses about the workplace and local community.
9. During the past year, more than two-fifths (45%) reported using a public library—in-person and/or online. Graduates we interviewed said they had scanned shelves at their local library for books on home repair, hobbies, landscaping, cooking, or travel. Others said they went online to place best sellers on reserve that they could pick up at their local library later on. These findings suggest that many graduates preferred borrowing to buying. Slightly fewer had used bookstores (44%) and museums (37%) to browse titles or see exhibits.

10. Over one-third of the graduates trusted their coworkers (39%), and to a lesser extent their supervisors (19%), as sources of advice and guidance they could use in their personal lives. In follow-up interviews, graduates said small talk with coworkers kept them current about local events, books and movie recommendations, relationship issues, or housing options.

11. Some respondents sought expert advice from licensed professionals or experts during the past year, such as attorneys (37%), budget managers (20%), or career advisors (9%).

12. Almost one-quarter of the sample reported staying connected through their campus alumni association (24%). According to graduates we interviewed, many used alumni websites to find out about networking events, job leads, continuing education, or volunteering opportunities. Others said they checked the alumni website to keep up with old classmates or purchase tickets to campus events, like college football games.

13. Almost one-fourth (24%) had enrolled in an online course during the past year, with some saying they had enrolled in a MOOC, such as Coursera, so they could improve their computer skills with coding, programming, or Web design, according to interviewees.

14. One-fifth of the respondents (20%) consulted academic libraries and slightly fewer (19%) accessed online articles from library databases, if they had access, such as ProQuest or JSTOR, during the past 12 months. These visits were both physical and virtual, according to the graduates we interviewed. Some said they used scholarly sources through their campus library when they needed to conduct more intensive research on a topic, such as scientific breakthroughs for treating diseases like cancer.

15. Some respondents had contacted their former instructors (19%), or current instructors (14%) in graduate programs in which they were enrolled or had completed, for guidance. Others had consulted a community expert, such as clergy or a coach (14%) or a librarian (9%) during the past year.

Not surprisingly, most graduates said they used a mix of Google searches and popular sites like Facebook, Pinterest, or YouTube to locate quick-fix solutions or creative ideas. But their online searching did not end there.

Many graduates that we interviewed had consulted books, blogs, NPR, or BBC broadcasts to learn more deeply and authoritatively about new ideas. Others tuned into documentaries or TED Talks on YouTube since it felt like being back in school again—but with shorter lectures that were “impactful, concise, and applicable.” Still others said they took deep dives into the plethora of sources available on the Web, especially when a topic piqued their interest.

32 One in five (20%) of the survey respondents were currently enrolled in a graduate program and 28% had already completed a graduate program.
Still others let their curiosity lead them from one source to the next over days and weeks in what one graduate called "serendipitous learning":

> It all started because I watched a documentary, The Business of Being Born—it’s what sparked my interest in midwives and exploring those options. So, after I saw that documentary, I looked at some other documentaries, and I went online to research statistics, what were options in my area, where to go, and what my options were with my insurance for having my own baby. There were books that were mentioned in the documentaries and that came up when I was searching online. I bought Ina May Gaskin’s book on childbirth. I would also look at YouTube videos about natural childbirth.

Nearly all of the graduates we interviewed complemented their use of online sources with face-to-face discussions. Such conversations were useful for finding out about local events or restaurants, or when graduates were making risk-associated decisions, such as switching jobs, making a major purchase, starting a family, or figuring about money matters, according to interviewees.

All in all, most graduates we studied realized the Web could not satisfy their continued learning needs. Conversations with friends and family mattered. So did the traditional learning sources they had relied on in college—books and libraries.

To comprehend how recent graduates continue to learn in their personal lives, we conducted two follow-up analyses: 1) a discussion and findings about graduates’ use of blogs, and 2) their use of public libraries.

**Follow-up Analysis: Why Do Blogs Still Matter?**

Short-form content—as quickly created as it is consumed—has captured the attention of a nation of Internet users. In 2015, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter made the list of the top 25 most frequently downloaded mobile apps in the US.33 When we conducted interviews with recent college graduates in our study, we found that blogs, an older Web form, still mattered, too.

In this follow-up analysis, we discuss some of the reasons graduates rely on blogs for continued learning. According to our survey results, more than half (56%) had turned to blogs in the past year. More than two-fifths of the respondents (43%) had followed between one and four blogs to meet their continued learning needs. The majority of these blog followers were women (68%), slightly lower than the national average for social media usage.34

As content that once was the bedrock of the blogosphere has migrated to sites like Tumblr, Twitter, or Facebook,35 we found the recent graduates we studied still turned to blogs for a variety of reasons (Figure 9).

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Summarizing findings about blog use:

1. More than anything else, blogs were an affordable source (71%) of the know-how that recent graduates needed. According to the survey results, blogs offered up-to-date information (69%) and good summaries of topics (61%) from insiders, according to our survey results. Many blog users we interviewed said they would not have been able to afford to hire this quality of expertise so they relied on blogs for guidance, instruction, and advice.

2. Further, six in 10 (60%) reported that blogs were easy to locate using search engines. To a slightly lesser extent, there was an authenticity and candor to blog content (59%); writers rarely are compensated, unlike the writers from the mainstream media—publications that graduates we interviewed said they tended to mistrust. Notably, none of the interviewees mentioned sponsored reviews, which are a form of advertising on some blogs.

3. Over half the graduates said they prioritized their search for blogs by looking for utility as well as for ongoing discussions with multiple voices (55%) about the kinds of things today’s they need to know.

According to graduates we interviewed, blogs helped with learning more about things such as personal budgets, house-buying, parenting and newborn baby care, workplace communication, or starting a business from the ground up. In other cases, some said blogs helped them keep up on neighborhood news:

*Blogs can get very specific about your neighborhood and they can cover just one neighborhood that newspapers really don't and can't. People who write for these blogs writers are on the ground and they're involved in the community. Blogs like this are very up to date. Several posts come out a day. If something happens, they're on it immediately.*
Utility, highlighted earlier in our report as being an important information quality to young graduates, was a main reason why graduates surveyed relied on blogs. Blog users we interviewed said they were looking for “specifics” and “how-to information” they could directly apply in their lives. They wanted practical and no-cost information that they could call up quickly and use.

We found most graduates said they were selective about the blogs that they consult, especially when they wanted to follow a certain topic closely. Many said they followed blogs after having carefully vetted them in a variety of ways.

For instance, one interviewee who had double-majored in business and music said he started reading a digital marketing guru’s blog after first learning about him in a *New York Times* business article. Another interviewee, who was setting up a graphic design business, said she is following a well-known entrepreneur’s blog for ideas and guidance.

Still another young graduate, who had majored in finance, said she had done a Google search and culled the results to find a credible blog about setting up first-time personal budgets after college. The comments posted on blogs, she said, helped her figure out which solutions worked over time and, ultimately, whether or not the budgeting methods were feasible for her.

Today, there are a myriad of online sources with this kind of shared utility for lifelong learning, such as online forums, social network sites, and video-sharing sites. However, our findings suggest these online venues may simply not be enough to provide lifelong learners with the quality of information graduates seek.

The quality and depth of blogs that have not migrated to social media platforms may be filling a gap with more information-rich content and less of the self-absorbed opinion and personal musings of the past. In the next section, we provide results from another follow-up analysis, this time, about public library usage.

**Follow-up Analysis: Public Libraries, along with What Else?**

Almost half of the graduates we surveyed (45%) had used a public library during the past year. In this follow-up analysis, we asked those respondents who reported using public libraries for continued learning, what other information sources were they likely to use for the same purpose.

A logistic regression analysis was used to determine the circumstances in which public libraries were more likely to be used—and not used—in graduates’ personal lives. The results of the analysis that are presented in Figure 10 provide the probability of whether respondents who used public libraries also used other sources for lifelong learning during the past 12 months. The full model containing all nine predictors of public library usage correctly classified 73% of the cases (n=1,571).

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37 The model contained nine independent variables: (1) consulting with a librarian(s), (2) visiting bookstores, (3) museums, (4) use of educational websites, (5) open access scholarly databases, e.g., ERIC, (6) gender, (7) having the ability to learn anything on their own, (8) use of online courses, and (9) age. The model’s dependent variable was the use of public libraries in their personal lives. We determined use by graduates’ responses to survey questions about the reported use of public libraries.

38 The value of the Nagelkerke R-squared was 0.3265, which means that 33% of all of the variance in the use of public libraries in personal life can be accounted for by these variables, using this model.
As shown in Figure 10, although their effect was small, seven of the nine independent variables made a statistically significant contribution to the model about public library usage (0.05%) level. In the figure, these variables appear asterisked in the first column of the figure and shaded in gray. The associated p-values of the standardized partial regression coefficient and the odds ratio are bolded.

**Figure 10: Logistic Regression Analysis Results on Public Library Usage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate of B</th>
<th>S.E. of B</th>
<th>p-value of B</th>
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<td>0.125</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.859*</td>
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Percentages based on total n = 1,571 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities. Bolded values with asterisks (*) are statistically significant at p <0.05 level.

Summarizing findings about public library usage and other information systems:

1. The strongest predictor of using public libraries for continued learning in personal life was having also used librarians in the past 12 months. That is, graduates who used public libraries were five and a half times more likely to have consulted a librarian in the past year. This finding suggests that the use of public libraries was closely paired with the use of librarians for graduates surveyed.

2. Other strong predictors of public library use were using (1) bookstores (online or brick-and-mortar), with an odds ratio of 2.9; (2) visiting museums, with an odds ratio of 2.7; (3) using open access databases with research articles (e.g., ERI or PubMed), with an odds ratio of 2.0, and (3) using educational websites such as YouTube, with an odds ratio of 2.0 (controlling for all other factors in the model).

3. The model indicated that public library users in our sample were also more likely to be female, with an odds ratio of 1.6. We found gender had an impact on public library use in our sample, which is consistent with other research studies.39

4. Those who thought they had the ability to learn independently on their own were less likely to use public libraries than those who did not believe they had the ability to learn anything on their own.40

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39 Kathryn Zickuhr, Lee Rainie, Kristen Purcell, and Maeve Duggan, “How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities, Section 1: An Overview of Americans’ Public Library Use” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, December 11, 2013), http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/section-1-an-overview-of-americans-public-library-use/. The Pew study found that more women (83%) than men (79%) had visited a public library or bookmobile in the past year and that more women (49%) than men (39%) had accessed a public library website. The sample size was 6,224 participants over 16 years of age.
In Figure 11, we provide a breakout of these same results that appeared in the column with the bolded figures in Figure 10. This figure summarizes the odds ratios for the statistically significant independent variables in the model. It shows how many times more likely respondents that used libraries also were likely to use of librarians, bookstores, museums, open access scholarly databases, educational websites, and their gender).

**Figure 11: What Were the Odds of Using Public Libraries?**

Numbers based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to examine the use of public libraries along with other information sources. As a whole, the findings from our analysis suggest that many, though not all, of the graduates we studied place a high premium on curated learning resources that are organized and kept up to date.

Further, they seem to prefer what bookstores and museums have to offer, and where there is available assistance, as in the case of librarians and knowledgeable staff. In the next section, we turn our attention to the workplace. We investigated how graduates in our study used information sources to meet their continued learning needs in their professional lives.

2. Learning Sources: Workplace

Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman published a groundbreaking book in 2011 called *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. This best seller, based on more than 30 years of research, analyzed two modes of thinking that the human mind uses for organizing and processing knowledge for decision-making. 41 “System One” is thinking that is fast, instinctive, and emotional. “System Two” is slow, deliberative, methodical, and rational.

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40 In Figure 10, the negative value for the Estimate of B for “the ability to learn anything on my own,” which means respondents who thought they could learn anything on their own had a decreased likelihood of using public libraries.

Kahneman's book is a useful starting point when thinking about the information-seeking behavior of today's college graduates in the workplace. In 2012, as a forerunner to this study on lifelong learning, PIL conducted its own qualitative study about how recent college graduates solved information problems once they joined the workforce.42

Our 2012 focus group samples of recent graduates said they used Google searches to solve information problems that landed on their desks in the course of a workday. For instance, a project manager in our discussions said he used Google to find directions to a hotel that was hosting a conference. A waiter did a quick Google search to learn how to describe a selection of artisan cheeses. A nurse needed to find out about new intervention methods and began with a Google search.

Comparing to Kahneman's thesis, we found that recent graduates in the 2012 study used information strategy based on fast thinking when asked to solve urgent information problems in the workplace. These instincts for instant information, however, ended up having significant limitations for meeting employers' needs, and, ultimately, for graduates' professional success.43

While this earlier study provided insights into how today's college hires make decisions for solving pressing information problems that workers were assigned, it only tells part of the story. Here, in this report, we have investigated both how graduates solve quick-fix information problems as well as how, and under what circumstances, they acquire a deeper and more conceptual understanding of a field, topic, or issue as lifelong learners.

Specifically, we have asked how recent graduates use different information sources to satisfy continued learning needs they have for the workplace. What role do coworkers, supervisors, and friends play in the Google Generation's quest to learn additional skills and, ultimately, succeed at work?

To answer these questions, we collected data from a survey with 28 sources graduates may have used during the past year. The results appear in Figure 12 and are ordered from most to least frequently used.


43 In addition to focus groups with recent graduates, we conducted 23 interviews with employers who hired and trained new college graduates. These employers worked at companies that included Microsoft, Battelle, the Smithsonian Institution, Marriot International, and Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company.
Figure 12: Learning Sources for Use in the Workplace

Percentages based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities and “check all that apply” responses. A complete data set of responses to this question appears in Figure 12A in Appendix E.
Summarizing the findings about learning sources for the workplace:

1. A large majority of the respondents (84%) had turned to coworkers to meet their learning needs in the workplace during the past year. In follow-up interviews, many called coworkers their go-to source, especially for learning how to perform certain tasks they did not know how to do and how to avoid pitfalls.

2. More than four-fifths had relied on search engines (83%), such as Google, to obtain factual information they needed about other businesses, such as a phone number or email address while others relied on Google for finding data sheets of workplace products.

3. Over three-quarters of the sample (79%) approached their supervisors during the past year to clarify expectations of their job. According to our interviews with graduates, many expected their boss to assess whether they had certain computer skills, such as coding or running spreadsheet analyses. Others said they used their supervisors as mentors, who helped them sharpen their workplace skills.

4. More than half (51%) had relied on books for getting a deeper understanding of a concept or workplace procedure. In our follow-up interviews, some graduates said they reviewed chapters from their old college textbooks to brush up on techniques, especially marketing strategies or scientific or statistical procedures. Others said they read business bestsellers so they could contribute to discussions during the course of the workday.

5. About half (49%) attended professional conferences to keep up with changes in their specialized fields and to update their skills and knowledge. Some graduates said conferences with training sessions were preferable so they could learn from well-known experts and expand their professional network.

6. Almost half the sample (47%) had consulted online and print news sources during the last year. Some graduates mentioned looking for stories from The New York Times, Business Week, Harvard Business Review, or The Economist so they could stay on top of business news that was relevant to their field. To a far lesser extent, graduates used blogs (26%) for workplace learning.

7. Over two-fifths of the respondents (43%) had monitored social networking sites for news about skills and information they could use for career development. Some said they used popular sites like Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn to develop their professional network, that is, to recruit new employees or look for new employment opportunities of their own.

8. Two-fifths of the respondents had relied on friends (42%) when learning about managing their careers while a smaller percentage of respondents had turned to family members (31%). In the follow-up interviews, some graduates said they used their friends as sounding boards, especially when figuring our career moves or getting along with difficult coworkers.

9. Four in 10 graduates surveyed had used educational sites (40%) to help solve the daily problems they encountered at work. For example, some interviewees mentioned using YouTube videos to brush up on how to execute a spreadsheet formula, to improve skills for communicating during meetings, or set up devices, like a field pump or printer, that they needed at work. Still, over a third of the sample (38%) relied on experts for one-on-one exchanges and guidance in their field.

10. More than a third of the sample read online forums (38%), especially for finding quick solutions to computer problems. Fewer took online courses (27%) that offered complete training modules on topics they wanted to learn, such as coding or programming.
11. Over a quarter of the sample (28%) had used specialized library databases during the past year. Interviewees mentioned using sites like LexisNexis and JSTOR for finding scholarly sources they needed for workplace research. Others used open-access databases (27%), such as ERIC, PubMed, ResearchGate, or Google Scholar, for finding research articles.

12. More than a quarter of the sample had contacted former instructors (26%) in the past 12 months while slightly fewer had turned to their current instructors in graduate programs (21%) as a source of workplace advice. Graduates, especially those that had graduated from smaller schools or were enrolled in graduate programs, said they relied on professors as mentors, especially for coaching them on career strategy and making professional decisions.

13. Over one-fifth (23%) had used academic libraries for conducting traditional work-related research while others (18%) had used workplace information centers during the past year. Comparatively, fewer had used public libraries (13%) or bookstores (12%).

14. For consulting on remedies to specific information problems they had encountered in the workplace, some graduates had consulted licensed professionals (19%), such as attorneys or CPAs, while fewer had sought guidance from career advisors (14%), librarians (9%), or community experts (6%).

Taken together, the graduates we interviewed had no shortage of sources they could use for continued learning in the workplace. Nor did most lack the competencies for evaluating the usefulness of relevant information. In many cases, what most graduates preferred and sought out were trustworthy and authoritative sources.

Some graduates, for instance, looked for guidance and advice from their peers in the workplace or from training sessions led by experts. Others went back to their textbooks from college courses, especially in the sciences or business. Still others pored through journal articles from library databases or Google Scholar for explanations of important concepts.

In this sense, these resources were similar to what many, as college students had relied on for learning while in college or a graduate program. The difference from college, however, was the goal—to succeed in the workplace and stay employed rather than simply to pass a course. To this end, graduates often sought out coworkers and authoritative sources in order to learn the tasks they needed to complete in their new position.

The graduates we surveyed relied on coworkers more than they did search engines, even though it was only by 1%. In the next section, we provide a follow-up analysis about how graduates used their coworkers as resources for the informal learning they needed for the workplace.

Follow-up Analysis: How Do Coworkers Help Graduates Learn?

A large majority of the survey respondents—84%—had consulted their coworkers during the past year to satisfy their continued learning needs. In this follow-up analysis we explored whether demographic factors helped to explain if anyone in our sample used coworkers more than anyone else. We used a cross-tabulation to see whether respondents majoring in certain fields were more likely to turn to coworkers than others.

From our analysis, we found that college major made little difference. That is, whether respondents had majored in arts and the humanities, education, engineering, or the sciences they had all approached coworkers to learn how to perform workplace tasks during the past year. Further, there

The difference from college, however, was the goal—to succeed in the workplace and stay employed rather than simply to pass a course.
Learning how to use hospital machinery was a part of his job at a news station. For instance, one graduate we interviewed said she pulled a trusted coworker aside to teach her the basics of communicating with customers. She had been hired as a salesperson, but had little training from college. Another said that in college he had not learned to edit news footage even though it now was a part of his job at a news station. Still another graduate who had studied the sciences, explained:

This weekend I went into the lab, because that's my life now, and a post-doctoral fellow was there who helped me record from a different cell type than I usually do—a technique I did not know how to do. So for probably about three hours on Saturday this person did one-on-one practice with me. It wasn't something that was necessarily prearranged; we just both agreed that it needed to be done. And that's usually how it works. There's no real training, there's just a lot of roping my colleagues into teaching me something.

In situations like these, new college hires turned to a nearby coworker for a solution that would keep them in good stead in their boss's eyes. Such learning exchanges helped graduates climb the steep learning curve that most soon discovered in their new workplace surroundings. These exchanges also helped with managing the pace and expectations of the workplace, which were very different from what they had experienced during college.

Learning from coworkers, however, did not end there. Some trusted their peers in the workplace to provide ongoing help to build their careers. They talked about these kinds of exchanges occurring face-to-face at work, rather than through social media, texts, or email.

For instance, a medical technician in our sample said she approached a more experienced technician for guidance. The seasoned coworker and the young graduate developed a month-to-month plan for learning how to use certain hospital machinery. Another graduate, who worked in human resources at a large company, asked a colleague how to be a better interviewer:

HR was not my background, so when I first started, I was completely overwhelmed. My interviews weren't going very well. They were really awkward. I said to a coworker “You're really great at interviewing, people love talking to you, people always leave with a smile whether it was a good interview or not. How do I make that part of my wheelhouse, one of my strengths?” She had her own stack of resources—different behavioral questions and guides—that she shared with me. She pulled a lot of online content and an old textbook for me. She helped me put together a game plan for every interview I had and then she would sit in on my interviews and give me feedback.
Whatever their career goals, many of the graduates we interviewed could be characterized as continuous learners, especially when they had available time to learn in the often fast-paced workplace. In many situations, had come to depend on informal exchanges with people, over Google searches, to meet their professional learning needs.

Like apprentices, graduates adopted the age-old practice of learning from people who they considered to be masters of the trade. What many had come to learn once they graduated was that question asking was an essential skill they needed to develop and practice daily in their new jobs.

In some cases, graduates observed the step-by-step instruction to, as one graduate put it, “mimic” how to complete certain tasks correctly. This was a common practice for solving urgent information problems when the turnaround time and margin of error were both tight. In other cases, when graduates wanted to learn a field in-depth for career development, they identified experts in the workplace who took them under their wing and helped them expand their career options.

Our findings suggest that across a variety of situations, young graduates arranged for these mentorships on their own; very few had been assigned mentors from higher ups within the organization. These relationships were grounded in coaching—much like the professor to student relationship that they might have had during college.

Together, these findings may be an outcome of a changing emphasis in higher education away from authoritatively and top-down relationships to more collaborative, open, and supportive interactions, and the carry-over of these approaches is seen in today’s workplace. A key distinction, however, between new hires and more seasoned workers was the size of the network each developed.

The young graduates we studied tended to use just one, or at most two coworkers, for informal learning with very few developing a larger community of practice, rich with expertise from workers across the organization or from throughout their professional field. In the next section, we examine the learning sources in the communities in where the graduates now lived.

3. Learning Sources: Local Community

Not long ago, getting a copy of the local phone book was as essential as hooking up to water and electricity for anyone settling into a new town. The telephone directory, with its Yellow Pages filled with local business and white pages of public services, was a veritable lifeline of reference material to everything from parks and schools to utilities and medical services.

Today, well before they even begin to pack for a move, people can consult sites like Yelp, Craigslist, LivingSocial, and Google Street View for a window into their new community. They may glean insights even longtime residents may still not know.

In our study, we wanted to understand how today’s college graduates used these and other sources to learn about their local communities. In our prior analysis about learning needs, far fewer graduates reported needing to learn about their local communities compared to the same graduates’ learning needs for their personal lives and workplaces. How could an analysis about what sources graduates used lend insights into why the graduates we studied did not seek to learn as much about their local communities?

In our analysis, we asked which of the 28 sources listed in our survey they had used most during the past year for staying involved in their local communities. In Figure 13, we present the survey results in descending order.
Summarizing these findings about the use of sources for engaging in their local community:

1. More than a third of the respondents (38%) had used search engines like Google to find information about the community where they lived in the past year compared to their use of search engines in their personal lives (88%) or the workplace (83%). When they did use search engines, they used them as a quick way to find addresses, maps, and phone numbers of local businesses, gyms, housing, churches, and other service organizations in their community.
2. Over one quarter of the sample (26%) had relied on social networking sites, such as Facebook during the past year for news in their communities. During the interviews, some said they had “liked” organizations on Facebook in order to receive updated information. Others said they relied on Yelp’s mobile app and the reviews for making decisions about where to dine or shop in their neighborhood.

3. Almost one in four turned to friends (24%) to learn about their local community; fewer had turned to family (15%) and coworkers (13%). Graduates said they talked to friends to find out about available housing, and to connect with people who had the same hobbies.

4. Over one-fifth of the sample (23%) had read a local newspaper or a free weekly shopper to stay current about local news, politics, housing, and events. Far fewer, about one in 10 (11%), had consulted blogs to learn what was going on within a few square blocks of their residence.

5. Though it was not very common, some respondents used educational sources like YouTube (12%), books (11%), online forums (7%), or online courses (3%) to learn skills for working with children or communicating with neighborhood groups.

6. Fewer than one in 10 had turned to community leaders or experts (8%), such as clergy, coaches, or neighborhood organizers; others sought out professionals (6%) to become involved in their local community.

7. Whether they visited the physical location or accessed materials online, fewer than one in 10 of the graduates who took the survey reported using public libraries (8%) and even fewer had consulted librarians (4%). At the same time, few respondents had used bookstores (5%) or museums (4%) as a community learning source during the past year.

8. Some respondents reported using their campus alumni associations (5%), academic libraries (3%), or workplace centers (1%) for learning about engaging in the community where they now lived. Similarly, few respondents used library databases like ProQuest (3%) or open access databases (2%) like ERIC or ResearchGate as part of engaging in community or civic life.

We found few respondents had looked beyond their usual go-to sources to learn how to become involved in their communities—mainly because they did not seem to have as many continued learning needs in this area. When they did look for community information, graduates turned to search engines first and then used social networking sites.

Some branched out and turned to friends and family for guidance, especially when they were trying to solve an information problem where there was a high degree of risk. As one graduate with a new baby explained about finding a pediatrician nearby to where he and his family lived:

“I really trust the old Google Search, once I found a few places, I did more researching on pages, like Yelp to see what people have to say about the physician, what their staff was like, and how clean the clinic is. And then once I found a pediatrician that looked good, I looked up the name on the state medical boards to see if there were any sanctions against this physician— I did my homework before just arriving at the name of a physician.”

Others learned about their new community by walking around their neighborhood. One graduate we interviewed, for instance, said she walked down a street in a new neighborhood while running the mobile apps of Google maps and Yelp. This was how she discovered new places to eat, shop, or, as in this situation, a new coffee shop where people her age congregated.

Still relied on face-to-face conversations with friends, roommates, coworkers, so they could learn how to become involved in their new surroundings, especially when trying to find out about local events, businesses, services, or housing. The next section contains a follow-up analysis about the relationship between where graduates lived and their use of local information sources.
Follow-up Analysis: Community Involvement—Does Proximity Matter?

Each of the colleges and universities in our institutional sample was located in a “smart city” (i.e., one of the top 25 fastest-growing areas in the US where today’s college-educated graduates in their mid-to-late 20s live). From our survey results, the demographic data indicated one in four now lived more than 500 miles away from their alma mater (Figure 14).

Further, more than half of the graduates (55%) lived within 100 miles of the city or town where they had attended college. This percentage is high, but then again, the institutional sample for this study was intentionally “smart cities” where graduates often find work and end up living.

Figure 14: Proximity to Undergraduate Alma Mater

Percentages based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities.

In this follow-up analysis, we examined whether these “locals” differed from the “re-locators” in the information support systems they used for engaging in their local community. Did more locals use information sources in their communities for continued learning than did re-locators?

To answer this question, we ran a cross tabulation comparing four learning support systems—public libraries, bookstores, museums, and alumni associations—by two demographic groups from our sample (Figure 15). These groups of respondents were “locals” (living within 100 miles of where they went to college), and “re-locators” (living over 100 miles from where they went to college).

Figure 15: Use of Local Information Sources

Percentages based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities.
We found that more locals than re-locators were users of community learning sources. That is, the locals in our sample had turned to alumni associations, museums, public libraries, and bookstores in a range that was between 8% and 14% more than re-locators in our sample during the past year.

In particular, more locals (59%) than re-locators (41%) had sought information from their alumni associations in the past year. This result makes intuitive sense, especially in light of our follow-up interviews. Graduates, presumably those who lived near their alma maters, told us they counted on their alumni associations to find volunteer opportunities or upcoming alumni events in the area.

We also found more locals than re-locators had used other information support systems—museums, public libraries, and bookstores—in the past year. In other words, locals used museums (57%) more than re-locators (43%); public libraries (55%) more than re-locators (45%); and bookstores (54%) over re-locators (46%) in the past year.

Collectively, these results suggest that respondents living in the larger environs of where they had attended college may be more actively learning about engaging in their local communities and civic life, at least, in the past year. One explanation for this result may be that college towns, especially in “smart cities,” offer more resources for recent graduates than do other communities. Moreover, locals may have more experience and familiarity from their college years with navigating the information sources available in their community.

4. Major Learning Sources: Personal Life, the Workplace, and Local Community

What information sources did most graduates in our study use for different parts of their lives? We conclude this part of the report with an analysis of the data that addresses that question. To provide this bird’s eye view of the data, we created three pie charts for the top learning sources across graduates’ personal lives, the workplace, and local community (Figures 16 and 17).

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44 We calculated the results in Figure 16 and Figure 17 by dividing the total number of “checks” respondents assigned each of the learning source categories (numerator) divided by the total number of checks assigned across all three arenas (denominator). In the earlier figures in this section, i.e., Figures 8, 12, and 13, we calculated the number of checks respondents assigned to a learning source (numerator) divided by the total number of checks for each learning source within each separate arena (denominator), i.e., personal life, workplace, and local community.
On the surface, it is not surprising that the graduates we studied used a combination of computer-mediated sources, like search engines and social networking sites, and human-mediated sources, such as friends. What we found most telling, however, was how graduates put these different sources to use for their continued learning.

Beyond finding out about day-to-day happenings of friends through news feeds, the features on social networking sites had other important uses. According to our interviews with graduates, some used the "like button" as a filter for managing the never-ending churn of online content. For instance, one graduate said he had “liked” the local Chamber of Commerce page so he could receive updates on its events calendar. Another “liked” a company’s employment page so she could receive new listings, instead of having to remember to visit the site. Others said they used the social buttons to keep track of business stories:

I noticed that I was spending a whole lot of time on Facebook. So, one of the best things I actually did for myself was I “liked” the pages of a whole lot of publications like The Economist, Harvard Business Review, Business Week, Entrepreneur. My newsfeed started filling up with articles that those publications were publishing. Instead of spending time looking at what my friends were doing, I started looking at what was going on in the business world and that has really helped me stay current.

Still others developed a different strategy for efficiently navigating the Web. These graduates used a search engine as a shortcut to retrieve individual pages they needed on known sites. For instance, one graduate used Google to get to a YouTube video so he could learn about running a particular kind of soil test for a bridge project at work.

Other graduates said when they were trying to code something in Python or SPSS, they “Googled” the problem knowing they would get the page they needed on Stack Overflow. Still others used Google as
a means for finding home improvement tutorials or Pinterest to learn such things as how to refinish furniture, decorate a room, or prepare a meal.

When we asked graduates what information source had helped the most with continued learning during the past year, over a third of the sample named Google searches. As one interviewee said, “Google is set as my home page, it's where I start everything I do on the Web.” Another explained, “Google is the Internet to me.”

But since Google has little content beyond a list of results, where were graduates headed? To understand which sites graduates used for continued learning in their lives, we conclude this section with a discussion of results from a survey question about the use of popular Web destinations in the past year.

**Follow-up Analysis: Beyond Google, What’s the Destination?**

In this follow-up analysis, we asked graduates which learning websites they used in the past year. To answer this question, we collected data in the survey about respondents’ use of 15 popular learning sites for image sharing, technical forums, MOOCS, and other online training sites. The results appear in Figure 18.

**Figure 18: Use of Websites for Continued Learning**

- YouTube: 79%
- Pinterest: 51%
- Duolingo: 21%
- Khan Academy: 18%
- Coursera: 14%
- Stack Overflow: 12%
- Codecademy: 10%
- Google Helpouts: 9%
- lynda: 7%
- edX: 5%
- Udemy: 3%
- CrashCourse: 3%
- Udacity: 2%
- Academic Earth: 1%
- ALISON: 1%
We summarize the findings about the use of certain websites for learning as follows:

1. Above all, more respondents reported that they had used YouTube (79%) to meet their continued learning needs online during the past year. Many said they used short videos for finding quick-fix solutions they needed at home or at work while others watched educational shows on YouTube, such as TED Talks, to keep up on new ideas from science, technology, or business.

2. Half of the respondents had used Pinterest (51%) during the past year to learn and to share images and videos about creative ideas. Graduates called Pinterest a “discovery source,” where they learned about creative projects to use in their K-12 classrooms or at home and for hobbies.

3. Over one-fifth (21%) had used Duolingo, a language learning smartphone app, so they could gain fluency in Chinese, French, or Spanish while on the run or commuting to and from work.

4. In the past year, almost one in five graduates had used the micro-lectures on Khan Academy (18%) or CrashCourse (3%), both of which are popular educational channels on YouTube. In our follow-up interviews, some graduates said they refreshed their math skills they had long since forgotten. Others used the sites and learned along with their young children who were completing homework assignments for science and history classes.

5. About one-tenth of the sample had used Stack Overflow (12%) for learning programming or improving their coding skills during the past year. Fewer had relied on real-time video help for computers or mobile devices like the now-defunct Google Helpouts (9%) or lynda (7%).

6. One in 10 had used Codecademy (10%) during the past year to learn one of the coding languages the online platform teaches to beginners and advanced users. Far fewer had used ALISON (1%), another site for learning coding.

7. Despite the promise of MOOCs providing collegiate-level courses online, few graduates in our sample reported being users. Coursera (14%), a MOOC with many fee-based certificates, was used by more graduates than was edX (5%), Udacity (2%), or Academic Earth (1%). Few used Udemy (3%), a platform that lets any expert create and teach an online class.

More reported using popular destinations with short-form content, such as YouTube or Pinterest rather than MOOCs...

Taken together, there was a large difference between the handful of sites graduates used for learning and the ones they had not. More reported using popular destinations with short-form content, such as YouTube or Pinterest, rather than MOOCs or other online learning sites that required time and ongoing commitment.

According to the follow-up interviews, sites like YouTube offered up an endless supply of user content with “how-to” information and step-by-step instructions, which they wanted to quickly learn:

I use YouTube all the time, especially when my sons are working on their science lab experiments. One of my sons has to build a catapult for a Roman Day and one of them has to build an aqueduct. So, we looked at some videos on YouTube—it’s better than other resources because videos demonstrating what you should actually do along with the instructions.

While graduates we interviewed had worked through the first couple of lessons on sites like Coursera or Codecademy, few had completed an entire module. We concluded from our interviews that there were three obstacles to learning online for graduates: time constraints, self-motivation, or lack of a formal classroom structure with face-to-face exchanges. As one graduate, who had an arts and humanities degree explained:

It's been awhile since I've used Codecademy. I just haven’t got back to it, I have my family, my kids, my job, so spare time is not in huge supply but it's also staying focused, too. If I don't use the skill the next day, what I've just learned does not stick.

In the next part of our report, we build on these findings. We provide data collected from graduates about the challenges they faced with continued learning, using online and offline modes as well as the critical thinking skills they took from college and applied in their everyday lives.

Part Three: College Takeaways

What is the value of a college education? Some higher education stakeholders and will say college prepares students to be lifelong learners who are comfortable with diversity and change in an increasingly complex world. Others will take an economic stance, asserting that college graduates earn more over a lifetime than high school graduates. Still, others will insist that studying math, science, engineering, and technology (STEM) provide the best path to higher-paying jobs and “The American Dream.”

But in 2013, there was a new twist to the argument. When executives in US companies and nonprofits were surveyed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), nine out of 10 agreed that when assessing the value of new hires the ability to “think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems” mattered more than their major.

The AAC&U study underscores the high premium stakeholders from the workplace put on college students’ ability to be critical thinkers. Yet, the results do not include the opinions and thoughts of today’s graduates.

When we administered our survey to 1,651 graduates we investigated these otherwise limited assessments from the AAC&U. We asked survey respondents which critical thinking skills they believed they had developed during college and transferred and adapted to their post-college lives.

To more deeply understand these responses, in our follow-up interviews, we asked graduates how they have, or have not, directly applied these critical thinking competencies to their personal and professional lives. We also explored the related skills of collaboration, teamwork, and mentoring they found they needed in their post-college lives.

We have divided this part of the report into three sections with results from (1) the critical thinking indices we constructed for measuring respondents' transferable competencies, (2) a survey question about the standards graduates use for evaluating Web content, and (3) a survey question about the challenges graduates have with continued learning.

1. Critical Thinking Indices

We began our analysis of critical thinking takeaways from college by constructing five indices. Indices are useful to social scientists as composite measures of ordinal variables that represent a larger construct, such as our investigation of critical thinking. They also provide indicators that are more valid than a single indicator of a variable, and they make finer distinctions among the values that a variable may take on.

In our analysis, we used indices to detect differences in critical thinking and information literacy competencies graduates thought they had acquired in college and transferred to their post-college lives. Two survey questions with a total of 15 different response categories were used to create these indices.49

These questions asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed, with statements about individual skills, strategies, attitudes, or thinking processes. In turn, we used the results to examine how transferable this set of outcomes was for respondents once they graduated.

It is important to note the skills, attitudes, and competencies that we have used in our analysis were intentionally derived from an amalgamation of both information literacy and critical thinking concepts.50 As such, we incorporated, ACRL’s 2000 updated standards of information literacy as well as the newly revised 2015 framework for information literacy, which was released at the time we were conducting this research.51

These two defining ACRL documents encapsulate librarians’ mission to coach, train, and instruct students in both skills and competencies they will need for navigating the increasingly complex information systems as students and as lifelong learners. At the same time, we drew on our own research and other scholarly publications on lower- and higher-order thinking practices.

49 Fourteen out of 15 of the variables used to create the scale were derived from survey question 12. The variable in the analysis that measured challenges with staying motivated to keep learning was derived from survey question 13. We reverse-coded responses to question 13, so that respondents who agreed that they had no difficulty in staying motivated to keep learning ran in the same direction as responses to survey question 12.

50 John M. Weiner has concluded from his research that critical thinking and information literacy are both concerned with the ability to apply acute intelligence for solving information problems. However, information literacy is the bailiwick of academic librarians and focused on facilitating self-learning in any domain, while critical thinking is the domain of faculty discipline specialists and concerned with individual mastery. See: “Is There a Difference between Critical Thinking and Information Literacy?” Journal of Information Literacy 5, no. 2 (December 2011): 81-92, http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/5.2.1600.

We called these clusters of related skills, knowledge, and abilities, “critical thinking competencies.” These competencies involved strategies that enabled an individual to be successful at finding and using information as well as creating their own content.

As such, they included strategies for deciding what action needs to be taken to execute a task, how to perform that action, how to achieve a specific goal, how to analyze and assess the results, and how to reflect on their own thinking processes and how to improve it.52

The objective of our analysis was to create indices that would enable us to understand the transferability of certain competencies that are developed for completing college-level coursework. Ultimately, these competencies are also necessary to prepare students to be lifelong learners once they graduate. In Figure 19, we present the five critical thinking competencies (left column) and individual information skills and attitudes (right column) that were in our analysis.

**Figure 19: Competencies and Skills in the Critical Thinking Indices** 53

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Thinking Competencies</th>
<th>Individual Information Skills and Attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. **Framing Questions:** Framing and asking questions as a self-motivated learner. | • Asking questions until a topic is understood  
• Staying motivated to keep learning * |
| 2. **Searching for Information:** Finding and gathering appropriate information or evidence for investigation of a topic. | • Formulating an effective search strategy  
• Using multiple sources, beyond Google search  
• Revising a search based on what is found |
| 3. **Interpreting Meaning of Results:** Selecting relevant information or data and analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting constructed and contextual meanings and detecting underlying bias and assumptions. | • Sorting through large amounts of content  
• Extracting information needed  
• Finding relevant data in large datasets  
• Reading “closely” to understand meaning  
• Evaluating credibility of content |
| 4. **Using Information:** Synthesizing and combining information while drawing conclusions for effectively communicating solutions or new ideas to individuals and groups of stakeholders, e.g., teams. | • Drawing conclusions from large datasets  
• Presenting information effectively  
• Communicating arguments persuasively to individuals and groups, e.g., teams. |
| 5. **Being Self-Aware about Learning Abilities:** Demonstrating metacognitive awareness about personal learning abilities. | • Having the ability to learn anything on my own  
• Teaching another how to carry out research |

* The skill listed here, “staying motivated to keep learning,” appeared in a different question in the survey and was reversed-coded here. A complete data set of responses to this question appears in Figure 19A Appendix E.


53 To define the indices we drew on three sources: (1) critical thinking concepts from Benjamin S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*, (New York: David McKay Co Inc.,1956); and Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick, *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*, (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008); (2) information literacy competencies from ACRL’s “Information Literacy Competency Standards For Higher Education” (2000; 2015), see note 51; and Michael Eisenberg and Robert Berkowitz, *Information Problem-Solving: The Big6 Skills Approach to Library & Information Skills Instruction* (Norwood, New Jersey: Abex Publishing, 1990); and (3) the institutional learning outcomes from one college in our sample, in which both competencies—critical thinking and information literacy—were detailed. Note that the information skills and processes used in our analysis were not intended to be exhaustive and conclusive about all the possible critical thinking skills.
In the next step of our analysis, we figured out respondents’ scores on these five critical thinking competencies. We used frequencies to calculate the results percentages in Figure 20.\(^5\)

**Figure 20: Critical Thinking Competencies from College**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using Information</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting Meaning of Results</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Self-Aware about Learning Abilities</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for Information</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing Questions</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results are ranked from most to least for critical thinking outcomes graduates believed they learned or developed during college and applied in their post-college lives, from total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities.

Summarizing the findings from our critical thinking indices:

1. More graduates in the sample (76%) believed that college had taught them how to use information effectively—combine different sources and communicate the results—and adapt it to their post-college lives.

2. Over three-fourths of the graduates (76%) agreed that college had taught them how to sort through and evaluate large amounts of content as well as finding the meaning in texts and datasets.

3. About three-quarters of the sample (74%) thought that college had enhanced their awareness about their ability to learn on their own. They believed their education also left them better able to teach others how to conduct research.

4. Over two-thirds (72%) believed that college had developed their search skills, which they continued to use, such as formulating a search strategy and using multiple sources.

5. Few of the graduates we surveyed—less than one-third (27%)—were in agreement that college had helped them develop the skill of asking their own questions and staying motivated as continued learners.

Two significant trends emerged from the indices. First, three-quarters of the respondents, on average, believed that their college experiences had taught them information competencies they could adapt and apply in their lives today. These competencies were essential to the continued learning process from searching and interpreting to applying and self-assessing their own learning styles.

\(^5\) In our analysis, each respondent ended up with a critical thinking score for each of the five stages of critical thinking. We re-calibrated the scores into one of the following five scores: 1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree. We then calculated the percentage of respondents in the sample who had scores between 4 and 5; that is, they agreed they had learned a critical thinking outcome from college and applied it in their lives now.
While these findings bode well for preparing students to be lifelong learners after graduation, the second major finding from this analysis does not. That is, very few graduates in our sample—slightly more than one in four respondents—believed that college had helped them develop the ability to frame and ask questions of their own.\textsuperscript{55} As such, these findings suggest that graduates in our sample left college fairly accomplished at answering other people’s questions—but were not very experienced with formulating their own questions.

\textit{Follow-up Analysis: In Their Words}

Our follow-up interviews lend further insights into graduates’ experiences and beliefs about the critical thinking competencies they developed during college. Above all, graduates said they had learned how to search for and evaluate information during college, and they still used those strategies today.

For instance, an accountant said he had learned use Google to find Wikipedia articles with a citation trail to authoritative sites. An engineer said even though CNN was his favorite news show, he had been watching BBC News since college, too, to find different news coverage about worldwide topics. A social worker explained how college had taught her how to search for information:

\begin{quote}
I know what sources are more credible and reliable, like I know that .gov is more credible than a .com website and so are scholarly articles, peer-reviewed ones. When doing research, I find myself leaning to more of those types of articles than to just whatever is out there. I look at the credentials behind it, the source it is coming from. I always ask, “Okay, who wrote this?” or if there’s a survey or study, “Okay, who conducted it?”
\end{quote}

Others said college taught them to take what they had found in a search and extract what was important and share the reasons why with others. For instance, a budget analyst said he had first learned how to explain Excel spreadsheet results to inexperienced team members on projects during college and used the same skill in his new career.

A chemical engineer said college had taught him the basics of taking a systematic approach to analyzing a scientific problem. A statistician had learned the skill of reading a book quickly and pulling out its main arguments—a practice he still used today as a lifelong learner.

Yet, at the same time, comparatively few graduates said they had developed the ability to frame and ask their own questions during college. Based on our interviews, three factors kept graduates from learning and developing the critical thinking skill of how to ask questions in college: (1) student-to-professor ratio, (2) institutional culture, or (3) disciplinary curriculum.

For instance, some graduates from public universities said their lectures were so large that there was no time or place to ask a question. The student-to-professor ratio was a defining issue, but the way in which students perceived their school’s customs and rituals for communication also shaped their viewpoint about whether question asking was allowed.

\textsuperscript{55} For more about the importance of question asking and methods for teaching the skill, see: Alison J. Head, “Dan Rothstein: The Necessity of Asking Questions,” Project Information Literacy, Smart Talk, no. 24 (April 21, 2015), \url{http://projectinfolit.org/smart-talks/item/144-dan-rothstein-smart-talk}; Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press, 2011).
As one graduate from a large public university explained:

『There just wasn't a lot of personal, one-on-one engagement at my college. At a school my size you get the feeling quickly that it's very much a business. My institution was in the business of getting people degrees, and churning out students. Maybe at a smaller liberal arts kind of college it would be an environment more conducive to creativity and personal growth. Where I think my institution was about "here's the path, here's how long it should take you, we do this every day, we know what we're doing here."』

Others said that it was the curriculum undergraduate institution that either did—or did not—foster questioning as an essential critical thinking competency. Some said engineering and computer science curriculum posed barriers to intellectual exploration:

『The biggest difference is the engineering curriculum in college is the faculty and the textbook problem sets are defining what the issue is. It's well defined. The solution is known. The faculty, the textbook author, they can carve the question any way they want whereas in the real world it's not black and white, there's a lot of gray area and unknowns. You use the principles that you were taught in school once you get a job but it's not necessarily a straight application in real life. In real life, you're the one defining the solution, not faculty or a textbook.』

Notably, there was a difference in opinion from graduates we interviewed at liberal arts institutions and those at larger public schools. Those from smaller schools said their education had woven in the ability to frame questions into every class:

『No one got through a class at my liberal arts college without speaking, having to ask questions, especially in my second, third, and fourth years. A lot of the courses were student-led and the professor was there as a moderator. Students were prompted with an issue and we had to ask questions, figure out solutions on our own, and if we got too far off base, the professor jumped in so no one had their time wasted. We were held accountable for figuring things out and solving problems.』

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies of the critical thinking competencies today's recent graduates consider to be college takeaways. As a whole, the results have implications for those who believe that higher education prepares students to be lifelong learners. Rather, the majority of recent graduates appeared to come out of college more skilled at answering questions that instructors posed than framing questions of their own and finding answers. In the next section, our follow-up analysis examines the effect of undergraduate major and institutional affiliation on the scores for the critical thinking indices.

**Follow-up Analysis: Does Major Matter?**

In this analysis, we explore whether a respondent's undergraduate major was a factor in the results of our questioning index. We used mean scores to calculate the results. A higher mean score meant that respondents with degrees in certain fields were in stronger agreement they had learned to develop their ability to ask their own questions in college more so than others that had lower mean scores and were in different disciplines. Figure 21 presents results for the questioning index.
Figure 21: Mean Scores for Questioning Index by Major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Survey sample size</th>
<th>Mean Score for Questioning Index</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical and life sciences</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>3.43048</td>
<td>0.849086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business administration (includes accounting)</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>3.36266</td>
<td>0.874951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational training (e.g., nursing, certificates)</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>3.33984</td>
<td>0.798457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and behavioral sciences</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>3.33407</td>
<td>0.85252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.31944</td>
<td>0.733051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and humanities</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>3.31388</td>
<td>0.866973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and engineering</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>3.23554</td>
<td>0.774797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer science and information management</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.14444</td>
<td>0.883062</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers based on total n = 1,327 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities, ordered from highest mean scores to lowest by major.*

Summarizing key findings about the mean scores from the questioning index:

1. We found respondents who had majored in physical life sciences, such as biology or chemistry, had a higher mean score for framing questions (3.43) than did respondents in any other major. The second highest score was for those who had majored in business administration (3.36).

2. Notably, graduates who had majored in computer science, which included information management, had the lowest mean scores for the critical thinking skill of framing questions (3.14). To a slightly lesser extent, those who had majored in engineering and architecture had comparatively low mean scores (3.24), too.

The findings from our analysis—and the high and low scores—suggest that certain majors may impact students’ opportunities for learning how to develop and frame their own questions. That is, graduates who had majored in computer science, engineering, or architecture were less likely to report that their college experience had taught them to develop and ask their own questions.56

As a follow-up to this analysis, we compared the mean scores of the questioning index for respondents from liberal arts colleges and universities with those from public institutions. We found students from liberal arts institutions had a higher mean score (3.42) than did respondents from research schools (3.30). Notably, while we found these differences to be statistically significant, the effect size between the groups was quite small for all practical purposes.57

Taken together, these findings raise some interesting issues about disciplinary curriculum and the effectiveness of pedagogical techniques in different teaching settings. Yet more research, beyond the limits of this study, needs to be conducted before these findings can be thought of as representative of

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56 The post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test that we ran indicated that the mean score for computer science majors was statistically different from the arts and humanities, business administration, education, and physical life sciences majors (testing at the p < .05 level).

57 For these comparisons, we conducted two one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to explore whether the differences were statistically significant at the p < .05 level. The partial eta-squared was 0.0037, which is considered very small, using Cohen’s criterion.
recent graduates from other institutions. For instance, why do graduates in the physical sciences and business majors think they are more adept at framing questions than graduates in other majors?

In the next section, we explore another critical thinking skill: evaluation. With over three-quarters of the sample believing that college taught them the competency of interpreting the meaning of results, we asked how graduates evaluated Web content for continued learning.

2. Evaluation: An Essential Takeaway

Evaluation of information has been called one of—if not the—most critical skills of the 21st century.58 Academic librarians and educators frequently cite the importance of teaching students how to navigate increasingly complex information systems in the digital age and how to be discriminating information seekers and consumers as well as ethical and legal producers of their own content.

In our study, we asked how recent graduates evaluate Web content they use for continued learning in their post-college lives. Do they apply and adapt the standards for judging the usefulness and validity of Web sources once taught to them as students?

To answer these questions, we used a survey question with a Likert scale to measure how often respondents considered 10 criteria about websites in the past year. We present the results in Figure 22.

Figure 22: Criteria for Evaluating Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How up-to-date the information is</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the author’s credentials are</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site is familiar from previous use</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site design conveys legitimacy</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL is from a legitimate source, e.g., gov or edu</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site links to other resources</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone has recommended using the site</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charts add important information (if they exist)</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gut feeling says site is legitimate</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site is familiar from college</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages based on total n = 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities. Responses of “almost always,” “often,” and “sometimes” have been conflated into a new category of “criteria used.” A complete data set of responses to this question appears in Figure 22A in Appendix E.

Summarizing the findings about how graduates evaluate websites:

1. Nearly every respondent (97%) considered the currency of Web content and to a lesser extent, the credentials of the author (94%) of the Web content they relied on for acquiring additional information they could put to use in their lives.

2. The large majority of respondents attributed familiarity with Web content legitimacy, and reportedly weighed whether they had used the site before (92%) or if someone had recommended using the site (84%). At the same time, far fewer (58%) considered a site’s content legitimate if they had specifically used the site during college.

3. Almost all of the respondents (89%) had considered how a site was designed as an evaluation criteria while three-fourths (75%) considered if charts, if they existed, contributed useful information to content they had found in the past year. Over two-thirds (72%) relied on highly qualitative and subjective assessments of sites reporting they depended on their gut feelings when determining whether a site’s content was reliable and credible.

4. Most graduates surveyed had considered domain-specific standards unique to the Web, such as what the URL could tell them (88%) about the site’s origins and whether content they used for continued learning was documented by using links to other resources (86%).

The results from this analysis are quite encouraging—an overwhelming majority of graduates reported using diverse and fairly extensive evaluation criterion for determining the credibility and validity of Web
content for continued learning in the past year. Consistent with our earlier studies, the young adults we have studied appear to be fairly avid evaluators of information obtained from the Web.59

According to the graduates we interviewed, most used multiple evaluation practices when making risk-associated decisions where Web content is used as an information source. Some said they had learned the importance of evaluating Web content at each stage of their educational training. As one interviewee working in the health profession explained:

I graduated with a biology degree, and one particular class of mine was very, very focused on critical thinking, specifically on evaluating scientific literature—looking at facts, what are they saying, is there usefulness in this. But I didn't really develop my critical thinking interpersonal communication skills until my graduate program, that is, evaluating what a patient is telling you, picking up on body language, written history and having to synthesize everything. It involves critical thinking in terms of people telling full truths, half-truths, or what they perceive to be the truth versus what I perceive. Written literature—undergraduate prepared me very well for that, but in terms of personal critical thinking, graduate school was really the crux.

Taken together, these findings suggest recent graduates are careful and deliberate evaluators of Web content. The results from this analysis further suggest evaluation may be one of information skills that today’s students learn early on and continue to apply throughout their lives. According to our interviews, today’s young adults assiduously applied and adapted a diverse method for evaluating Web content, especially when making risk-associated decisions for use in their lives after college.

3. Challenges with Continued Learning

The results from this study suggest that graduates believe they have learned essential critical thinking competencies for finding and applying information in their post-college lives. But do these results also mean that graduates were unchallenged by continued learning?

In this analysis, we investigate the challenges graduates have with continued learning. We used results from a survey question with a Likert scale to measure how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with six statements about challenges with continued learning after college. The results from this analysis are presented in Figure 23.

Summarizing the challenges graduates had with continued learning:

1. More than anything else, finding time for continued learning (88%) was the biggest obstacle to continued learning, according to the graduates we surveyed. In our follow-up interviews with study participants, some said their available time was eaten away by commuting, meeting workplace expectations of performance, and family obligations. Others said they battled inertia, missing the structure of college courses and being tested on whether they had learned material and completed a lesson.

2. Almost three-quarters of the graduates (73%) reported that finding affordable sources was a barrier to learning in their professional and personal lives. Some said they had difficulty finding authoritative sources and expert services that did not cost money. Others struggled with paying for certifications they now needed in their jobs as CPAs, teachers, or attorneys while they were also paying off their student loans.

3. Seven out of 10 (70%) considered keeping current and up-to-date with everything they needed to know a challenge, given the volume of information available in the digital age.

4. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (62%) found it difficult to stay motivated with continued learning. According to our interviews, some graduates were disheartened that learning is a never-ending process while others said it was the sheer volume of information they needed to learn, especially in their new careers.

5. Half of the respondents were challenged by having little to no access to college lectures, professors (50%), and scholarly journals through their campus libraries from such vendors as JSTOR, EBSCO, or ProQuest (50%). Some graduates regretted that they could not turn to the professors, as trusted experts, who had once taught them about the profession they were now working in. Others said they had no idea public libraries provided access to some of the scholarly journals they needed at no charge to the community.

6. Less than one-third of the graduates surveyed had difficulty finding sources they could understand (28%) and use for continued learning in their personal and professional lives.
The two greatest barriers to continued learning graduates had were time and money. Some graduates, as a result, had dramatically reduced their continued learning efforts. Others had devised workarounds for learning on a shoestring budget and with the little chunks of time that they had available. Many of these efforts were solo learning efforts; none mentioned learning through journal clubs or book clubs, where a group of individuals met regularly to discuss and critically evaluate articles or books.

For instance, some graduates used smartphone apps like Duolingo to brush up on their language skills while commuting to and from work, rather than taking a Spanish or French class at the local college. Others used online forums to learn from examples rather than taking an online course through Codecademy. Still others said they relied on their companies to buy textbooks or research articles they could skim at work when no one else was using them.

At the same time, many graduates felt overwhelmed by the need to stay current in their personal and professional lives. Some had lost confidence in their ability to stay informed on multiple fronts:

> Self-doubt is my biggest obstacle to continued learning. I put a lot of pressure on myself, I have all these skills from college, which taught me the value of finishing my work, but often that can put an unnecessary amount of pressure and anxiety on the learning goals I pursue now. I know the direction I want to go to become an illustrator, but there aren’t any classes offered locally. The ones offered were too distant to drive to, and the offerings I found online were expensive. It’s hard to find exactly what you need, at the price and location you want.

All in all, the large majority of the graduates we studied fought to fit continued learning into their busy lives. Many had come to realize the resources that they had taken for granted in college—professors, lectures, and authoritative research sources—were difficult to come by now. If they wanted to keep learning, they needed to rely on their own motivation rather than homework, class time, grades, and meeting their professors’ expectations.

**Part Four: Modeling the Lifelong Learning Process**

Whether they had graduated from community colleges, liberal arts colleges, or research universities, the majority of graduates in our study used similar information-seeking strategies to find the expertise and knowledge to continue learning and improve their skills. We have used these commonalities as the basis for developing a model that describes the research behavior today’s graduates use for lifelong learning.

Utility, as we first came to realize, was key to understanding how recent graduates operationalize and prioritize their search and select sources for learning to use as they make the transition from college to real life. In this context, utility means usefulness—not that a source is just relevant and credible, but that the information it contains can directly and immediately applicable to real problems.

For instance, the young graduates we studied were looking for “specifics,” “how-to solutions,” and “something really instructive” that that they could directly apply in their personal lives, the workplace, and to a lesser extent, the communities in which they lived. Whether they needed to find today’s stock price for a company, write the formula for an Excel function, or figure out how to trim a climbing rose bush, they sought useful information that was factual, reliable, and applicable.
Interestingly, graduates valued sources that met their utility requirement often related to personal connections they had established with coworkers, friends, supervisors, and family. Yet, they also used contemporary social media technologies such as YouTube videos, Pinterest, Wikipedia, Stack Overflow, Reddit, Khan Academy, and online forums.

Depending on what the situation required, graduates often took a deep dive into learning when they needed to acquire a conceptual understanding of a field or topic. For example, some told us they needed to master Python or Java so they could be an authority; others needed to learn how to develop a comprehensive social media marketing plan. Still others spent a lot of time learning about a topic that involved a certain amount of risk for them, such as making a career move or starting a family.

In some cases, many graduates told us they needed to improve their interpersonal communication skills. Here too, some were looking for quick fixes; others needed deeper learning to make sense of concepts around negotiation, conflict resolution, and cross-generational communication they could use in their personal and professional lives.

To fulfill these more complex learning needs, graduates said they took advantage of different sources and information systems. For example, they enrolled in job training courses, read books, or had ongoing conversations with supervisors or mentors about how to resolve communication issues. They also leveraged the deep learning potential of online learning through sources like blogs, webinars, TED Talks, or to a lesser extent, Coursera.

The information-seeking process for continued learning we have described so far is driven by graduates’ needs for utility and finding useful and applicable solutions. However, our model does not end there—it is where it starts. We came to understand that utility is a valued starting point, but that graduates recognize they have more extensive, lifelong learning needs.

The results of our study show that graduates also place a high premium on what we are now calling the socialness of the information. They prioritized their search for continued learning sources by looking for multiple voices with interactivity as well as utility. They wanted a variety of opinions, guidance, and an option to join in a discussion or exchange and interact. In time, these multiple voices added to the validity, reliability, and a richness of the solutions.

Taken together, we characterize continued learning sources that are both useful and interactive as having what we call shared utility. There are a variety of online sources with shared utility that graduates mentioned using, such as webinars, online forums, video-sharing sites, blogs, and social networking sites.

Shared utility is an attribute of some traditional sources as well as newer, social, and online ones. For instance, graduates mentioned using face-to-face training and professional conferences. They also tapped the expertise of co-workers they identified as mentors. In these situations, the multiple voices contributed to the richness of solutions through face-to-face exchanges. Figure 24 presents a graphical representation of the information attributes that contribute to our model of shared utility for lifelong learning.
Based on our research findings, we found young graduates had four frequent learning needs where shared-utility sources worked well and were often used. Under these circumstances, graduates were often seeking (1) do-it-yourself solutions for pressing problems, (2) creative inspiration and ideas, (3) professional expertise and training, and (4) agreed-upon truths or concepts.

In Figure 25, we provide an overview of information-seeking behavior today's graduates often use for meeting their continued learning needs in professional and personal life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequent Learning Needs</th>
<th>Type Of Learning Sources Needed</th>
<th>Some Shared Utility Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do-it-yourself fixes for pressing problems</td>
<td>Instructions and advice that can be quickly applied to solving a problem.</td>
<td>YouTube videos, Instructables, Yelp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative inspiration and ideas</td>
<td>Sources for finding or pitching new ideas, hobbies, or projects.</td>
<td>Pinterest, Kickstarter, Facebook, YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional expertise and training</td>
<td>Credible, reliable, and affordable expertise for making decisions.</td>
<td>Blogs, webinars, Coursera, TED Talks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreed upon truths and concepts</td>
<td>Sources for finding consensus about the truthfulness of factual information or procedures.</td>
<td>Wikipedia, discussion lists, Khan Academy, Stack Overflow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this model, the concept of fit comes into play—young graduates are looking for information that fits their needs, depending on their learning need at any given point in time. Fit relates to both relevance and credibility. Relevance means that the source is on topic, precise but complete, and current. To be credible, a source should be up-to-date, authoritative, well cited, and appear professional.

These are exciting and important findings when modeling and considering the lifelong learning processes of today’s young graduates. First of all, there appears to be a fundamental shift in the way today’s young graduates (and perhaps, many more of us of all ages) cope with relevance and credibility in a world flooded with information.

Second, we found today’s graduates were overwhelmed by all they needed to learn and the little time they had to dedicate to their continued learning efforts. They manage by teaming up to take advantage of some of the same technologies that feed information overload. That is, they start with utility and expand on searches for learning sources via social contexts. Taken together, this is shared utility and they are likely to continue to explore and invent even more efficient and effective means of doing so for the years to come.
Conclusion

Project Information Literacy (PIL), in 2012, began a series of studies about the information transition from school to work that we called “The Passage Studies.” The purpose of this research series has been to better understand the information competencies and strategies that young adults say they adopt, develop, and apply as they move from one complex information landscape to the next.

Over the course of three studies that make up the series, we have surveyed and interviewed more than 3,500 college students and recent graduates from 14 higher education institutions in the US. In 2012, we used focus groups to explore how a sample of recent graduates solved information problems after joining the workplace. In 2013, we interviewed first-year college students to investigate the information challenges they faced as they made the transition from high school to college.

On the surface, these two study samples—fledgling college students and seasoned graduates—may appear to have little in common. But we have found otherwise. Whether they were conducting research for a first-semester composition course or preparing a report for a sales meeting, there were significant disparities between how today’s young adults find and use information and the expectations that instructors, librarians, or employers may have of these young adults’ information-seeking behaviors.

In this last (2015) study in the series, we have turned our attention to lifelong learning. Using a sample of 1,651 recent graduates from 10 US colleges and universities located in “smart cities,” our objective was to investigate the information-seeking strategies young adults employ once they complete college.

What makes this latest study a fitting bookend to the Passage series is its research focus. This study examines the critical passage from college to real life and the transition into three arenas in their lives: personal life, the workplace, and local community. Further, our inquiry explores how graduates respond to many of the information problems that they have identified themselves in their real life, rather than those that may have been assigned to them by instructors or employers.

The First Decade after College

We found the majority of the college graduates we studied were blindsided by all they needed to learn and know during their first decade out of college. Most scrambled to pick up quick-fix solutions in their personal lives, like how to make household repairs, schedule student loan payments, or shop for groceries on a budget.

Others spent much of their time trying to advance their early careers by improving their communication skills with coworkers. They also wanted to extend the shelf life of the technical work skills and deepening their understanding of fundamental concepts they had learned in college only a few years before.

Still others, though far fewer, needed to learn the ins and outs of a new neighborhood and how to respond to practical needs, from finding a local coffee shop where people their age congregated to lining up meaningful volunteering opportunities in their communities.
One graduate interviewee from a large public university summed up his post-college life learning needs as follows:

*When you graduate, you don’t realize how much was provided when you were in college. I don’t know how to manage my money even though I thought I did— I figured if I can pay my bills on time that’s the same thing, but it’s not. I definitely have needed to learn about personal nutrition and how to eat healthy, too. It’s tough to engage in civic matters since I’m often in the minority opinion, so I don’t seek out ways to get involved.*

What makes this young graduate’s comments compelling, and this study’s related findings significant, is the preponderance of *life skills* that today’s graduates lack and need to learn. These skills, we found, ranged from learning how-to quick fixes to learning the conceptual underpinnings of an entirely new discipline or field, depending on a given situation.

**Life Skills 101**

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined life skills as “abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.” The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has further divided life skills into three categories: “(1) cognitive skills for using and analyzing information, (2) personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself, and (3) interpersonal skills for communicating and interacting effectively with others.”

Together, these two definitions are a useful lens for understanding our results about lifelong learning and today’s graduates and thinking about the broader implications of those findings. Borrowing on UNICEF’s categories, we found a wide gap between the life skills recent graduates had and the ones they did not. In particular, most graduates in our sample believed they had the cognitive skills for finding, evaluating, and using information; skills honed during college.

For instance, many graduates knew to go beyond the first page of Google search results and to look for credible sources. Most frequently, they considered the currency of the content and the credentials of the author. These graduates had leveraged evaluation skills from college to develop a hybrid strategy of using both computer-mediated and human-mediated sources for solving the information problems and acquiring conceptual knowledge they had needed in the last year.

Yet, at the same time, today’s graduates were reportedly missing some of the most important corresponding life skills that align with UNICEF’s other categories. That is, most lacked requisite skills needed for managing themselves in their personal and professional lives and, to a lesser extent, in their local communities.

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For instance, many graduates, even those who had been finance or math majors, needed to learn new skills for money management, such as figuring out how to pay taxes or setting up their first personal budget. Others had found they needed to improve and expand on their interpersonal communication skills in their jobs. They wanted to learn delegation and negotiation techniques for communicating with coworkers who were older than their college classmates had been. Still others looked for ways to build their professional network, and to a lesser degree, their social circle in the physical communities where they had relocated for a new job.

Even though our findings suggest that graduates were fairly proficient at finding information for meeting their continued learning needs and to meet life’s expectations once they graduated, the true irony was why graduates said their continued learning efforts were often diminished. More than anything else, survey respondents reported that their lifelong learning efforts were hobbled by a lack of available time (88%) beyond the hours they put in at work.

Still, seven in 10 reported they had trouble staying on top of everything they needed to know, given the volume of information “out there.” Almost two-thirds (62%) were challenged by staying motivated to keep up with learning in their personal and professional lives. Half of the sample was frustrated by not having access to valued research articles from college library databases, like JSTOR.

Preparing Today’s Lifelong Learners

The findings from our study, as a whole, have broader implications about today’s recent graduates and what they are taking from their college years and able to apply as lifelong learners once they graduate. They raise essential questions for college administrators, educators, librarians, alumni associations, community groups, and commercial information publishers, like ProQuest or EBSCO.

How can college students be better prepared to acquire the life skills they will inevitably need once they continue with their lives? What lifelong learning educational strategies, resources, and services would best serve young adults once they graduate, given their limited time and money and the pressure of job and family obligations?

It is interesting but not surprising that questions like these had also occurred to some of the graduates we interviewed. When we asked graduates what could have helped better prepare for real life, they said there needed to be less of a separation between college life and life in the workaday world.

As one graduate explained: “We were sheltered in this idealistic undergraduate world where anything is possible, however, that’s not what the world is like. There needs to be some sort of real-world application with decision-making skills; if my college had required more internships or work-study programs that would have been great.”

In thinking more broadly about how to solve such far-reaching problems, it is important to conclude with this study’s two most revealing results. These results came from the critical thinking indices we developed and tested in our study. These indices were used to ascertain the information competencies recent graduates believed they had learned and developed in college and adapted and applied in their post-college lives.

We found, on average, three-quarters of the sample believed that their college experience had taught them information competencies, such as searching, evaluating, and presenting, and that they had adapted and applied in their post-college lives. Yet, what was most telling is that far fewer said they had developed the ability of framing and asking their own questions about topics as independent learners. Many acknowledged they had needed to develop the skill of asking their own questions once they entered the workplace after graduation and began their careers.
We cannot overestimate the importance of these two findings. They reveal the diminished potential of higher education to prepare a sizable number of lifelong learners who are prepared to keep learning throughout their lives. Moreover, the results raise serious questions about the critical thinking skills of today’s college graduates.

At a time when higher education is scrutinizing the efficacy of their pedagogical practices, are institutions graduating inquisitive question-askers who are prepared to be continuous and self-motivated learners in their personal and professional lives once they graduate? Or, are they churning out an abundance of graduates that are "strategic learners" who can complete assignments in order to graduate and try to find work? Strategic learners chase the highest grade rather than concentrate on self-reflection, deep learning, and true knowing, according to Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Students Do*. 62

A third finding—the finding about tapping co-workers or supervisors—as learning sources highlights some of the changing relationships occurring in the workplace. It is certainly a finding worthy of more investigation for future researchers. How, for instance, do these lifelong learning relationships develop over time as far as recent graduates and continued learning? Are they short-lived, or do they tend to be nurtured over time and with what outcomes?

Taken together, the findings from our study have clearly shown an increased need to nurture individual discovery and curiosity in our classrooms, in our libraries, and in our communities. Furthermore, young adults need to learn how to adapt and develop an information-seeking behavior that fits into the information cultures and demands of their new settings. This way, graduates are more likely to become what Bain calls “adaptive experts.”

These are individuals who tackle unusual problems and generate new solutions, which few would disagree, are needed in an increasingly complex world. Graduates are also likely to be lifelong learners, an essential ingredient in a democratic society and for living a full, productive, and rich life. In the next section we conclude this report by presenting 10 recommendations for improving lifelong learning resources and services for today's young adults. 

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62 Ken Bain is the author of *What the Best College Students Do* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012). Bain also served on the PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board for this report.
Recommendations

In the final section of this report, we make 10 recommendations for improving educational strategies, resources, and services so that they foster lifelong learning. We hope these recommendations will resonate with librarians and library decision-makers in all settings (academic, public, school, and special) and stakeholders in higher education and K-12 settings, community groups, alumni associations, and producers and publishers of educational materials. Moreover, we hope these ideas will stimulate conversations that may lead to new strategies for helping recent graduates and other young adults fulfill their lifelong learning needs. These recommendations are based on the study’s research findings as well as ideas and solutions generated by our Lifelong Learning Advisory Board members.63

Higher Education

Recommendation 1: Reaffirm a broad-based purpose for higher education

To be sure, one of the goals of an undergraduate education is to help students gain the skills and knowledge to secure employment in a career of their choosing. However, in the past decade we have witnessed an overemphasis on the economic value of higher education. While the research studies cited in the pages of this report have shown a direct relationship between years of education and salaries, we contend that it is short sighted to overemphasize financial rewards. Our research suggests that an undue emphasis on the economic rewards of learning can have deleterious effects on students’ perceptions about the purpose of higher education. For instance, many of the graduates we interviewed viewed their institutions as being a big business rather than being a place for intellectual exploration and discovery. One young graduate said of the public university where he received his baccalaureate degree, "My institution was in the business of getting people degrees, and churning out students." Students like this one were often the same ones that may rush to get through college and punch their ticket. Such students may come into college hedging their bets by bringing enough credits earned in high school so they can skip a year or more of college and graduate sooner. We understand the significant financial burden of higher education today. However on reflection, many of us also recognize that college years are valuable for personal and social growth and for learning ways of thinking and doing.

For these reasons, and others, we see a vital need for reaffirming the broad-based purpose of higher education. This is an approach that places the onus on institutions first, and libraries second. As a solution, we stress the importance of supporting lifelong learning across disciplines and across faculty, librarians, and administrative stakeholders, rather than assured employability after graduation. We believe these efforts must make it a clear priority to uphold—and improve—General Education curricula, especially a rigorous program general inquiry, problem solving, and critical thinking. This, however, is not always the case. For instance, in a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Michael W. Clune, a professor at Case Western Reserve University, warns against “the gutting of Gen Ed.”64 He points to examples of Gen Ed courses being slashed even though many parents, students, faculty, and administrators “believe that a college education should endow every graduate with a knowledge of the world beyond the terms and techniques of their chosen trade.”

63 Mike Eisenberg, the chair of the PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board, who contributed thoughts, opinions, and editing to many of these recommendations. PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board: Ken Bain (University of the District of Columbia); Ginnie Cooper (former Chief Librarian for the Washington, D.C. Public Library, now retired); Sari Feldman (President of the American Library Association and Executive Director of Cuyahoga County Public Library); Deborah S. Garson (Graduate School of Education at Harvard University); R. David Lankes (Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies); Peter Morville (Semantic Studios); Michael Stephens (San Jose State University Information School); and Bonnie Tijerina (Data & Society Research Institute).

One library effort that is designed to reaffirm a broad-based view of education comes from Barbara Fister, a professor and academic librarian at Gustavus Adolphus College. For a small amount of credit, students at her institution in any major can enroll in a Reading Workshops where they would read and discuss books selected from a student database of fiction best picks. As Fister explained, “there is some interesting research on the psychology of reading for pleasure, suggesting that it correlates with empathy, that the brain is very active when ‘lost in a book,’ that it plays a role in identity formation, and that people learn a great deal about the world, even when they are reading fiction.” Whether library services or programs are big or small, what matters is integrating a broad-based approach into learning. Ultimately, we need to embrace the rewards that learning brings and a society that values knowledge over starting salaries.

**Recommendation 2: Integrate the social side of research into college curricula**

More than anything else, graduates reported that they wanted to improve their interpersonal communication skills across the arenas in their lives during the past year. In our follow-up interviews, graduates, most of whom were between 20 and 29 (74%), explained their struggles to communicate with people who were older than their peers. For instance, some said they were uncomfortable and inexperienced with delegating tasks to fellow workers who were older than they were. Others said they had to learn how to negotiate with someone in a position of authority, since this was different than interacting with professors or their parents. Still others had trouble with making small talk with higher-ups at work or people with authority in their personal lives. We concluded that most graduates were not incapable communicators. Rather, they had little experience with some of the higher-order communication skills that are necessary to succeed in real life.

In this recommendation, we highlight the need for students to learn more advanced and essential social communication skills they will need once they graduate. To achieve this goal, we recommend a three-pronged effort where: (1) instructors engage students in formulating and asking questions via classroom lectures or related extra-curricular activities, (2) librarians work with faculty to develop assignments that require using human-mediated information sources in addition to textual sources, and (3) librarians expand information literacy instruction to include training and hands-on experience with conducting the social side of research. We define the social side of research as identifying, extracting, and integrating a mix of reliable and high quality human-mediated sources into the research discovery process. Today, these “social sources” may consist of face-to-face communication as well as discussions through social media platforms. We found graduates already engage, to a certain extent, in the social side of research in their professional and personal lives. More than eight in 10 (84%) turned to a coworker to learn in the past year. In their personal lives, others tapped social sources turned to social networking sites like Facebook (79%), blogs (56%), or online forums (52%), especially when they sought expert advice. Most students, however, tend to be more skilled at using textual sources, such as journal articles or books, than with employing social research skills when researching a topic. This is not surprising, since most research skills that faculty and librarians teach students are for fulfilling assignments rather than continuous learning throughout the rest of their lives.

Since library stakeholders recognize the importance of teaching students to retrieve quality information sources in a variety of formats, why hasn’t the social side of research been more discussed? Granted, we are heartened by ACRL’s framework and the concept of teaching “scholarship as conversation,”

but what training and assignment ideas work for teaching students how to have fruitful exchanges that tap expertise with authorities? Are academic librarians across different library settings including instruction about social networks’ impact information-seeking behavior for solving information problems today?\textsuperscript{67} We contend that the social side of research needs to be recognized as a fundamental component of the research process. The graduates we interviewed said they discovered experiential and contextual factors gained through one-on-one exchanges with coworkers mattered just as much, if not more, than facts, figures, or theories from textual sources in the workplace. The question at hand for librarians is, how can young adults learn the social side of research while they are students so they are better prepared for joining the workplace and more experienced communicators? We think this starts by going beyond the reference interview or exchanges between students and librarians in research consultations for creating new opportunities for teaching the social side of research.

\textit{Recommendation 3: Ensure that students graduate knowing how to ask their own questions}

We were surprised to find that less than a third of the graduates (27\%) in our sample reported that college had helped them develop the critical thinking skill of framing and asking their own questions. As many recent graduates came to soon learn, this skill is critically important because in the workplace, problems and issues are mostly fuzzy, ambiguous, and ill defined. Knowing how—and when—to ask questions in the workplace is important, as some of the graduates we interviewed acknowledged. Yet, our study results suggested that certain majors, such as computer science and engineering, might preclude students from learning and getting much experience with how to formulate and ask their own questions. As the young engineer we interviewed put it, he learned about engineering through assigned problem sets where the facts were black and white and there was only one solution to a problem. But when he began his career, he was surprised to find that “you’re the one defining the solution, not faculty or a textbook.”

Many of today’s college students, like this engineer, specialize early on and take a narrow set of courses focused on their major and anticipated career. Even though General Education curricula are supposed to address general inquiry, problem solving, and critical thinking, we found this is not always the case. Such a discipline-intensive focus may help some students land their first job, but this kind of focus may be masking some deep and troubling shortcomings, especially the ability to ask meaningful questions and to stay motivated to keep learning. As PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board member Deborah Garson explained in our discussions, “We have to rethink and question how ‘questions’ influence and drive communication...just as librarians and faculty/teachers have developed and valued the ability to ask questions in order to teach and instruct effectively, so do students (at all levels) need to begin asking ‘What’s that?’ and ‘Why?’”

We agree that librarians are in the unique position of helping students be better at asking their own questions. As such, we recommend that librarians make a concerted effort in helping students develop their ability to formulate and ask their own questions in the assignments they co-produce with faculty, the reference exchanges they have with students, and the information literacy instruction they deliver to students throughout their education. In Garson’s words, “It is not an issue of the librarian instructing the user ‘how to be a librarian’ or even a ‘how to research’ but an educational opportunity to construct and ask questions. Libraries are places of inquiry. It is simply a matter of broadening and extending the role of questioning in the user/librarian interactions.”

\textsuperscript{67} One recent example of librarians coming together to discuss how social networks impact search behavior the Harvard Library Search and Discovery Initiative’s Education Working Group at Harvard University Libraries on January 27, 2016, where Alison Head will be a panelist and discuss findings on the social side of research.
Recommendation 4: Make strategies for lifelong learning part of information literacy curriculum

Lifelong learning is a multifaceted, mutable, and often ambiguous concept. This is especially true in the digital age where the rapid expansion of communication technologies and the burgeoning availability of information have increased learning expectations. As researchers, we were confronted with defining lifelong learning for purposes of our inquiry. What exactly does lifelong learning mean to today’s recent college graduates? How could we explore what activities and dispositions it entails? We found what worked especially well for us was to ask graduates we interviewed, “How did they stay smart and up to date after college?” The phrase, “staying smart,” resonated with graduates. Most believed college had made them smarter. Upon graduating, most also came to realize that they were going to need to keep learning on their own in order to stay smart, or constantly update the shelf life of their knowledge, competencies, and skills. The phrase “staying smart” often led to candid discussions about graduates’ learning needs and the strategies they had used during the past year. In our discussions, we discovered many graduates equated lifelong learning with getting the advice or guidance they needed in their personal and professional lives. For instance, they wanted to know things like how to build their career, how they should spend as well as save money, or how they could make time to give back in their community.

We are not the first to recognize the shifting nature of lifelong learning needs. In a 2014 Atlantic Magazine article, the authors wrote that today’s lifetime learners are “looking for not just learning but guidance in navigating the changing world to find the best learning and career opportunities. The growth in life coaching and self-help books, now $2 billion and $11 billion industries respectively, is an early signal of this need.”68 This quote is consistent with our study’s major findings: Graduates have a tremendous need for guidance and advice during their first decade out of college. For instance, three-fourths of the graduates (75%) we surveyed had looked for “how-to information” in their personal lives during the past year. Over two-thirds (69%) wanted guidance with more complex questions about their own career development. At the same time though, many were frustrated by their lack of access and the affordability of expert advice they said might help.

In this recommendation, we see an opportunity—and a great need—to provide information literacy instruction that includes the competencies graduating seniors will need as they make the information passage from college to real life. How, for instance, can new college hires keep up with information in their field? What sources can help them extend the shelf life of skills they had learned in college only a few years before? How can they find credible but affordable expertise for continued learning? We applaud efforts by some librarians to integrate workplace information literacy into higher education curriculum. Most importantly, these librarians are using metacognitive frameworks to teach their students how to reflect on their own practices and engage in community and collective workplace practices. This approach is superlative over teaching students a set of functional information literacy skills that will soon be obsolete in the rapidly changing workplace today.69 Further, such an approach can go a long way in preparing students to be successful lifelong learners.

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68 John Hagel III, John Seely Brown, Roy Mathew, Maggie Wooll, and Wendy Tsu, “The Lifetime Learner,” The Atlantic, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/deloitte-shifts/the-lifetime-learner/256/. This article was originally published by Deloitte University Press in 2015. We are grateful to PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board member Deborah Garson for providing sharing this article during our online discussions.

Public Libraries

**Recommendation 5: Design libraries as “gathering places” for informal and formal learning**

More than half of the graduates in our sample had the greatest need for continued learning in their personal lives (57%) during the past year. For instance, graduates looked to improve their ability to live on their own—how to read a rental agreement, how to plan and prepare meals, and how to make household repairs. In order to meet such personal life needs, PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board Member Sari Feldman said it would be, “interesting to consider how libraries could be conceived of as ‘gathering places’ for recent college graduates. How could cohort groups be formed? Developing and programming financial literacy would be another attraction to recent graduates. How can programming be built into supporting maker space activities? Could libraries provide incubator spaces and support life skills programming?” Lifelong Learning Advisory Board Member Michael Stephens agreed and added to the discussion, “Public libraries should be promoting a culture of learning everywhere.”

We think it is imperative for public libraries to connect information and technology skills programs with essential life skills that recent graduates (and others) say they increasingly need. This recommendation comes at a time when librarians are redesigning library space to increase informal and formal learning. It also comes when recent graduates are using public libraries in their personal lives. As Feldman said public libraries need, “More services that anticipate what people need, perhaps even before they know they need it, and services that are built on user experience and trust.” With access to current, relevant, and credible sources, libraries can find innovative ways to deliver life skill services and instruction to recent graduates. These services need not be restricted to the physical library; they could—and should—be offered virtually, where young people spend much of their time. Moreover, these services, if successful, could serve as a model for developing similar services for the general public. At least half of today’s recent graduates have a specific need that public libraries can meet. We recommend marketing these services and using them to promote libraries as physical and virtual gathering places.

**Recommendation 6: Librarians have a mandate—and a responsibility—to intervene in their communities**

Seven out of 10 (70%) of the graduates we surveyed were challenged by keeping abreast of everything they needed to know in their lives. Moreover, almost two-thirds (62%) found it difficult to stay motivated to keep up with learning after they were out of college. The sheer volume of information they needed to learn in a new career or their daily lives overwhelmed many of them. Some graduates were dismayed to discover that learning is a never-ending process. Still others longed for formal learning settings that provided curricula, sources, and structure. PIL Lifelong Learning Advisory Board Member Peter Morville defined three problems with staying informed today: “First, most people lack the necessary search skills and information literacy. Second, our information environment is increasingly fragmented (myriad formats, sources), hard to use, and dangerous to trust (e.g., research funded by Big Pharma). Third, technology is driving rapid change across all areas of life and work. These are wicked problems that we’ve failed to solve at scale... Students and faculty often fail to realize the value of the library and its collections. They simply don’t know what they’re missing. For me, this brings to mind the words of Lee Rainie during a 2015 Internet Librarian keynote: ‘Librarians have a mandate to intervene in their communities.’”
In this recommendation, we wholeheartedly support and expand upon Lee Rainie’s call to action: “Librarians not only have a mandate to intervene in their communities, it is their responsibility to do so!” One way for public librarians to have impact is to think of themselves as what Lee Rainie has called nodes. Nodes are actors in people’s social networks that are sources of authority, expertise, and trusted go-to advice. Nodes connect with people through the content they create in shared utility sources like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, or online forums. But we need to do more than simply “use” social media. Librarians have a unique role as nodes: they can leverage their highly valued expertise as trusted super searchers and help people stay on top of everything people need to know. Libraries need to fully embrace the online space and see this venue as a priority. For example, just as the media now has bloggers and journalists who spend all their time in virtual spaces, so too should librarians. Librarians should also involve younger people in nurturing these spaces. Librarians should be creative—such as engaging teens to develop and deliver social media spaces, services, and resources. They should offer “sandboxes”—cutting edge capabilities to test out and offer all the content resources related to their personal “how to” needs virtually. And again, these should not be seen as enhancing the physical. The online should stand on its own in the public library today—the online though, must be fully developed in order for librarians to intervene in their communities.

Recommendation 7: Develop localized lifelong learning with TED Talks

The large majority of survey respondents had used YouTube (79%) for continued learning over the past year. Many of these graduates said they watched TED Talks to keep up on new ideas from science, technology, or business. One graduate said she liked to watch TED Talks with her husband since it made them feel like they were back in school. One reason for the popularity of TED Talks is the myriad of short talks they offer on interesting topics, such as whether schools kill creativity or how body language shapes personality. Another reason TED Talks are used is they are easy to find; a Google search often turns up TED Talks in the first or second page of results.

Some public libraries have integrated some of these videos into their services through joint partnerships with other community organizations that promote lifelong learning. One example is the collaborative effort between Berkeley Public Library and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at nearby U.C. Berkeley. Their program is called “TED Talk Watchers” and the purpose is simple: to gather in the community room, watch, and discuss an 18-minute TED Talk video. These sessions are free of charge and open to the community. PIL Lifelong Learning Board Member Bonnie Tijerina took this programmatic idea one step further by asking, “What if public libraries embedded their collections and local services into certain TED Talks that were particularly relevant to locals?”

Along with PIL Lifelong Learning Board Member Dave Lankes, the two discussed what a public library lifelong learning campaign like this could entail. Dave suggested, “What if public libraries did something along the lines of ‘Like the talk, let us help you walk the walk!’ The library could pick a good TED Talk (or better still have a community board of new grads pick one), marshal a set of community experts and opportunity that match the talk and hold hyper-local [library] events, such as ‘Watched the video of Bill Gates and disease? Come by Thursday night and talk with folks from org X that is addressing the problem and share your thoughts and talents. Meet others in your community wrestling with topic X. Find out how to get involved. See the local perspective.’ By then coordinating these local events and activities, librarians can also begin incorporating learning and training activities, e.g., ‘Next week, we’ll do a 3D printing and tour a local hospital. Curious what the need is for these kinds of services? We’ll show you the databases and tools to find out.’ This is information literacy and tools in context.”

The special value of a public library campaign like this is that it localizes continued learning and makes it community-based. It leverages popular—and relevant—TED Talk videos that already have a large following. Moreover, the library can present itself as a gathering place for "like minds." The library has an ample supply of curated and authoritative physical and virtual sources for viewers who want to dig more deeply into a topic.

**Recommendation 8: Embed lifelong learning sources across settings, both physically and virtually**

Almost half of the graduates we surveyed reported using a public library (45%)—physically and/or virtually when they wanted information sources or services they could use in their personal lives. Some said they turned to libraries for finding and checking out best-selling fiction. Others said they scanned the physical library’s shelves looking for books that would help them with their hobbies. Still others relied on libraries as a quiet place to read or search the Web on a library terminal. What was revealing from our analysis was the other information systems that public library users in our sample had also used during the past year. We found, for instance, that public library users were three times more likely also to visit bookstores and two and a half times more likely to go to museums.

Together, these findings tell us graduates who use libraries use a variety of other information systems in their communities—physically or virtually—to advance their learning. Further, our analyses suggested that graduates recognize the importance of curated, high quality learning resources that are organized, kept up to date, provided in a space where physical or virtual professional assistance is available if they need it. We cannot overestimate the importance of this finding—the graduates we studied wanted something, beyond Google searches, to order their ever-changing information worlds and help them understand how to find what they needed to know. For libraries, these findings are encouraging: Their needs can be met by library services, resources, and programs, and almost half of those in need already use public libraries. Of course, a majority (55%) of potential users are not taking advantage of their public libraries. Therefore, we recommend a three-pronged strategy: (1) market existing library offerings to students in their last year of college, including access to scholarly research databases that many graduates we studied had no idea were even available to the public, (2) collaborate with museums and other community institutions to offer seamless, integrated access tools and resources or even to embed (physically or virtually) library services and resources within other settings, and (3) evaluate the potential of cutting-edge, emerging technologies as ways to engage users, meet them where they are (i.e., online), and provide expanded forms of interaction and access.

Marketing is fairly straightforward, however, we recommend focusing marketing on online, social media forms of interaction. Collaboration requires overcoming concerns about turf and scope on both sides. Fortunately, while the audience for programs and services by libraries, museums, and community agencies overlap, the nature of those programs and services are quite different—but complementary. This is a case where the whole is truly greater than the sum of the parts. In addition, new technologies will expand the sense of community and the richness of offerings in virtual spaces. Libraries need to view their online spaces with as much care and pride as they do their physical ones. Virtual and augmented reality, ubiquitous mobile access, enhanced social media, and 3D graphics are just some of the emerging innovations that will expand the capabilities, effectiveness, and enjoyment of being and doing online.
K-12 and Beyond

Recommendation 9: Teach financial literacy skills in a variety of venues

Eight out of 10 of today’s college students in the US have at least one credit card. The average college senior graduates owing a credit card balance of over $4000 along with $35,000 in student loan debt. Not surprisingly, student debt is mounting with every passing year. On this note, one of our study’s major findings is as worrisome as it is telling: more than two-thirds of the recent college graduates we surveyed admitted that they needed to learn more about managing money (69%) in their personal lives. The graduates we interviewed needed specifics for financial planning that are unique to early adults—not setting up an IRA and planning for their retirement, but meeting immediate money management needs such as setting up a first-time personal budget, scheduling student loan payments, or figuring out how to pay taxes. Most said they were surprised about how little they knew about money matters; as one young graduate said: “I don’t know how to manage my money even though I thought I did—I figured if I can pay my bills on time that’s the same thing, but it’s not.” We think these findings, and our conclusions, raise important questions: Where are young people supposed to learn these skills? Further, as there are information competencies for addressing financial literacy and other essential how-to needs, how are these best learned in K-12 and the first years of college? How might we rethink the possibilities for this in terms of K-12 and higher education curriculum, extracurricular programs, capstones, or just through school, or community culture?

We recommend that librarians consider and plan for the financial literacy resources and services they might offer, both physically and virtually. Librarians should leverage their unique role for teaching financial literacy. Librarians are trusted sources of unbiased information, as we have found in our prior research. They are also highly valued collaborators. Some programmatic solutions across community and educational settings already exist. Since 2011, for instance, ALA has partnered with the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago to hold a series of financial literacy educational activities in its annual Money Smart Week. In 2014, this partnership expanded to include the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, so that Chicago libraries could host sessions on financial literacy for community members. Beyond successful programs like these, there are curricular solutions that librarians can tap for inspiration. For example, the Indiana Department of Financial Institutions have produced a set of online lesson plans that instructors can use helping high school students learn about the use of credit cards. In the higher education arena, there have been electives on personal money management designed for first-year students and at colleges and universities such as the University of Cincinnati, St. Olaf College, Texas State University, and Scripps College.

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73 Ibid.
74 Sparshott, “Congratulations, Class of 2015.”
Recommendation 10: Begin teaching information competencies early, and continue throughout students’ formal education

There is increasing recognition of the need for more formal and informal opportunities for students of all ages to learn essential life skills from kindergarten through their last year in college. Information problem-solving competencies such as search, determining relevance and credibility, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are basic to all of these areas. Moreover, integrating information and technology literacy into life skills’ programs is clearly desirable, especially when we consider information skills as essential life skills as well (e.g., personal information management). Our findings have convinced us that early intervention that teaches requisite life skills in K-12 curriculum often has very positive outcomes. For instance, in this study, as well as others we have conducted with college students, we have found many young adults are careful and skilled at evaluation when accessing materials online. Further, many had learned to use and apply a diverse criterion for evaluating Web content.

In our study, almost all of the graduates used traditional evaluation standards they learned from librarians or teachers, such as considering the currency (97%) and an author’s credentials (94%). They also applied some of their own evaluation techniques they have learned along the way from their friends or teachers, such as sizing up whether a site’s design—the fonts, the colors, and images—conveys legitimacy (89%). Many of these are criteria that young adults first learned in elementary and middle school. One graduate we interviewed explained, “Evaluating information was actually something that I learned in high school because the Internet was becoming so popular for research and I had one teacher that really helped us differentiate the good from the bad. Then in college, these evaluation skills were enhanced and I learned the ability to look at a problem from all angles, that was important.” As this young graduate’s comments suggest, early intervention efforts can help students succeed as they continue with their education and the expectations for course research evolve. We recommend building more bridges for teaching information competencies between K-20 curricula. Stakeholders—librarians, teachers, and faculty—need to discuss how students can be better prepared to succeed as they continue with their education from one setting to the next and ultimately, once they graduate, leave school settings, and continue as lifelong learners.

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78 Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, “Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age.”
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— Alison J. Head

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