Project Information Literacy's Lifelong Learning Study

Phase One: Interviews with Recent Graduates
Research Brief

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During spring 2014, Project Information Literacy (PIL) completed Phase One of a two-year, large-scale study of college graduates and lifelong learning. PIL researchers conducted 35-minute telephone interviews with 63 recent college graduates from 10 US colleges and universities. Trends from our qualitative interviews will be used to inform the quantitative online survey that will be administered in Phase Two (fall 2014) to a total of 75,000 recent graduates from the 10 schools in our institutional sample.

For purposes of our study, we have defined *lifelong learning* as the kind of purposeful and ongoing learning that has the aim of improving skills, knowledge, or competencies in three areas for: (1) use in the workplace, (2) engagement in civic and community activities, and (3) participation in activities for social and personal enrichment.

Three sets of research questions guided our Phase One interviews:

1. What lifelong learning needs do recent graduates have? What sources do they use for their personal development, cultural enrichment, and engagement in civic affairs in their day-to-day lives and for success in the workplace?

2. How do today's graduates use information support systems for lifelong learning, such as face-to-face exchanges with colleagues and friends, social media, search engines, MOOCS, extension courses, and community services?

3. What best practices for finding and using information do recent graduates use to facilitate lifelong learning in their everyday lives and in the workplace? What information practices do they learn in college then adapt and apply once they graduate?

Interviews: Data Collection Methods

From May 14, 2014 through June 25, 2014, six certified members of the PIL Team collected data from recent graduates of four-year institutions and one community college.[1] A total of 63 interviews were conducted with participants who had received their undergraduate degrees from one of the 10 US campuses in our study sample.

Participants had graduated in the past six years (i.e. 2007-2012), were 18 years of age or older, and lived within 30 miles of the college campus where they had received their undergraduate degree. Each of the colleges and universities in our institutional sample is located in one of the top 25 fastest-growing areas in the country where college-educated graduates in their mid-to-late 20s live. US Census data have identified the metropolitan areas in our sample as today's growing "smart cities" where recent graduates find work and where career opportunities are aided by partnerships between employers and nearby higher education institutions (Klotkin, 2012; McMeekin, 2012; US Census Bureau, 2010).[2]

In our study, we explore whether these smart cities may be rich with opportunities for lifelong learning where graduates can access, if they choose, a variety of information support systems, such as public libraries, community centers, bookstores, extension courses, and museums. Figure 1 presents details about our institutional sample.

Institutional Sample	Location	Region	Type	Enrollment
Belmont University	Nashville, TN	South	4-year, private	4,500
Ohio State University	Columbus, OH	Midwest	4-year, public	41,438
Phoenix College	Phoenix, AZ	West	2-year, community	25,000
Trinity University	San Antonio, TX	South	4-year, private	2,400
University of Central Florida	Orlando, FL	South	4-year, public	50,968
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	Las Vegas, NV	West	4-year public	28,000
University of North Carolina, Charlotte	Charlotte, NC	South	4-year public	26,000
University of Redlands	Redlands, CA	West	4-year, private	2,800
University of Texas, Austin	Austin, TX	South	4-year, public	38,437
University of Washington	Seattle, WA	West	4-year, public	30,790

Figure 1. Institutions participating in the study sample (Source: Research liaisons at each campus, January, 2014). Enrollment figures are for undergraduate enrollment.

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[1] Members of the PIL Research Team included the following researchers: Michelle Fellows and Sarah Evans, the University of Washington, Alison Head and Kirsten Hostetler, Project Information Literacy, Ann Roselle, Phoenix College, and Michele Van Hoeck, CSU Maritime. If a PIL researcher provided reference or taught courses to students at a given campus, as part of his or her full-time job, he or she did not collect data from students at the "home campus."

[2] See J. Klotkin (2012, August 9). The US Cities Getting Smarter the Fastest. *New Geography*; B. McMeekin. (2012) Get Smart: Metros with fast growing college graduate workforces. *Business Climate*, August 13; U.S. Census Bureau (2010). Decennial Census Data 2000 and 2010.

Interview Sample and Use of Data

We conducted 63 interviews with volunteer participants who had received their undergraduate degree between 2007 and 2012. More than half of this sample had a degree in either business administration (29%) or social and behavioral science (29%). Fewer had degrees in arts and humanities (22%) or the sciences (17%). The most frequently reported GPA was in the range of 3.4-3.7 (41%). Almost three quarters of the participants in the institutional sample were between 23 to 30 years old (73%). Figure 2 provides demographic data of the interview sample all 10 schools in the study.

Interviewee Demographics	Total Interview Sample (n = 63; 10 institutions)	
Year of graduation		
2012	11	18%
2011	16	25%
2010	7	11%
2009	10	16%
2008	11	17%
2007	7	11%
Other:	1	2%
Age range		
21 – 22 years old	1	2%
23 – 25 years old	19	30%
26 – 30 years old	27	43%
Over 30 years old	16	25%
Undergraduate major (includes double majors)		
Architecture and engineering	1	2%
Arts and humanities	14	22%
Business administration (includes accounting)	18	29%
Education	4	6%
General education (includes AA)	2	3%
Mathematics	1	2%
Occupational training (e.g., nursing)	1	2%
Social and behavioral science	18	29%
Sciences (includes computer, life, and physical sciences)	11	17%
Grade point average (GPA)		
3.8 – 4.0+	16	25%
3.4 – 3.7	26	41%
3.1 – 3.3	7	11%
2.7 – 3.0	13	21%
Don't remember	1	2%

Figure 2. Demographic data for interview sample by institution.

The method we used for collecting qualitative data—open-ended interviews—was intended to explore underlying situations, attitudes, and opinions. We will test these trends with a larger sample and using quantitative methods and an online survey in Phase Two of our study. To enhance the reliability of our interview technique, we used a scripted interview with study participants. The script was piloted, with a few small changes made to the wording before the interviews began. Qualitative research, unlike quantitative, is not intended to produce generalizable findings about a sample. Rather, the goal of qualitative research is to arrive at a deep understanding of a specific situation within a natural setting and interviewees' perception of that situation (e.g., solving information problems at work after graduation).

Key Trends from Phase One Interviews

Based on data gathered from 63 interviews, we have identified five trends among recent graduates and their lifelong learning information practices. These trends are preliminary and will be tested further using quantitative data from the online survey we will administer in Phase Two (Fall 2014).

1. **Lifelong Learning Needs:** More than anything else, a large majority of recent graduates we interviewed identified lifelong learning needs that centered on employment and professional success. Many described participating in continuous learning on their own and using educational sites like YouTube, Coursera, or StackFlow or local extension courses to learn programming, graphic design, or data visualization skills they could use to secure jobs, apply to their current jobs, or to help them move into new positions. Interestingly, interviewees' lifelong learning needs in the workplace, community, and in their personal lives often overlapped. For example, finding information for engaging in their community or in civic life often originated from opportunities young graduates first heard about at work, such as volunteering for a children's after-school reading program or working election day for voter turnout. At the same time, ongoing learning for personal fulfillment could involve building skills, such as creating budgets or mastering Excel spreadsheets, which could help them both at work and in their personal lives. Most admitted their biggest challenge with meeting their lifelong learning needs was balancing available time for learning with the overwhelming number of available resources. Nearly all of the interviewees admitted they were challenged by "staying smart" in a rapidly changing world.

2. **Use of Sources:** Google search was the go-to source for lifelong learning, though some recent graduates mentioned turning to people first for recommendations. Most prioritized their searches by looking for sources with "specifics" and "how-to information" they could directly apply in the workplace, their community, or their personal lives, often to shore up knowledge and close skill gaps. Many interviewees had a preference for online forums, blogs, webinars, MOOCs, YouTube, and for face-to-face conversations. We found it rare for them to rely on a single source for learning skills and concepts; instead, they looked across resources for similar patterns and consensus. No matter which sources they used, these interviewees wanted practical and no-cost solutions they could call up and apply quickly. But usefulness was just one facet of the lifelong learning information-seeking process graduates employed. They also valued what we are beginning to call the *socialness of the information*. In many cases, young graduates told us they were searching for people and a variety of opinions, rather than books and other static print resources.

3. **Use of Social Media:** We were surprised to learn many young graduates placed a high value on blogs for lifelong learning. In our previous research about college students' information practices, we found that undergraduates infrequently consulted blogs for finding information for coursework (15%) or for solving problems in their everyday lives (37%).[3] Yet, in our recent interviews about lifelong learning practices, blogs came up over and over again, especially blogs interviewees had vetted for authority. As one graduate we interviewed explained, "I believe in the wiki voice, in crowdsourced knowledge; there are so many topics, anyone can join in, anyone can edit, and over time you get towards to the real truth." Another graduate said he started reading a digital marketing guru's blog after first learning about him in a *New York Times* business article. Another said she follows a well-known entrepreneur's blog since she is setting up a graphic design

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[3] A. J. Head and M. B. Eisenberg (2010). Truth Be Told: How College Students Use and Evaluate Information in the Digital Age, p. 7, http://projectinfolit.org/images/p dfs/pil_fall2010_survey_fullreport1.pdf

business. Still, another mentioned doing a Google search for a blog about setting up first-time personal budgets after college. Taken together, graduates offered five reasons for using blogs for continuous learning: (1) quality content was "easy to harvest" with a Google search; (2) content was a good value offering low cost opinion and knowledge from insiders; (3) credibility of entries could be verified through consensus (three different people saying the same thing on three different blogs yielded "a small kernel of knowledge" or "some technique that works"); (4) comments posted were an added value, since they could be used to figure out whether solutions/ideas worked over time and, ultimately, whether they were feasible; and (5) an open community existed on sites where participants could be sideliners, lurkers or participants in the discussion.

4. **Best Practices:** Many of the recent graduates we interviewed had developed best practices for lifelong learning, especially in the workplace where their needs were often greater. Many mentioned actively building a social network of go-to experts they could consult at work. Others took certification courses, either online or through local extension programs, in network security, digital marketing, project management, or firefighting in order to "provide evidence" to employers for a raise or promotion. Others had continued their formal education with a graduate degree; a process they said gave them practical expertise for advancing their careers. Interestingly, some said they changed jobs as a way to expand their skills and acquire knowledge and experience. A dental hygienist said she has had about 35 jobs since she graduated in 2009, while another interviewee mentioned having six different job titles in finance since her graduation in 2008. Switching jobs was the best way for continuing to learn--not only about their job, but about office culture and how the workplace works, the office is managed, clients are attracted and maintained, billing and costs are processed. As a whole, many mentioned "reading anything," subscribing to professional journals and magazines, scanning their boss's bookshelves for new titles, and reviewing college syllabi for possible reads.

5. **Adaptable Information Practices from College:** Many of the recent graduates we interviewed credited college with "teaching them to learn how to learn," while giving them the confidence to "learn anything on their own." They referred to the critical thinking skills they had taken from college, especially the ability to sort through large volumes of content and synthesize key points, determine bias on web sites and in news articles, evaluate the authority and credibility of sources, and to be flexible and revise search strategies as new information is presented. At the same time, some interviewees did not see how their major had taught them skills that matched their real world needs. Sometimes this was because of differences in their major compared to career, but also because the goals of a college course can be very different from those of the workplace and life away from the campus. Evaluating the usefulness of their college education, a number of interviewees said it was capstone projects, a senior thesis, or involvement in extracurricular activities that nurtured their initiative, curiosity, independent learning, motivation, and involvement. After graduation, they had come to realize these learning dispositions were transferable and critical to their success both as employees and as lifelong learners.

Next Steps

During Phase Two in September through November 2014 PIL will administer an online survey to 75,000 recent grads. The survey data will measure the lifelong learning information practices of recent grads for (1) staying adaptive and competitive in the workplace; (2) engaging in community and civic life; and (3) having enriching and fulfilling personal lives. PIL's survey findings will inform how librarians and faculty

can best teach and prepare graduates for their lives after graduation. The data will be beneficial to Alumni Services, especially for engaging continued contact with young alumni and supporting ongoing learning and connection with their campuses.

The purpose the 2013-2015 PIL lifelong learning study is twofold: (1) to produce a descriptive model of how recent graduates rely on information support systems to meet lifelong learning needs; and (2) to make recommendations in collaboration with our Lifelong Learning Advisory Board to inform lifelong learning resources. Taken together, our findings will lead to more than incremental change—they will have a far-reaching and lasting impact for our target audience of librarians as well as educators, educational administrators, the alumni office and prospective employers, while building upon the study of information literacy. The open-access findings report for this study will be released in December 2015.

About Project Information Literacy

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is an ongoing, national research study that investigates how college students conceptualize and operationalize research tasks for course work and "everyday life" use. Since 2008, PIL researchers have interviewed and surveyed over 11,000 undergraduates at over 60 US four-year public and private universities and colleges and two-year community colleges.

In 2013, *Library Journal* named PIL one of the "Big Four Research Studies" about information and library use. The lifelong learning study is PIL's eighth large-scale research study. It is sponsored with generous federal grant support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and a National Leadership Research Grant.

A final report for the 2013-2015 PIL Lifelong Learning Study will be released in late fall 2015. It will be open access and available on the PIL Web site at http://projectinfolit.org as well as ERIC and the Social Science Research Network (SSRN).

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