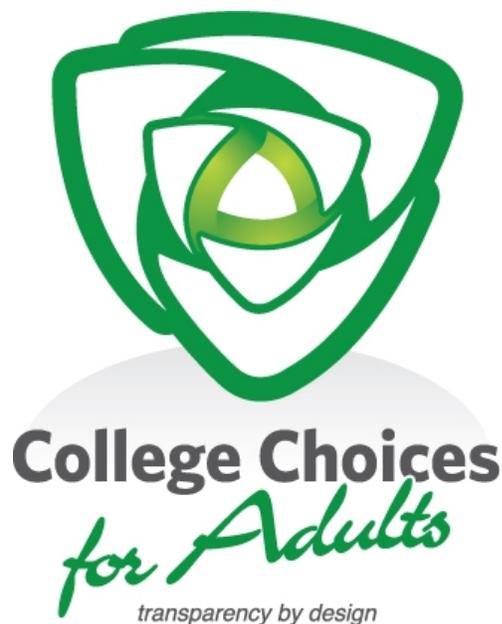




WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies

The Guide: A Resource for Going to College as an Adult

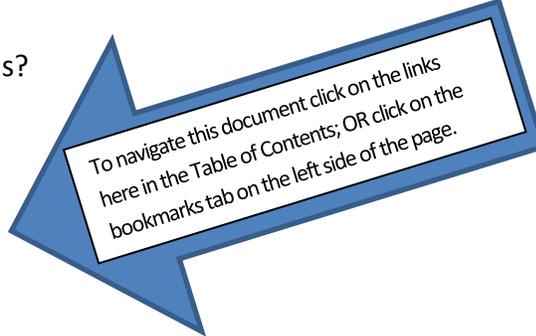
The Guide was originally a piece of the College Choices for Adults website which was developed by the Transparency by Design initiative. This resource has been adapted to be utilized in an interactive .pdf or print format.



This resource will help you answer questions such as: Just what kinds of programs qualify as online learning? How do you know if you're a good fit for an online program? What kinds of computer skills do you need? How do you get in? And how do you pay for all of this?

We've got the answers you need to prepare for and succeed at this next stage in your life. Feel free to browse the sections below or click on the FAQs for a short-and-sweet version. Here's to success in your future endeavors!

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1. What, exactly, does online learning entail?

Is Online Learning Right for Me?

If you want to earn more money, change careers or get that promotion, yes. If you're looking for a flexible, affordable education from a reputable university - absolutely.

You already know degree holders earn more than their peers and enjoy better job security, [Financial Statistics of College Grads Vs. Non-Grads](#),¹ so you're sold on going back to school. But before you go through the application, admissions and financial aid process, take the time to develop a clear understanding of the types of programs you're considering.

The term "online learning" can mean many things— a fully online program, a combination of online and on-campus, a competency-based program, or a self-paced independent program. Some programs are offered "at a distance," which may not be online at all.

Fully online, combination online/on-campus, and competency-based programs are by far the most prevalent, all being term-based programs in which students are required to complete courses or demonstrate knowledge and abilities within an institution's specific time frame. Here's a primer on the kinds of programs you may encounter:

- *Fully online* - All courses are offered through an Internet connection. You will not be required to physically attend a class at any time in order to earn a degree or certificate.
- *Combination of online and on-campus* - Sometimes referred to as a blended, hybrid or low-residency programs, these require you to physically attend a class, orientation, practicum, clinical, or other program requirement occasionally in order to earn a degree or certificate.
- *Competency-based program* - This type of program emphasizes your ability to demonstrate your knowledge or abilities by passing a number of tests and/or taking a number of courses with a strong focus on practical, demonstrable, measured, and immediately-applicable knowledge.
- *Self-paced independent program* - Students are required to send assignments to a faculty member or mentor by e-mail or regular mail as part of this kind of program. In addition, you will be given a combination of online, print-based, and electronic study and presentation materials, as well as a series of progressive tests and quizzes that you will take from home. Self-paced programs do not follow an academic calendar; rather, you are required to complete any given course at your own pace (usually within one year). Full degree programs typically are not offered this way.
- *"At a distance" program* - In these programs, you often will be required to sit in a classroom and view a class via a teleconferencing system. These types of programs

¹ http://www.ehow.com/about_6128503_financial-college-grads-vs_-non_grads.html

typically include two-way audio and video conferencing capabilities in which students and faculty, at separate locations, interact with each other in real time.

What Types of Institutions Offer Online Programs?

Before you start narrowing your search, be sure you are aware of the different types of institutions that provide online degree and certificate programs. Do you want or need a purely virtual program, or might you consider one that is a combination of virtual and on-campus? What does it mean if you attend a non-profit or for-profit institution?

Learn more about which kind of program will best meet your needs:

- *Virtual Institutions* - These are institutions that operate out of a business hub and do not have an additional physical campus. Virtual institutions offer fully-online programs, meaning that from start to finish you will never have to set foot on campus.
- *Virtual and On-campus Institutions* - These institutions offer online programs but also have a physical campus or campuses that provide traditional, face-to-face courses and programs. A virtual/on-campus institution might allow you to take fully-online courses, hybrid, traditional on-campus courses, or a combination of these to fulfill your program requirements.
- *For-profit vs. Non-profit Institutions* - The number of for-profit institutions has grown over the last two decades, especially in the online learning sector. Also referred to as “proprietary” institutions, for-profit providers of online programs operate under the business practice of accruing earnings that can be used for institutional improvements as well as for the financial benefit of the shareholders and/or individuals who own the corporation that runs and manages the institution.
- The majority of colleges and universities are public or private non-profit institutions that operate under the practice of accruing earnings only for institutional improvements and the so-called “public good” - not for the financial benefits of any outside entities.
- Overall, an institution’s non-profit or for-profit status does not have any influence on the academic quality of the programs offered. However, it does have an effect on an institution’s eligibility to receive federally funded institutional improvement dollars. While most for-profit institutions do qualify to offer you federally funded loans and grants, they do not qualify for federal dollars earmarked for institutional enhancements or research purposes.
- You can find out if an institution is for-profit or non-profit by visiting the [National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator](#).² Enter an institution’s name in the search field and look under the “type” category within the general information field.

How Long Will It Take?

Admission and enrollment counselors get asked this question frequently, and it is difficult to give a precise answer because it depends on the following important variables.

² <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

The amount of time it takes to complete a program will vary according to:

- the structure and organization of the program under consideration;
- the possibility of transferring in prior credit earned or applying prior work-related experience, training, and/or knowledge to the program you are entering;
- whether you can test out of certain courses through such things as [CLEP](#),³ [DSST](#),⁴ and [ACE](#)⁵ (for undergraduate programs only); and
- your skills, prior knowledge, and how many courses you can effectively fit into your schedule.

Program Requirements

A general rule of thumb is that it requires about 60 credits, or approximately 20 three-credit courses, to earn an associate's degree; about 120 credits, or approximately 40 three-credit courses, to earn a bachelor's degree; and about 36 credits, or approximately 12 three-credit courses, to earn a master's degree.

In addition to completing required courses, you may have to complete a number of credit-bearing assignments, such as capstones and independent study projects for business and information technology majors, clinicals for medical-related majors, and student teaching experiences for education majors.

If you enroll in an online program with such requirements, faculty, staff, and administrators will help arrange these types of face-to-face, mandatory assignments in areas geographically near where you live and work.

Learn more about other time factors which may affect program completion:

Time Factors

- *Transferring in Previously-earned Credit* - You may be able to apply credit earned from previous courses you completed to a program's requirements, and thus lessen the number of courses you will be required to take in order to earn a degree. Any previous courses you took must match academically to any specific courses in the program under consideration. In other words, if you took a junior-level statistics course in the past from a different institution and a similar statistics course is required in the online program, then, in most cases, you can transfer in that credit you already earned. Keep in mind, however, that if the course or courses you took previously were not from a regionally-accredited institution, and you are enrolled in an online program that is offered by a regionally-accredited institution, that previous credit may not be transferable (please see "Finding Accreditation Status" below). In addition, all programs have a limit on the

³ clep.collegeboard.org

⁴ <http://www.getcollegecredit.com/>

⁵ <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/College-Credit-Recommendation-Service-%28CREDIT%29.aspx>

number of transfer credits you can apply toward a degree, and there may be fees that apply when awarding transfer credit into any degree program.

- *Finding Accreditation Status* - Most institutions will prominently display its accreditation status on its website. If you can't find an institution's link to information about its accreditation status, then sometimes you can type in the word "accreditation" into the institution's website search function to be taken to the appropriate section.

You can also visit the [National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator](#)⁶ website, type in the institution's name in the "Name of School" box, click on "Show Results," and then navigate to the "Accreditation" tab, where both institutional and programmatic/specialized accreditation status are listed for almost every higher education institution in the United States.

- *Work Experiences, Prior Learning, Special Training, and Special Tests* - A variety of learning experiences, skills acquired, special training, certifications, and special testing results may be converted into credit earned and applied to both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Every institution has its own unique policies and evaluation processes for the possible transfer of such credit, and most have a special department that deals exclusively with such transfer credit evaluations.
 - *Credit awards from such experiences can include:*
 - Successful completion of College-Level Examination Program ([CLEP](#))⁷ exams.
 - Successful completion of Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support ([DANTES](#))⁸ exams.
 - Successful completion of military training, college-level course work, corporate training programs, and business-related certifications that have been reviewed and recommended for credit by the American Council on Education ([ACE](#))⁹.
 - Experiential learning demonstrating subject matter mastery through documented work experiences that reveal college-level learning has been gained.
 - Constructing a portfolio that presents evidence from a variety of sources that support a student's claim to specific knowledge. The portfolio then is assessed by the institution to determine eligibility.

⁶ <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

⁷ clep.collegeboard.org

⁸ http://www.dantes.doded.mil/DANTES_Homepage.html

⁹ <http://www.acenet.edu/higher-education/topics/Pages/Adult-Learners.aspx>

In other words, there are multiple ways in which an adult learner can shorten the duration of time it will take to earn a degree. Each institution and program has its own transfer policies and variable credit and entrance requirements. Prior to enrolling in any program, communicate with counselors who will provide you with a fairly good estimate as to what kind of credit you may or may not be able to transfer in based on your background and experiences. This will help you determine more precisely how long it should take for you to complete a program and earn a degree.

- ***Average Course Time*** - It is important for you also to understand how much time may be required to successfully complete an online course. The generally accepted formula for determining how much time you will need to spend on each course is provided by OhioLearns, which is part of the Ohio Learning Network's consortium of colleges and universities. Generally, it is expected that students put in a total of three hours per week for every credit taken. So a three-credit course would require a minimum of nine hours of your time each week over the duration of the course. This, of course, can vary, especially at the graduate level, where the amount of time per week required in any given course can increase substantially over nine hours.

Curious About How Much Time You'll Have to Devote to School? Take This Survey!

OhioLearns publishes an online ["Time Usage Survey"](#)¹⁰ tool that can help you understand how much time you truly have to devote each week to your education. This tool will really help you get a better feel for your time restraints!

¹⁰ <http://ohiolearns.org/explore/get-a-plan/time-usage-survey>

2. The Technology

System Requirements

Online programs will list the minimum requirements for the computer system you'll need. Still, consider investing in the most updated system you can find at a reasonable price.

As an online learner, you'll be spending a good deal of your time at a computer workstation either at home or at work, working both online and off-line, utilizing some of the latest learning technologies available today. At the very least, you'll want to have a reliable computer with the right software and a fast Internet connection.

Most online learning providers have a tech support staff that will answer any hardware and software questions you may have. A typical required hardware and software scenario might look like this:

Hardware:

- Either a PC or a Macintosh computer running a recent operating system
- Decent amount of hard drive space
- DVD-Rom or CD-ROM
- Sound card with speakers and microphone
- Video card
- Minimum of 256 MB of RAM; it is strongly suggested to have at least 512 MB or more if possible
- Backup storage device
- Printer

Software:

- Current operating system for your computer
- Free Plug-ins, including Windows Media Player, Adobe Acrobat Reader, Flash Player, and Java
- Antivirus software
- Internet security software
- Compression utility software

Internet/E-mail:

- Preferably a broadband cable or DSL Internet connection, but a 56K dial-up connection will often be noted as the minimum requirement for Internet access
- An e-mail account (free via gmail.com, yahoo.com, live.com, etc.)

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Computer Maintenance

Remember to keep your computer running smoothly by conducting all of the necessary diagnostic tests and performance checks that are recommended by the manufacturer of your computer. This information typically is easily accessible via your computer system's help and support pages that come pre-installed on your computer. Some recommendations for running at peak performance include:

- Managing the e-mails you get by deleting unwanted messages and spam on a daily basis
- Scanning for viruses on a weekly basis
- Using optimization tools and performing back-ups on a weekly basis
- Keeping your software, operating system, and drivers updated on a regular basis
- Routinely changing your passwords and not storing them in a place where they could be compromised

The Technology of Online Courses

Educational technologies comprise the software and web-based functions, features, and tools that a program's faculty and students utilize. You may work with a wide variety of educational technologies in your online program, or you may work with only a few. Nonetheless, having a general idea of the kind of educational technologies that will be utilized in your courses could be a factor to consider when choosing any online program.

Types of Educational Technologies

In addition to technologies such as the course management system and discussion board, relatively new educational technologies are making their way into online programs and are facilitating more interaction and a sense of community between students and faculty. These tools also are providing faculty and students with more ways to self-publish online, as well as more opportunities to use digitized audio and video presentations that often can enhance the total online learning experience. Some online learning educational technology trends, depending on the program, could include: streaming lectures, web conferencing, blogs and wikis, social media, virtual worlds, simulations, interactive digital environments, online quizzes and exams, and a variety of other electronic communication and presentation tools. For the most part, many of these technologies are not yet deeply entrenched in the world of online learning, but it is safe to say that they are on the horizon.

- *Streaming Lectures* - Some online programs will video stream or podcast lectures to you that are viewable through such software plug-ins as RealPlayer, Adobe Flash, Windows Media Player, QuickTime, iTunes, or as a download to your MP3 player. One of the benefits of this kind of technology is that it allows you to view and listen to a lecture repeatedly at your convenience.

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Here's an example of a streaming video - this one is from [Ted.com](http://www.ted.com/),¹¹ "[ideas worth spreading](http://www.ted.com/talks/view/lang/en/id/572)"¹² is shared free on the web. May this provide you with inspiration to succeed in your educational pursuits!

"In his typically candid style, Richard St. John reminds us that success is not a one-way street, but a constant journey. He uses the story of his business' rise and fall to illustrate a valuable lesson -- when we stop trying, we fail."

- **Web Conferencing** - Also called "virtual meetings," this type of online interaction is conducted in real time and requires participants to access a special application either online or through a course management system. Web conferences include live audio and video; a screen area for displaying text, graphics and PowerPoint presentations; an electronic chalkboard (called a "whiteboard") for annotating an online presentation; a polling feature to conduct live surveys; a text box for asking questions or making comments; and the ability to have participants talk to each other if they have a sound card, speakers and a microphone or a headset hooked up to their computer. Some web conferences also can include seeing all of the participants in real time if they all have working, Internet-connected video cameras hooked up to their computers. Another type of "virtual meeting" can occur inside a virtual world (see below). These may be used for a synchronous course session or more informally as a way for dispersed classmates to meet online.
- **Blogs and Wikis** - Blogs and wikis are similar in that both ultimately give users the ability to create websites. Wikis let multiple users edit and delete each other's content, essentially creating a collaborative website. A blog, on the other hand, is typically managed and owned by a single person who allows visitors (monitored or un-monitored) to post comments. The blog owner has full editorial control over what gets published online and how. In short, blogs do not have collaborative editing functions. Blog entries are also typically dialogues between the blog owner and its participants displayed in reverse chronological order. Wikis are shared information-gathering websites that do not typically have a dialogue emphasis and may not have any kind of strict chronological order. Blogs and wikis are being utilized in online learning programs as a means to facilitate meaningful collaborations on projects in which students can share resources and/or gain insights into shared topics of interest related to their coursework.

The online video production company Common Craft has a short [introduction to blogs](#)¹³ located at, as well as a short [introduction to wikis](#).¹⁴

¹¹ <http://www.ted.com/>

¹² <http://www.ted.com/talks/view/lang/en/id/572>

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- *Social Media* - Social media ([Wikipedia definition](#))¹⁵ are online tools that allow you to interact socially with other people and businesses connected to those tools.

[Facebook](#)¹⁶ and [MySpace](#)¹⁷ are two social networking applications on the Internet today. A social networking application gives you the ability to create a page that features your profile, interests, photos, images, links, online groups you may belong to, and other information. You then can invite others, who also must have an account through the social networking application, to connect with you and post comments and messages on your page, essentially forming a network of “friends.” Common Craft has a great, quick video on this - "[Social Networking in Plain English](#).”¹⁸ In online learning, social networking is often utilized to allow students who are dispersed geographically to interact informally - often it's the equivalent of grabbing a cold one after class. Although some instructors use social networks help students build their [personal learning network](#)¹⁹ as well.

Social bookmarking is an application that allows you to create a website for sharing your favorite “bookmarked” websites with others. Common Craft also has a short introduction to social bookmarking "[Social Bookmarking in Plain English](#).”²⁰

- *Virtual Worlds* - If you are familiar with [Second Life](#),²¹ [Sims Online](#)²² or [World of Warcraft](#),²³ then you know about virtual worlds. The use of virtual worlds in online programs is not commonplace, but it could be increasing in the near future as more educators see how this technology can create a compelling course that features an innovative online presence and interactions. In a virtual world, users can create customizable avatars (three-dimensional electronic representations of users) that can speak and interact with each other in a three-dimensional space on their computers in real time. The possibility to create these kinds of electronic worlds has brought about a keen interest from some educators to experiment with this relatively new educational technology inside online courses.

¹³ <http://www.commoncraft.com/video/blogs>

¹⁴ <http://www.commoncraft.com/video/wikis>

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/>

¹⁷ <http://www.myspace.com/>

¹⁸ <http://www.commoncraft.com/video/social-networking>

¹⁹ <https://sites.google.com/site/buildingapln/>

²⁰ <http://www.commoncraft.com/video/social-bookmarking>

²¹ <http://secondlife.com/>

²² http://thesims.com/en_US/home

²³ <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/?->

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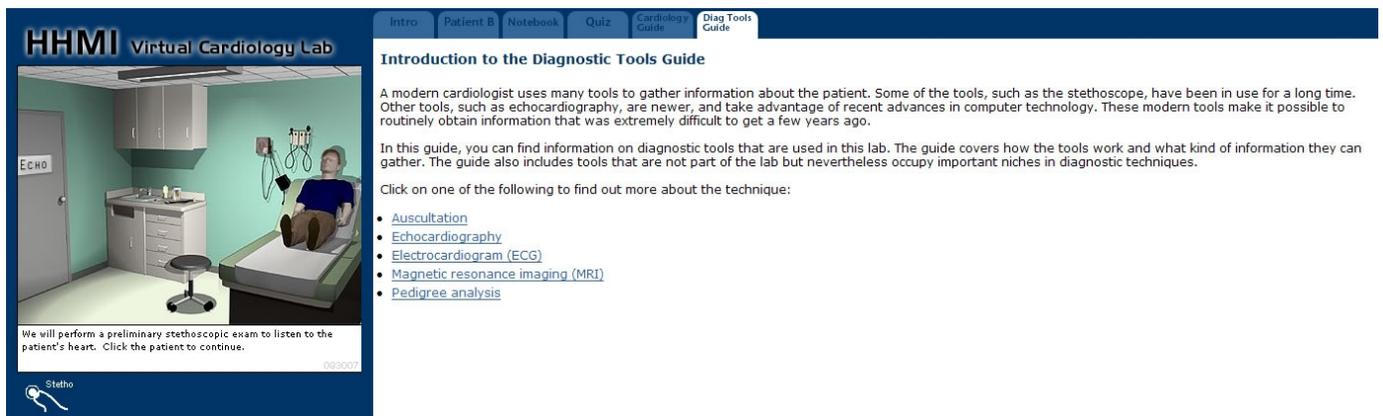
To hear more about Second Life from founder, Philip Rosedale, check out his Ted Talk: "[Phillip Rosedale on Second Life](http://www.ted.com/talks/the_inspiration_of_second_life.html)."²⁴

Below is a short video on Virtual Worlds: "[Secondlife - What Are Virtual Worlds - Intro to Second Life](http://youtu.be/O62GHcIVKS4)."²⁵

More information about these can be found in Educause ELI's "[7 Things you should know about virtual meetings](http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7011.pdf)."²⁶

- *Simulations* - Simulations are typically interactive electronic representations of real-world practices that often put you into a decision-making role online. These typically are geared toward engaging you in a problem-solving process. A business- or medical-related simulation, for instance, will provide you with only enough information and choices — perhaps in the form of video, audio, special interactive graphics, etc. — for you to ultimately make a crucial management-level decision. The possible results of your decision then will be displayed. The idea is to teach you how to solve problems and manage effectively in unpredictable circumstances.

One example of this are the virtual labs created and made available to teachers and students by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Biointeractive team. This example, pictured below, from the [HHMI Virtual Cardiology Lab](http://www.hhmi.org/biointeractive/vlabs/cardiology/index.html)²⁷ is a cardiology lab focused on heritable diseases of the heart.



²⁴ http://www.ted.com/talks/the_inspiration_of_second_life.html

²⁵ <http://youtu.be/O62GHcIVKS4>

²⁶ <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7011.pdf>

²⁷ <http://www.hhmi.org/biointeractive/vlabs/cardiology/index.html>

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- *Online Quizzes, Tests, and Exams* - Online quizzes, tests and exams are common in online courses and all involve some form of technology, usually as part of your course management system. Also, some online math-related courses include special software for doing mathematic equations in an online testing environment.

Just like on paper, these can be formatted as multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short-answer, or long answer. They can be timed, meaning they would shut down after a pre-established period of time beginning from the moment you logged on to the quiz or exam. Or they may be open-ended, which may mean they are also open-book tests. Some online test, quiz or exam systems are scored immediately for instant feedback while others must be reviewed by your instructor before a grade is assigned.

In addition to having a reliable internet connection, its important that you understand fully how to log-in, properly save and exit the test-taking system. Check the help section of your course management system prior to logging on for your exam to ensure you'll receive the credit you earn with your answers.

Outside of the technology, preparing for an online exam is no different than preparing for any other exam you've taken. Be sure to take good notes, study the material and most importantly ask any questions or clarifications you need prior to the exam. If you have test anxiety, be sure to contact your institutions' student affairs office or counseling center prior to your first exam. They will be able to help you with relief strategies and or accommodations if they are necessary.

- *Grading* - Grading also will be provided online through your course management system. Your instructor will outline how your grades are determined, typically calculated by percentages that are aligned to specific tasks and assignments you must complete over time. For example, a grading scenario might be segmented as 10 percent for quizzes, 20 percent for homework assignments, 25 percent for participation in online discussions, and 45 percent for a final research paper. The course management system will have a grade book function that your instructor will use to keep track of your progress. Your grading will be made viewable to you and you alone when your instructor releases that information via the course management system grade book.

For More Information

A great source of information that covers some of the latest education technologies is the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative "[7 Things You Should Know About](#)"²⁸ series which provides concise information on emerging learning technologies and how they are being used by colleges and universities.

²⁸ http://www.educause.edu/search/apachesolr_search?filters=tid:33438

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3. What does it take to succeed in an online learning environment?

***First-timer?** Here's what you can expect — and what is expected of you — when taking an online course. If you have basic computer skills and an Internet connection, you can learn online. In fact, most institutions offer free online course demonstrations via their websites to give you a feel for the experience. They even give new online learners the chance to participate in an online orientation prior to enrollment. And if you get stuck, these schools provide tech support via telephone, online chat and e-mail.*

The Skills, Habits, and Qualities of an Online Learner

Succeeding in the online learning environment requires a set of soft, technical, and modern information-oriented skills. [Soft skills](#) include your ability to [write](#), [communicate](#), present, [manage time](#) and projects, [work in teams](#), and be organized. [Technical skills](#) are related to your adeptness with the use and maintenance of computer hardware and software, also referred to as computer literacy skills. Modern information-oriented skills refer to being [information literate](#) and web-savvy.

Most online programs today have courses that will inform you about the skills and habits you will need to navigate through Internet search engines and online library databases in order to find valid, trustworthy information. It is a good idea to take full advantage of any [library services](#) offered by the institution you are enrolled in as soon as you are considered a registered student with a valid student ID username and password. It will be beneficial for all of your coursework throughout your academic career, and you will learn Internet-based research skills that will serve you well both personally and professionally.

Get Help if Needed

Don't worry if you happen to be lacking in any of the skill areas mentioned here. Take advantage of the introductory or demonstration online courses and tutorials that every online program offers its students; they're helpful, easily accessible, typically free, and they go a long way in ensuring your overall success as an online learner.

A free tool, provided by the Louisiana Board of Regents, to help you determine if you are ready for online learning is "[SORT" the Student Online Readiness Tool](#).²⁹ Within this tool there are surveys to help you determine your technology experience, access to tools, study habits, lifestyle, goals and purposes, and your learning preferences. After each survey, depending on your level, it will provide resources for you to improve on those skills if necessary. While the interface is not flashy, the information provided is solid and can help give you a good idea of what you may need to do in preparation for beginning an online learning program.

²⁹ <http://yourcalla.org/sort-tool/html/tool.html>

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Starting Off in the Right Direction

The first step toward success as an online learner requires that you clearly understand that this pathway entails hard work, and that you consistently maintain a high level of energy and commitment.

Learning online will be a challenging experience that requires a certain stick-to-it-iveness. Online learning is not in the least bit easier than learning in a traditional, on-campus setting. Overall, you'll need to start by setting up a comfortable and effective learning environment, along with establishing a strong commitment toward meeting, in a timely fashion, all of the required academic tasks of a typical online program.

- *Understanding What's Required of You and Maintaining Balance* - Basically, you'll be reading, writing, and communicating from your Internet-connected computer through a course management system (CMS). Text will be the primary method for disseminating information, although the use of video and audio technologies is growing (see "The Technology of Online Courses"). You'll be reading lots of materials required by your instructor, ranging from academic journals, contemporary magazines, and news articles to various website content, case studies, academic papers, books, and more.

There will be homework assignment deadlines on a regular basis, typically weekly. You'll be communicating by e-mail and possibly by telephone with your instructor, as well as posting your comments and questions to the course discussion board several times or more each week. You may regularly take some online quizzes and exams, and you will more than likely be required to research and write one or more essays and/or academic papers, with proper citation of the resources you utilized to arrive at your conclusions/opinions. You also may be put into a team of three to five students who will work together on one or more projects remotely, requiring you to regularly communicate with your team members.

One of the greatest challenges you will face is balancing all this with your work, family, and social lives. Although you will have the luxury of working on your own time schedule from your personal workstation, there are deadlines that you will have to meet each week. Frequently procrastinating, asking for extensions, or submitting assignments late will throw you into a constant catching-up mode that can cause a lot of stress, so doing your best to stay on task and on time will make your online learning experience more enjoyable (see "[The Skills, Habits and Qualities of an Online Learner](#)," above).

Finally, make sure you know exactly what is required of you in your online course(s) at all times and do not hesitate to ask for clarification from your instructor if there is something you don't understand. Read the syllabus carefully; know what all your assignments are and when they are due, as well as how you will be graded for your work.

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- *Setting Up the Right Learning Environment* - It is important that you have a proper and comfortable physical learning space and workstation because you will be spending a good deal of your time there. Here are some tips, especially if you will be working primarily from home:
 - Make your work environment as private as possible with no disturbances.
 - Make sure your friends and relatives are aware of your schedule and know when not to call or stop by. Turn off the phone if you have to. Try to have a support system in place, whereby your friends and family clearly understand the time you are investing in your education.
 - With a well-designed workstation, you can avoid computer-based syndromes, such as the possibility of a repetitive stress injury that could be caused by excessive typing and mouse maneuvering. According to the [U.S. Department of Labor](http://www.dol.gov/),³⁰ this means that your computer monitor should be stationed just below your eye level when your head is in a straight upright position; your shoulders should be relaxed and your elbows close to your body and supported; your wrists and hands should be in line with your forearms; and your feet should be flat on the floor. For more information about ergonomically proper computer workstations, please see the [Occupational Safety & Health Administrations \(OSHA\) Guidelines](http://www.osha-slc.com/).³¹
 - [Lifehacker.com](http://lifelife.com/)³² also publishes great resources on [keeping your workspace organized](http://lifelife.com/5641578/).³³
- *More Tips for Learning* - While some of these tips may seem obvious, they are worth repeating:
 - Think before responding to any online discussion-board posts. You have time to provide valuable insights. First, use a word processing program to compose your response, then reread and analyze further before copying and pasting it into the discussion thread. In many courses, your posts to the discussion board will affect your grade, so it behooves you to do it right. Plus, intelligent responses will gain the respect of your peers and your instructor.
 - Make yourself fully aware of the library services available to you and seek out any information literacy training that the institution may provide. Being information literate is a strong academic asset that will help you throughout your academic career and beyond.
 - If you feel that your writing skills could use a tune-up, take advantage of any online learning writing labs and services offered by the institution.

³⁰ <http://www.dol.gov/>

³¹ <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/computerworkstations/>

³² <http://lifelife.com/>

³³ <http://lifelife.com/5641578/>

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- Fully understand the rules of plagiarism. Especially in today's copy-and-paste culture, be careful about how you use and cite information in your writing assignments and discussion board posts. Always cite your sources appropriately.
- Keep a running, up-to-date calendar of everything you need to do academically, socially, and work related.
- Have a decent computer and fast Internet connection. It's also a good idea to have a back-up plan in case your computer or Internet-connection is interrupted. Your local library, for instance, might be a good alternative in a pinch.

Essentials for Success

In order to become a successful online student, you'll need all the study habits and skills associated with any kind of academic achievement, *plus* a keen sense and ability for working effectively without the benefit of face-to-face interactions with your peers and faculty members.

Honestly, the necessary skills are not that different than it takes to be successful in any endeavor. Here's a short [video](#)³⁴, originally from [Ted2005](#)³⁵ where Richard St. John shares the 8 secrets of success he garnered from 7 years of research and over 500 interviews with successful people.

Necessary skills for the successful online learner include: having strong online communication abilities, reading comprehension, typing, computer and information literacy, writing, online test taking, and, where appropriate, math.

- *Getting Started with an Online Learning Program* - Online learning typically begins when you enter a pre-assigned username and password into the institution's login screen. This puts you into what's called a Course Management System (CMS). The CMS is where you access all the pertinent information related to your courses, along with any online tools you will use as you move through your coursework.
 - *What Happens After You Login?* The faculty member leading the course usually provides his or her contact information to you via a welcome message, along with a syllabus that outlines the structure of the course and the work that will be required of you. Any required textbooks and supplemental course materials would be duly noted in the syllabus. The course learning objectives, rules, and how you will be graded also should be clearly explained. If anything is unclear to you, be sure to ask your instructor immediately.
- *Class Discussions* - In addition to submitting a variety of homework assignments to your instructor in a timely fashion, you'll also be expected to participate in the class discussion board/forum. This is where most of the interaction with fellow students and

³⁴ <http://www.ted.com/talks/view/lang/en//id/70>

³⁵ <http://www.ted.com/>

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your instructor takes place. Most discussions begin with the instructor posting a topic of interest related to the course subject matter or a particular reading assignment. You'll be asked to post a comment/point of view relative to the topic, beginning a discussion thread that grows as more comments are posted by more students and the instructor. These discussions are at the heart of most online courses; therefore, your ability to post significant comments can figure heavily into your grade.

- *Teamwork* - Depending on the structure of the online course, you may be required to work with your fellow classmates on special course projects, communicating with each other both synchronously (in real time) and asynchronously (not in real time).
- *Communicating with Peers and Faculty* - As already noted elsewhere, good communication skills are vital in any online program. When communicating online, keep the following in mind:
 - *Practice proper [netiquette](#).*³⁶ This refers to the practice of being polite and civilized when communicating online. Often, for instance, the nuances of the written word can be easily misinterpreted in an e-mail, chat or discussion forum. It's important to pay close attention to the following rules of thumb when communicating online:
 - Don't use all uppercase – it's interpreted as screaming at the recipient.
 - Colored fonts or fancy typefaces can be hard for many to read.
 - Keep your emotions and emoticons [😊] in check.
 - Always address people by their name in an e-mail correspondence, and always conclude your message with a polite closing and your name.
 - Proofread your online communications for spelling, grammar, and clarity before sending.
 - Do not criticize another person's opinion.
 - If you are asked to critique someone's work, do it in a constructive manner and support your critique with valid resources.
 - Stay on topic.
 - Show respect and don't offend.
 - Be precise and to the point.
- *Be actively engaged in a meaningful way.* Your presence in an online course is often scrutinized via your ability to participate effectively in online discussions. This does not mean that you simply agree or disagree with the postings from your fellow students and the instructor. Instead, you should always contribute something meaningful and substantial to any online course discussion. In other words, stay actively engaged at all times to the best of your ability. Don't hesitate to share your

³⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netiquette#Netiquette>

experiences and insights. Chances are you have a lot to offer to your peers through your unique perspectives.

- *Interact with faculty.* Your instructors will be more than willing to communicate with you outside of the formal course structure on anything related to your studies. They may have dedicated office hours in which you can call, e-mail or live chat with them. Taking a proactive role in communicating with your instructors will give you the benefit of drawing from their expertise and knowledge over and beyond the actual online course interactions you will have.
- *Read Right* - Using your reading skills to accurately identify and analyze information published both online and in hard copy may seem almost second nature to many adult learners. However, according to the Foundation for Critical Thinking, it might be to your benefit to learn “The Art of Close Reading,” meaning that good readers “don’t simply decipher words,” they “actively engage in a dialog with the writer.” They “actively seek the author’s purpose in writing.” They “look for systems of meaning in a text.” For more information about Close Reading, see **Critical Thinking & The Art of Close Reading [Part One](#)**,³⁷ **[Part Two](#)**,³⁸ and **[Part Three](#)**.³⁹
- *Type Well* - This may seem apparent, but many adults are a bit rusty with their typing skills. Even high-level managers are often not the greatest typists, as they have grown accustomed to having administrative assistants create all of their documentation and communications for them. Additionally, if you happen to work at a job that does not put you in front of a computer, your typing skills might not be up to speed for all the typing required in an online program. Being an accurate and relatively fast typist will certainly save you time, and it’s never too late to boost your skills in this area. For some free online help with typing, including a typing test to check your speed, visit [Learn 2 Type](#).⁴⁰
- *Write Solid Papers and Essays* - Depending on the program, you will write a good number of research papers and essays over the course of your academic career. If your skills need a little sharpening, you should definitely take advantage of any writing labs or tutorial services offered by the institution. For now, here are some basic academic writing tips:
 - If you have any writing fears, conquer them. The best way to overcome apprehension or lack of confidence about writing is to simply change the way you think about writing. Never say the typical self-prophesying “I can’t write.” Instead, adopt a mental attitude that meets any writing assignment as a

³⁷ <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-the-art-of-close-reading-part-one/509>

³⁸ <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-the-art-of-close-reading-part-two/510>

³⁹ <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-the-art-of-close-reading-part-three/511>

⁴⁰ <http://www.learn2type.com/>

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welcome challenge that is a definite boost to your overall knowledge bank once it is completed.

- Avoid problems with grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and clarity. These can be rectified quickly by getting to know one easy-to-read and relatively short book that has been popular since 1918: “The Elements of Style” by William Strunk, Jr., available [online for free](#).⁴¹
- Be logical. Oftentimes in a course, you’ll be asked to write an argumentative paper or essay in which you analyze the research and come to your own point of view about a given topic. Good logic when writing academic papers or essays entails creating a sensible progression of thought where one paragraph leads to the next until you reach a sound conclusion. A good source specifically about logic in argumentative writing is available at “[The Owl at Purdue](#).”⁴² Also, keep in mind that it always pays to read and re-read all of your writing assignments with a keen eye toward the overall logic of what you composed.
- Recognize good flow. Always review how your sentences and paragraphs are linked together to ensure a smooth-flowing piece. Using transitional statements, such as: for example, for instance, nonetheless, thus, moreover, etc., can help, but be careful not to overuse them. Another method for enhancing flow is, as you edit, proofread and re-read your work, try to pay very close attention to how well you connect all your sentences or paragraphs to the sentences or paragraphs that precede them.

For a wide range of tips and information about the writing process, see the “[The Owl at Purdue](#)”⁴³ or [Grammar Girl](#).⁴⁴

- *Know your Hardware and Software* - You will definitely need to be a skilled computer user as an online learner. If you are lacking in computer skills, you can learn how to operate your computer efficiently and use a variety of software through a free service offered by the [HP Learning Center](#).⁴⁵ This center offers numerous free online classes that include video and audio presentations, with transcripts, on Microsoft Office and Adobe products, programming and web design, PC maintenance solutions, graphic arts, and more. If you prefer, or need, a very basic explanation of hardware and software check out these videos from [Technophobics Anonymous 101](#).⁴⁶

⁴¹ <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

⁴² <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/659/01/>

⁴³ <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

⁴⁴ <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

⁴⁵ <https://h30440.www3.hp.com/learningcenter/Default.aspx>

⁴⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r3Vln4bGLk>

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Of course, the institution you attend also will provide plenty of computer hardware- and software-related help.

- *Conducting Good Research in our Digital Age* - [“What Today’s College Students Say About Conducting Research in the Digital Age,”](#) written by Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg of [Project Information Literacy \(PIL\)](#),⁴⁷ is a national study on how “early adults resolve issues of credibility, authority, relevance, and currency of resources used for course-related research.”

Interestingly enough, Head and Eisenberg came to the conclusion that research is [more difficult to conduct in our digital age](#)⁴⁸ than it has been in the past. Part of the reason for this is that we are bombarded with an overload of information published online by amateurs, making it more difficult to decipher what information we find over the Internet is actually professional, authoritative, trustworthy, and relevant.

[College students often go to Wikipedia to conduct their research, which typically is frowned upon by most faculty and librarians.](#)⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the study also discovered that many of these same students simply used Wikipedia as a jumping board for conducting more serious research using scholarly articles and publications they found through their institutional online library database offerings. This same theory applies for using Google and other search engines - [they are often used to find context.](#)⁵⁰ These should be considered as stepping stones or add-ons to the more important and valid research you will conduct at your institution’s online library. One video that will be really helpful in understanding strategies for conducting research is: [PIL InfoLit Dialog, No. 4: Strategies.](#)⁵¹

So, as an online student, it certainly is important that you hone your online research skills and utilize online library databases. This facet of your online learning experience should be taken advantage of to its fullest extent throughout your academic career. The website [AcademicInfo](#)⁵² offers a good collection of tips on how best to search the Internet for information, as well as how to avoid the inherent pitfalls in your path.

- *Know How to Take Online Tests* - Online quizzes, tests and exams are common in online courses and all involve some form of technology, usually as part of your course management system. Also, some online math-related courses include special software for doing mathematic equations in an online testing environment.

⁴⁷ <http://projectinfolit.org/>

⁴⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmEzo51e_SQ&lr=1

⁴⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nOe26xY1zM&lr=1>

⁵⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0adM-YpThHs>

⁵¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=4myLLv-xcz4

⁵² <http://www.academicinfo.net/refind.html>

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Just like on paper, these can be formatted as multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short-answer, or long answer. They can be timed, meaning they would shut down after a pre-established period of time beginning from the moment you logged on to the quiz or exam. Or they may be open-ended, which may mean they are also open-book tests. Some online test, quiz or exam systems are scored immediately for instant feedback while others must be reviewed by your instructor before a grade is assigned.

In addition to having a reliable internet connection, its important that you understand fully how to log-in, properly save and exit the test-taking system. Check the help section of your course management system prior to logging on for your exam to ensure you'll receive the credit you earn with your answers.

Outside of the technology, preparing for an online exam is no different than preparing for any other exam you've taken. Be sure to take good notes, study the material and most importantly ask any questions or clarifications you need prior to the exam. If you have test anxiety, be sure to contact your institutions' student affairs office or counseling center prior to your first exam. They will be able to help you with relief strategies and or accommodations if they are necessary.

- *Avoid Math Anxiety* - Programs that are rich in quantitative-oriented courses can be the most difficult to take, especially if you are an adult who has not practiced basic algebra, statistics, or accounting in a while. If you are feeling anxiety about the math courses you'll be required to take, step back and talk to your counselor about taking some fundamental, beginner math courses before diving into a full-blown, required course. Be prepared to put in enough time to refresh the basic math skills you'll need to get through your program. About.com's "[What is Math Anxiety?](http://www.about.com/od/reference/a/anxiety.htm)"⁵³ covers what math anxiety is all about and how you can overcome it, including links to worksheets and a variety of math formulas, calculators and reference resources.
- *Know Your Student Services* - Beyond getting information about the academic side of online learning, **you will want to get a firm handle on the student services an institution provides.**

The amount and quality of student services an institution has in place is vitally important to your overall satisfaction as an online learner. These services include organized and efficient admissions, registration, and financial aid services; knowledgeable academic advising services; online library access and support; a comprehensive online bookstore; and an effective technical support staff. In short, you will want to get as much information about all these services as possible prior to starting your first online course.

- *Enrollment, Registration, and Financial Aid Services* - Every institution provides these services, which are the first level of interaction you will have during your

⁵³ <http://math.about.com/od/reference/a/anxiety.htm>

decision-making process, prior to actually taking a course. These people are there to help you understand the forms you must fill out to get admitted, registered, and to obtain financial assistance. They will explain what's required to graduate from a degree program or to earn a certificate. They will explain what you may or may not be able to transfer in as credit already earned. They will discuss all your concerns and direct you to the appropriate personnel within the institution who can give you more information, if needed.

- *Orientation Services* - Don't expect to be thrown into an online course without some proper training, especially if you are a novice online learner. This is where orientation services come into play. Most programs provide some form of practice/training-oriented online course, often credit bearing, which will get you totally familiar with how to be an effective and organized online learner. These orientations can come in two forms: completely online or as part of a face-to-face residency at the start of your first term, typically conducted over a weekend. Overall, the orientation should get you fully acquainted with the educational technologies you will be using, as well as feature some readings, assignments, exercises, and tests that are symbolic of a typical online course.
- *Academic Advising* - The institution should assign a professional academic advisor to you, usually a faculty member, typically after you have been accepted into a program. However, you can ask to speak with a professional academic advisor prior to actually enrolling in your program of choice. This person will provide one-on-one assistance in relation to scheduling your courses, building an academic plan of action for all of your time spent as a student, and basically clearly defining all of the course requirements applicable to your degree or certificate program. Your academic advisor also should be able to provide you with sound career advice relative to how your studies apply to your employment situation or career goals.
- *Technical Support* - How an institution provides technical support is important, especially during the beginning phases of your online learning experience. As you get used to the learning environment, you might have questions about the proper configuration of your computer system; you might encounter problems logging in to your course; you might have trouble downloading some resources that apply to a course assignment. In particular, you will want to know what hours of the day/week technical support is available. Technical support can be provided via telephone, instant messaging, and/or e-mail. Many busy professionals, for instance, work on their coursework during late evening hours and over the weekends. Some institutions provide 24/7 support while others have extended hours at specific times of the day/week.

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- *Library Services* - The library services an institution offers to online students is another important consideration. Some questions to ask include: Does the online library have an easily accessible and relevant collection of scholarly journals and other online materials, such as newspapers, magazines and other publications and databases, that are relevant to your course of study? Does the program have a dedicated librarian(s) who helps online learners effectively use all of the online library services available to them? Does the institution provide an online tutorial or course on how to develop your information literacy skills and habits?
- *The Online Bookstore* - This is another very important aspect of your overall online learning experience and satisfaction. You will be utilizing this service in many of the courses you take that will require a textbook(s) and/or other reading materials in both printed and digitized formats that are available only through an online bookstore provided and managed by the institution itself or through a third-party online bookstore that the institution has partnered with. You might also have to purchase course materials through the familiar commercial online booksellers, such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and others. Whatever service you end up using, you will want to ensure that your books and other reading materials are delivered to you in a timely fashion so that you have them well enough in advance for meeting your course assignment obligations. Plus, the institution's bookstore service should be able to ensure that you get the appropriate and latest editions of any textbooks you may need, as well as possibly provide you with a buy-and-sell used books service.
- *Career Services* - Providing career services to online learners has obviously grown in importance in recent years as the economy has weakened. A good online career services department will provide a full array of job-searching and career-advancement information services to its online student population, along with access to counselors that you can communicate with online or over the telephone. Also, if you happen to live close to the institution you are enrolled in, you should be able to utilize the help offered by the on-campus career services department, since you are an official student just like your on-campus counterpart.
- *Alumni Services* - Alumni services is an area in which online students typically do not participate in as much as on-campus students, but this does not mean that institutions don't see the value of supporting online learner alumni associations. Many online programs are now encouraging their current and former students to take an active role in these relatively new alumni services, updating their websites and outreach to attract online learning graduates and provide increased networking benefits that alumni associations are known to provide. An alumni association for online students could be an excellent resource for career growth and business-related connections that last a lifetime.

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- *Services for Students with Special Needs* - Online learning can be ideal for people who have special needs, particularly those who are disabled and unable to travel easily to a physical campus. One example of a service for disabled students entails ensuring that all web pages comply with industry standards for making content accessible to people with disabilities. In addition, you should ask if the institution you are considering has any kind of disabled student services department or professional staff that can answer any questions or concerns you may have.
- *Academic Support and Tutoring Services* - Writing labs, math support, assistance using the online library, strategies to develop good study habits and test-taking skills, and more — these are the kinds of services that can fall under the academic support and tutoring labels. They can be supplied in a variety of online learning formats, with or without an instructor, often at no additional cost, as part of your student services.

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4. How do I find Information I can trust?

You can find online programs that interest you by searching on the web, but you'll want to be careful about where these searches take you. Top-level search engine results will link to a wide variety of websites that publish information about online programs. However, many of these websites are driven by a variety of marketing and advertising mechanisms that may not have your best interests in mind.

But don't worry: At College Choices for Adults, we're committed to providing you with quality data, not marketing fluff. All of our data are reviewed by a third party higher education non-profit, the [WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies](#)⁵⁴ for quality assurance.

What's more, program learning outcomes, assessment measures and results of those measures are difficult to find elsewhere, even on an institution's own site, but all programs here MUST provide that information in order to be published. And all of our participating institutions are regionally-accredited.

And you can rest assured that we'll never ask for personal information – even our [website feedback form](#) can be submitted anonymously. That means we won't provide our members with leads; rather, their small annual dues go to hosting the data on College Choices for Adults, third party review of the data and maintenance and development of this website.

Understanding Accreditation

Knowing the accreditation status of any institution and program you're considering is a crucial part of your decision-making process.

Accreditation is a process whereby educational institutions or specific programs are endorsed by an association as viable teaching and learning establishments based on a set of rigorous educational standards. There are three types of accreditation that you need to be aware of:

- *Regional* - Regional accreditation means that an institution has been recognized as meeting educational standards and requirements established by both the [U.S. Department of Education \(DOE\)](#)⁵⁵ and the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation \(CHEA\)](#).⁵⁶ There are [eight regional accreditation agencies](#)⁵⁷ that accredit higher education institutions in the U.S. The U.S. DOE publishes an extensive [online database of accredited institutions](#).⁵⁸

⁵⁴ <http://wcet.wiche.edu/>

⁵⁵ <http://www.ed.gov/>

⁵⁶ <http://www.chea.org/default.asp>

⁵⁷ <http://www.chea.org/Directories/regional.asp>

⁵⁸ <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>

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Why Regional Accreditation is Important - Institutions that are regionally accredited, which are by far the most prevalent, are eligible to offer federally funded financial aid to their students. Credits earned from regionally accredited higher education institutions can usually be transferred between each other. Regionally accredited institutions may not accept previous credits earned from non-regionally accredited institutions, but every institution has its own unique policies related to transferring credit. **All institutions listed on College Choices for Adults are regionally accredited.**

- *National* - National accreditation is similar to regional accreditation, in that nationally accredited institutions also are eligible to offer federally funded financial aid to their students. However, not every national accrediting agency is recognized as meeting educational standards and requirements established by both the Department of Education (DOE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). For example, there are [seven National Career-Related Accrediting Organizations](#),⁵⁹ of which only two are recognized by both the DOE and the CHEA: the [Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training \(ACCET\)](#)⁶⁰ and the [Distance Education and Training Council Accrediting Commission \(DETC\)](#).⁶¹ The other five are recognized only by the DOE. There are four [National Faith-Related Accrediting Organizations](#)⁶² recognized by both the DOE and the CHEA.

If you enroll in an online degree program offered by an institution that is only nationally accredited, and you have plans, in the future, to transfer the credits you earned to a program offered by a regionally accredited institution, check with the regionally accredited institution's registrar before you proceed because those credits may not be transferable.

- *Programmatic* - As noted by the Department of Education (DOE), programmatic accrediting agencies are "agencies that accredit specific educational programs that prepare students for entry into a profession, occupation, or vocation." These agencies are also known as specialized accreditors. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) lists more than [65 programmatic agencies](#),⁶³ ranging from the [Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business \(AACSB\)](#)⁶⁴ and the [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education \(NCATE\)](#)⁶⁵ to the [Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology \(ABET\)](#)⁶⁶ and the [National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission \(NLNAC\)](#).⁶⁷

⁵⁹ <http://www.chea.org/Directories/private.asp>

⁶⁰ <http://www.accet.org/>

⁶¹ <http://www.detc.org/>

⁶² <http://www.chea.org/Directories/faith.asp>

⁶³ <http://www.chea.org/Directories/special.asp>

⁶⁴ <http://www.aacsb.edu/>

⁶⁵ <http://www.ncate.org/>

⁶⁶ <http://www.abet.org/>

⁶⁷ <http://www.nlnac.org/home.htm>

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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) has created several additional resources on understanding why [Accreditation Matters](#)⁶⁸ including the videos [Accreditation and Its Value to You](#),⁶⁹ [Types of Accreditation: What's the Difference?](#)⁷⁰ and, [Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills](#).⁷¹

Finding Accreditation Status

Most institutions will prominently display its accreditation status on its website. If you can't find an institution's link to information about its accreditation status, then sometimes you can type in the word "accreditation" into the institution's website search function to be taken to the appropriate section.

Also you can visit the [National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator](#)⁷² website, type in the institution's name in the "Name of School" box, click on "Show Results," and then navigate to the "Accreditation" tab, where both institutional and programmatic/specialized accreditation status are listed for almost every higher education institution in the United States.

About Promotional Websites

If you type in the term "online degree" into Google, you will see that many of the results listed on the first page link to websites that promote online programs. Many of these promotion-oriented websites do provide a great deal of relevant information about online learning in general. However, a good number of these promotion-oriented websites do not have any relevant information or data that can really help you make a truly informed decision. Many of these websites have what's referred to as "pay-per-click" or "pay-per-lead" online advertising and marketing devices. In a pay-per-click scenario, online program providers pay a predetermined fee to a promotion-oriented website for each time a visitor clicks on an advertisement or link that is published on that website.

In a pay-per-lead scenario, online program providers pay a fee to have a request-for-more-information form published on a promotion-oriented website. Prospective students fill out and submit these online forms that then are forwarded to the respective institution(s) under consideration. A typical form will ask for your contact information, what program you are interested in, and what level of education you have completed. Soon after you submitted this kind of online form, a representative from the institution will contact you by phone or e-mail

⁶⁸ http://chea.org/pdf/accreditation_matters_trifold_4_straight.pdf

⁶⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGGfBNTLSBI>

⁷⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BP3dqwqMWAI>

⁷¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1voHNMQDrk>

⁷² <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

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and provide you with more information about the online program. Usually, the primary goal of the representative is to get you enrolled as soon as possible.

Some of these same pay-per-click and pay-per-lead scenarios are also part of advertising programs offered by the major search engines. In this scenario, an institution will bid on a search term, such as “online education degrees,” which gives them a prominently displayed sponsored link on the search engine’s results page when anybody keys in that particular term. The institution is charged a fee — based on the bid — for every time a visitor clicks on the sponsored link.

Go Directly to the Source

Filling out an online form could be a quick and easy way to obtain more information, but it may be more effective to first go directly to an online program website that has a .edu URL. Carefully read through the information provided on the online program website and then call the admissions office and ask to speak with a counselor. **Ask a lot of questions.** [Here are our 21 questions to ask before enrolling](#) to help you get started.

A Word About Rankings

Finally, during your search, you may run across some websites that claim to rank online programs. It is a good idea to closely scrutinize any such rankings, because they are often not based on any solid data that prove or disprove if one institution is any better than another. While there are reputable ranking services for traditional colleges and universities, such as the popular [US News and World Report](#)⁷³ annual rankings, the ranking business for online programs has not yet come of age.

Bottom line: You’re in exactly the right place to learn all you need to know about the programs that have piqued your interest; the quality data contained on this website are sure to help you make an informed decision on a program that will further your professional goals.

⁷³ <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges>

5. How do I choose the right school & program for me?

The first step to choosing the right school and program for you is to understand your goals are personally and professionally. If you know what industry or career you'd like to pursue, it will be easier to find a program that will help you gain knowledge and skills in that area.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Labor, has two sites which might also help you in determining what industry you'd like to pursue a career in. The first, [BLS Career Information Home Page](#),⁷⁴ is aimed at K-12 students however; it still contains concise, useful information. The other resource is the [Career Guide to Industries](#).⁷⁵ This resource is more broadly aimed and contains a wealth of information on many industries. These may help you set your list of learning goals to match the industry you'd like to pursue.

About.com also has a list of a few [free self-assessment tools](#)⁷⁶ to help you discover your strengths, choose an industry or career that matches those, and set your goals.

Prior to enrolling, it is a good strategy to understand the online curriculum's requirements, teaching and learning methods, and what the programs objectives and proposed outcomes are. Getting a solid idea about the variety of online program course requirements and teaching and learning methods you may encounter, as well as what the program claims you will learn, know and apply once you graduate, is a good strategy to take prior to possibly enrolling.

Every online program has a unique set of courses and teaching and learning strategies for putting you on track to gain the appropriate knowledge and skills for career advancement.

One of the best ways to find out all the information you need to make an informed decision about any program is to simply ask the counselor assigned to you a lot of questions. If you feel that the counselor cannot effectively answer your questions, don't hesitate to ask to be connected to another representative, such as a dean, department chairperson, or faculty member. ***To help you formulate your questions, use our [21 Questions to Ask Before Enrolling](#).***

What to Look At

Here are some areas of interest that may be relevant to your search process as you decide on what program to pursue:

- *Your Course of Study* - Just like in a traditional college or university, every online program has a set of required and elective course offerings that comprise a curriculum

⁷⁴ <http://www.bls.gov/k12/index.htm>

⁷⁵ <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/About/Career-Guide-to-Industries.htm>

⁷⁶ http://careerplanning.about.com/od/careertests/Free_Self_Assessment_Tools_Online.htm

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that is prescribed or outlined by an institution for earning a degree or certificate. Elective courses are those you will have the option of taking in addition to required courses. Some programs offer more or less elective course choices than others. The number of required courses and electives you will have to take depends on the program.

Some specialized master's degree programs outline the entire course of study for you in what's called a lock-step cohort model. This is where a group of students take all the same predefined courses together and in the same sequence. Overall, as you review what courses comprise the curriculum, you should talk to your counselor about which required and elective courses best fit with your career goals.

- *Concentrations and Specializations* - Sometimes the electives you decide to take can become the basis of a concentration or specialization. Usually at the master's level, if you complete on average 12 to 18 credits in a particular subject area, the institution will award you a general degree with a concentration, such as an MBA with a concentration in finance or marketing, an MS in Information Technology with a concentration in network architecture, or an MS in Nursing with a specialization in nursing education. Some online programs offer concentrations or specializations while others do not.
- *Competency-Based Programs* - In some competency-based programs, you may not take any courses. Instead, you will have to pass a number of tests that are required within a program in order to earn a degree or certificate. These types of competency-based programs may provide, or partner with, a number of fully-online or hybrid course offerings that are geared toward helping students gain the necessary knowledge and ability to pass the required tests. Competency-based programs also may include the practice of assigning mentors to students. These mentors provide ad-hoc guidance and advice via telephone, e-mail, or instant messaging in relation to successfully completing a program.
- *Requirements Outside of the Typical Structure of an Online Course Offering* - Some programs may require you to complete additional requirement beyond your regular online course. It's important to understand the general concept of each of these types of ideas but even more important that you discuss the specific requirements with your institutional counselor, mentor or faculty member.
- *Field Experiences*: Certain programs, such as in healthcare, psychology, education, business, and information technology, require you to earn credit through special learning and/or field experiences and projects, referred to as "colloquia," "practicums," "clinicals," or "internships," that are conducted outside of the typical online course structure and require your physical presence.

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- *Student Teaching Experiences:* If you pursue a bachelor’s degree in teacher education, you will have to participate in a live, credit-bearing student teaching experience and/or practicum in order to graduate, as well as to earn a license or certification to teach in your state.
- *Capstones:* Some bachelor’s and master’s programs culminate in a “capstone” course or courses that are taken near the completion of your program of study. Capstones are based on the skills and knowledge you should have gained as you moved through the curriculum. A capstone may be based on a pre-approved project conducted at your place of work or at another business related to your course of study and career. Capstones are completed under the guidance of a field-based mentor and your course instructor. Depending on the program, a capstone may require that you submit a thorough research report as well as present an oral defense. The purpose of any capstone is to ensure that you have gained the requisite skills and knowledge for career advancement in your field.
- *Team-based Residencies:* Some online MBA programs have residency requirements that include putting students into teams to conduct an in-depth study of a specific business or on a business-related issue (such as globalization). This type of learning experience could entail interviewing key executives and seeing first-hand, or through electronic simulations, how a business operates. The team might put together a paper based on its interviews and observations, combined with research in the field and an analysis of marketing strategies, operational plans, organizational strategies, and more. The team presents its findings at a later date, either online or in-person, to all of the students and faculty who participated in the residency.
- *Certifications and Credentials:* Many programs may include a partial emphasis on preparing students to obtain specific certifications or credentials that are widely known and respected within their field of study. For example, an online master’s degree in information technology management could prepare you for a [Project Management Professional \(PMP\)](#)⁷⁷ credential. Or an online master’s degree in nursing management could prepare you for the [American Nurses Credentialing Center’s \(ANCC\) Nurse Executive Certificate](#).⁷⁸ Check with your counselor about any certifications or credentials you may be interested in earning as part of your course of study.
- *Case Study Method:* Particularly in business, management, and leadership-related courses, you may be required to participate in a case study learning experience. A case study is based on a nonfictional story outlining how a business or industry dealt with a specific challenge(s) or how it rose to prominence or fell to failure. In a typical case study exercise, you will review the nonfictional story, which could include some

⁷⁷ <http://www.pmi.org/en/Certification/Project-Management-Professional-PMP.aspx>

⁷⁸ <http://www.nursecredentialing.org/>

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additional electronic simulations of a business practice, and be asked a series of questions by your instructor inside the course discussion board. You'll be asked what you would do in a similar situation and be given a variety of decisions to choose from and defend. Based on your response, you may be put into a team of like-minded students who must then defend their position through presentations and interactions with fellow students. The idea is to put you in a true-to-life experience that ultimately will enhance your skills and ability to lead.

A Word on Math Courses

If you are thinking about enrolling in a program that emphasizes management and leadership practices or the sciences and engineering, you may want to know what kind of math-oriented courses you will be required to take. Math-oriented courses, which are called “quantitative” courses by academics, basically deal with numbers, factual statistics, and data. To succeed in these courses, you'll need a strong set of math skills, ranging from algebra through calculus; know how to work with spreadsheet software; and perhaps have a good understanding of statistics, accounting, and/or finance. Make sure you are prepared to take these kinds of courses before you actually enroll in one. Ask your counselor what kind of skill set you will need if you will be enrolled in quantitative courses. Typically the program will offer some kind of remedial courses or tutoring in these areas to help you if needed.

Online Faculty

Understanding the faculty at any institution is another factor you may want to consider when choosing an online program. Information about the professionals who are teaching online courses is not always prominently displayed on many websites. However, that does not mean that you cannot obtain this kind of information from counselors or the administrators who manage the program you are thinking about pursuing. Don't hesitate to ask questions about the faculty.

As you discuss how the final learning outcomes of any online course or program will benefit you, bear in mind that the end result of your studies should be no different than if you were to enroll in a traditional on-campus course or program. Make sure you feel comfortable knowing that the quality of any online program you are considering is equal to or greater than any traditional on-campus education experience.

And don't forget, it is up to you to take an active role in your education — online or otherwise — in order to get all the benefits an institution has to offer. Education is a two-way street; you must bring your own knowledge and experience to class to share with your instructor and classmates so that everyone can benefit from and build on that perspective.

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6. What do I need to know about admissions and funding?

How Do I Apply? And Will I Get Admitted?

You have numerous opportunities to pursue an online education, regardless of your age or your academic history. Getting admitted into any institution will depend on what level of higher education and the specific program you are thinking about pursuing. But rest assured that anyone can get started at just about any time, depending on an institution's course offerings and schedule.

What's Required to Get In?

In general, admission requirements cover a wide range, including showing proof of:

- being at least 18 years of age for open admissions and open enrollment at a community college that offers online courses in subjects that have no pre-requisites;
- graduation from of an accredited high school or a passing grade on a [General Education Development \(GED\)](#)⁷⁹ test for admittance into an associate's degree program or as a first-year student in some bachelor's degree programs;
- an associate's degree or specified number of general education credits, depending on the program's requirements, for admittance into a specific bachelor's degree program;
- a bachelor's degree and, in some but not all cases, a special test score, such as the [GRE](#)⁸⁰ or [GMAT](#),⁸¹ along with a number of other requirements, including submitting letters of reference and essays, for admittance into a master's degree program; and
- a master's degree and a variety of other special requirements for admittance into a doctoral program.

Important Considerations in Starting the Admissions Process

Getting Started:

Simply contact the institution and ask to be connected to a counselor who will walk you through the application process. He or she typically will direct you to fill out an online application form. But don't hesitate to call: Communications both online and over the telephone with a counselor(s) during an application process will help give you the best picture of what kind of degree plan will fit your needs.

⁷⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Educational_Development

⁸⁰ <http://www.ets.org/gre/>

⁸¹ <http://www.mba.com/the-gmat>

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Special Considerations:

If you have no idea about how to obtain your high school or college transcripts, an admissions counselor will help you. In most cases, all you will have to do is give the admissions counselor the name of the school and the year you graduated, and they will either obtain your transcripts for you or give you a form to fill out that you will either mail or fax to the appropriate school or higher education institution. But be aware: Some schools or higher education institutions may charge a fee to process your transcripts; should that be the case, ask your previous school if it is advantageous to get as many copies as you think you may need at one time to lower your processing costs.

- Be aware of application fees; they can range from \$30 to \$75 each.
- Some institutions offer new courses that you can apply to and register for on a weekly basis throughout the year, called “rolling” admissions; others have accelerated five- to eight-week course cycles; and others have traditional semesters (Spring, Winter, Fall, 13-week trimesters and a shorter five to six-week Summer semester) or quarterly cycles (11-week).
- Have common application materials handy as you fill out any application forms, including an understanding of how to access and submit high school or college transcripts; score reports (CLEP, DANTES, etc.); corporate training and military records, including any certificates or licenses earned; and financial records, including tax returns (for financial aid purposes). International students customarily will need to obtain a credential evaluation of their high school transcript or any higher education credit earned and English proficiency score reports, such as TOEFL.
- Some online programs have a minimum age requirement.
- Some online programs have a minimum full-time work experience requirement.

How Much Will It Cost? Can I Get Assistance?

While tuition and fees for online programs can vary to a wide degree according to institutional policies and degree level pursued, online learners can take advantage of financial aid programs just like any other college student.

Some online programs have in-state and out-of-state tuition fees and others do not. A variety of supplemental fees may apply for additional services and materials depending on the program. Your best bet is simply to talk to a counselor about tuition and fees. Every institution offering online programs also has extensive information about financial aid easily accessible online, making the process as easy as possible for you.

That said, there is one universal starting point: FAFSA. Be sure to read this crucial advice before continuing!

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Start with the FAFSA

In order to apply for federal financial aid, regardless of your age, you must fill out the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#).⁸² This is the starting point in the financial aid process. Your completed FAFSA includes income, asset and tax information that is used for considering your eligibility for a Pell Grant and/or government-backed subsidized and unsubsidized loans.

Completing this form online as early as possible is the most expedient method for obtaining two very important elements that form the basis of your financial aid grant and/or loan possibilities: an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) and a Student Aid Report (SAR).

Prior to filling out the FAFSA, you need to hop online and get a [Personal Identification Number \(PIN\)](#)⁸³ that becomes your electronic signature. Your PIN is required for access to return to your online FAFSA to review the status of your application.

Your EFC is the amount the institution will expect you to pay, and it is determined based on an analysis of your income and assets.

Your SAR is a precise look at the information you provided on your FAFSA that includes the final calculation of your EFC, letting you know if, in fact, you qualify for a Pell Grant. The SAR also has a section where you are given the opportunity to correct any errors you may have made on your FAFSA.

Financial Aid Categories

Most regionally- and nationally-accredited institutions offer financial aid under the following categories:

- Federal Financial Aid, which includes [Pell Grants](#),⁸⁴ [Perkins Loans](#),⁸⁵ [Stafford Loans](#),⁸⁶ and [Direct PLUS loans](#)⁸⁷
- [Private Loan Programs](#)⁸⁸
- [State Financial Aid](#)⁸⁹
- Scholarship Programs - In recent years, institutions have increased the number of internally funded scholarships being made available to online learners. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of private scholarships available to online learners

⁸² <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>

⁸³ <http://www.pin.ed.gov/PINWebApp/pinindex.jsp>

⁸⁴ <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html>

⁸⁵ <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpl/index.html>

⁸⁶ <http://studentaid.ed.gov/types/loans/subsidized-unsubsidized>

⁸⁷ <http://studentaid.ed.gov/types/loans/plus>

⁸⁸ <http://www.finaid.org/loans/privatestudentloans.phtml>

⁸⁹ <http://www2.ed.gov/students/college/aid/other.html>

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from corporations, associations, and non-profit foundations. Some scholarships are based on financial need, while others are based on academic performance. Be sure to ask your financial aid counselor if anything is available, or check out [Scholarship Help](#).⁹⁰

A Note of Caution: Be wary and fully explore any organization which charges you a fee and guarantees you a scholarship in return. This may be a scam.

- [Veteran Affairs Educational Benefits](#)⁹¹

All institutions offer some kind of payment plan in which you can segment out your tuition payment schedule to better meet your budget.

In addition to the aforementioned financial aid scenarios, your employer may help finance your education if it has an education reimbursement program.

As more employers come to realize that online learning has enormous benefits for adult learners, tuition reimbursement packages for online programs have become more commonplace. Nonetheless, the economy and your company's overall financial health will always be factors in whether or not your employer will help foot the bill for your education. If your employer will pay for you to attend college, be sure you fully understand the requirements. For instance, some employers will only reimburse you after you have successfully completed the course with a set level of achievement (a "C" for instance). While some employers may have you sign a contract stating you will remain with the company for a certain time period after completing your education. Be sure that you are comfortable with all requirements, especially with the ability to grow with the organization after graduation. Should your employer need some convincing, it will not hurt to show your boss or human resources department how an online education will add value to the company. Most institutions gladly will help you put together an informational for this kind of presentation, if needed.

⁹⁰ <http://www.scholarshiphelp.org/>

⁹¹ <http://www.gibill.va.gov/>

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7. Frequently Asked Questions

- Q. What, exactly, is online learning?
- Q. How long do such programs take to complete?
- Q. What kind of computer/tech skills will I need?
- Q. What kind of computer hardware/software will I need?
- Q. It's been years since I wrote a paper/took a math class/studied for an exam. What if I've forgotten a lot of what I learned?
- Q. How do I know if the institutions I'm considering are well respected?
- Q. What should I look for in terms of an institution's faculty?
- Q. Will I get admitted?
- Q. What financial assistance is available to me?

Q. What, exactly, is online learning?

A. Online learning programs includes those which are fully online, a combination of online and on-campus, competency-based, or self-paced and independent. Some programs are offered “at a distance,” which may not be online at all.

Fully online, combination online/on-campus, and competency-based programs are by far the most prevalent, all being term-based programs in which students are required to complete courses or demonstrate knowledge and abilities within an institution's specific time frame. Here's a [primer](#) on the kinds of programs you may encounter.

Q. How long do such programs take to complete?

A. That depends on the structure and organization of the program under consideration; any transfer of prior credit earned or application of prior work-related experience, training, and/or knowledge; whether you can test out of certain courses; and your skills, prior knowledge, and how many courses you can effectively fit into your schedule. More information can be found in ["What, exactly, does online learning entail?"](#)

Q. What kind of computer/tech skills will I need?

A. You must know how to work efficiently on a computer and navigate around online and offline electronic environments. Computer- and Internet-related proficiencies that will come in handy as an online student include knowing how to:

- copy, paste, delete, and save files;
- download and install software;
- keep your computer in good working order, including proper maintenance and backup procedures;

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- use word processing software (Microsoft Word, Google Docs, etc.), presentation software (Microsoft PowerPoint, Keynote, Prezi, etc.), and spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel, Google Docs Spreadsheets, etc.), depending on the program enrolled in;
- create PDF documents;
- attach documents to e-mail communications;
- be information literate, in short, the ability to search effectively online, including analyzing resources and the utilization of an online library service
- manage and organize computer files and folders;
- effectively use a web browser and its favorites folder;
- participate in synchronous and/or asynchronous discussion forums; and
- navigate within an online course management system where many of the elements of your course will be displayed.

Most online programs provide students with online orientation sessions that are facsimiles of an actual online course. Many programs will require that you enroll in an online orientation session prior to taking your first full course. Sometimes these courses will award students with one credit upon successful completion. You also typically can find free demonstrations of actual online courses, open to the general public, at many of the online programs' websites.

Q. What kind of computer hardware/software will I need?

A. A typical required hardware and software scenario might look like this:

- Hardware:
 - Either a PC or a Macintosh computer running the most- or second-most-recent operating system
 - Decent amount of hard drive space, starting at a minimum of 10 GB
 - DVD-Rom or CD-ROM
 - Sound card with speakers and microphone
 - Video card
 - Minimum of 256 MB of RAM; it is strongly suggested to have at least 512 MB or more if possible
 - Backup storage device
 - Printer
 - Fax and scanner (access to one via a local business center will suffice)
- Software:
 - Current operating system for your computer
 - Free Plug-ins, including Windows Media Player, Adobe Acrobat Reader, Flash Player, and Java
 - Antivirus software
 - Internet security software
 - Compression utility software

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- Internet/E-mail:
 - Preferably a broadband cable or DSL Internet connection, but a 56K dial-up connection will often be noted as the minimum requirement for Internet access
 - An e-mail account (free via gmail.com, yahoo.com, live.com, etc.)

Q. It's been years since I wrote a paper/took a math class/studied for an exam. What if I've forgotten a lot of what I learned?

A. You'll be in good company. Many adults who return to school get jitters about having what it takes. Don't worry if your skills are rusty. Most programs have freely available online tutorial services that will jog your memory. ["What does it take to succeed in an online learning environment?"](#) will help you understand the skills necessary to excel.

Q. How do I know if the institutions I'm considering are well respected?

A. Knowing the accreditation status of any institution and program you're considering is a crucial part of your decision-making process. Accreditation is a process whereby educational institutions or specific programs are endorsed by an association as viable teaching and learning establishments based on a set of rigorous educational standards. There are three types of accreditation that you need to be aware of: [regional](#), [national](#), and [programmatic](#).

You can also visit the [National Center for Education Statistics College Navigator](#)⁹² website, type in the institution's name in the "Name of School" box, click on "Show Results," and then navigate to the "Accreditation" tab, where both institutional and programmatic/specialized accreditation status are listed for almost every higher education institution in the United States.

Q. What should I look for in terms of an institution's faculty?

A. Ask for documentation, such as biographic information or a curriculum vita (academic resume), about who will be teaching some of the courses in the program you are thinking about pursuing. See if you can communicate with any of the faculty members prior to enrolling. Ask what percentage of faculty is part-time or adjunct, what percentage is full-time, and how many have doctoral degrees. See if there are any faculty members in your program who are conducting specialized research (and are thus contributing knowledge to the field), then check out what they've published. Basically you're looking to find out [who's teaching](#) and how will their knowledge/skills contribute to your goals?

⁹² <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

Q. Will I get admitted?

A. You have numerous opportunities to pursue an online education, regardless of your age or your academic history. Getting admitted into any institution will depend on what level of higher education and the specific program you are thinking about pursuing.

Q. What financial assistance is available to me?

A. While tuition and fees for online programs can vary to a wide degree according to institutional policies and degree level pursued; online learners can take advantage of financial aid programs just like any other college student.

Some online programs have in-state and out-of-state tuition fees and others do not. A variety of supplemental fees may apply for additional services and materials depending on the program. Your best bet is simply to talk to a counselor about tuition and fees. Every institution offering online programs also has extensive information about financial aid easily accessible online, making the process as easy as possible for you.

Our ["What do I need to know about admissions and funding?"](#) section provides you with more information on financial aid options and how to apply for aid.

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8. External Resources

Other Consumer-information & Accountability Efforts:

With our focus on adult students, this site may not provide all the information you were looking for. If you're a traditional aged student or are looking for more information on elements of college life such as campus activities, residence halls and the like, you may want to check out one of the other information and accountability efforts listed here:

The [College Portrait](http://www.collegeportraits.org/)⁹³ is a straightforward presentation of comparable information directly from public universities. It helps prospective students make careful and informed decisions about which institution is the “best fit” for them. Sponsored by the [Association of Public and Land-grant Universities](http://www.aplu.org/)⁹⁴ and the [American Association of State Colleges and Universities](http://www.aascu.org),⁹⁵ each university’s College Portrait includes information on admissions, campus life, student characteristics, degree programs, campus safety, graduation rates and more.

The [NAICU](http://www.naicu.edu/) (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities)⁹⁶ consumer-information initiative [U-CAN \(University & College Accountability Network\)](http://www.ucan-network.org/)⁹⁷ is designed to give, in a common format, prospective students and their families concise, Web-based consumer-friendly information on the nation's nonprofit, private colleges and universities.

Popular News Media:

- [US News & World Report - Education Section](http://www.usnews.com/education)⁹⁸
- [New York Times - Education Section](http://www.nytimes.com/pages/education/index.html)⁹⁹
- [USA Today - Education Section](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/)¹⁰⁰
- [USA Today - Degrees of Difficulty Special Section](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/degrees-of-difficulty.htm)¹⁰¹
- [Huffington Post - College Section](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/college/)¹⁰²
- [Wired Magazine](http://www.wired.com/)¹⁰³

⁹³ <http://www.collegeportraits.org/>

⁹⁴ <http://www.aplu.org/>

⁹⁵ www.aascu.org

⁹⁶ <http://www.naicu.edu/>

⁹⁷ <http://www.ucan-network.org/>

⁹⁸ <http://www.usnews.com/education>

⁹⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/education/index.html>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/>

¹⁰¹ <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/degrees-of-difficulty.htm>

¹⁰² <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/college/>

¹⁰³ <http://www.wired.com/>

APPENDICIES

Appendix A

The Skills, Habits, and Qualities of an Online Learner Definitions

- *Soft Skills* - First and foremost, you must be self-directed, disciplined, and organized, which simply means that you have to maintain your motivation and commitment throughout the online learning experience. Without a specific physical classroom meeting time to talk with a faculty member or place to meet with fellow students on a regular basis, there is, perhaps, a stronger need than in the traditional education environment for you to devise and stick to a plan to meet all of the academic requirements in any given course. [\[Return to reading\]](#)
- *Writing Skills* - If it has been a while since you enrolled in a higher education course or are a first-time student, you will need to brush up on your writing skills. In addition to basic writing skills, you will need to understand how to quote and cite sources of information for course-assigned academic papers or essays. You also will have to understand how to avoid plagiarism. Some programs will require that you follow the guidelines of a particular writing and citation style, such as the [Chicago Manual of Style](#);¹ the [American Psychological Association \(APA\) style](#);² [Modern Language Association Style](#);³ or, in journalism programs, the [Associated Press \(AP\) style](#).⁴ [\[Return to reading\]](#)

Don't worry if your academic writing skills are rusty; this is not uncommon for adult students who have not been in an academic environment for a while. Most programs have freely-available online writing labs and other writing-related tutorial services that will walk you through the ins and outs of academic writing and how to avoid the possibility of plagiarism. A great online resource for all things related to college-level writing is the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#).⁵ [\[Return to reading\]](#)

- *Communication Skills* - Good communication skills are vitally important in the online learning environment. Your ability to communicate effectively online will have a strong impact on what you will ultimately get out of your educational experience. When contributing to an online course discussion, practice good netiquette ([Wikipedia definition](#)⁶) and give yourself enough time to post an intelligent, meaningful, clear, and concise statements rather than something that is hastily typed-up just to be recognized as a participant.

¹ <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

² <http://www.apastyle.org/>

³ <http://www.mla.org/style>

⁴ <http://www.apstylebook.com/>

⁵ <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netiquette#Netiquette>

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If you are required to participate in a video chat, virtual meeting or other course meeting where you will be conversing orally with faculty and peers, remember to be professional. [Inc. Magazine](#),⁷ a leading business publication, maintains on its website a [Guide to Better Communication with Employees and Peers](#),⁸ It has topics ranging from "[Communicating when people leave you speechless](#)"⁹ to "[Are you Aggressive or Assertive?](#)"¹⁰ and "[Talk Targets: Becoming a Magnet](#)."¹¹ Although some of the articles are a tad dated, they still contain good basic rules to follow when communicating during your program of study. [\[Return to reading\]](#)

- **Time Management - You'll need to be a time bandit.** The amount of time required for pursuing your online education will challenge you to consistently maintain a steady balance between your job, course work, personal responsibilities, and social life. Since most online learners are busy adults, you'll find that most programs have online discussion forums, outside of course work, where fellow students provide each other with moral support and shared advice about these kinds of issues. Another key ability of any successful online learner is not falling behind on coursework at any time. Playing catch-up is problematic, especially in the online learning environment.

Ready to test your time management skills? Check out the free tool by the folks at [MindTools](#)¹². When taking the assessment and analyzing your results, think about how these skills will apply to your course work.

Here's a little inspiration by way of [Randy Pausch](#),¹³ a computer science and computer-human interaction professor at [Carnegie Mellon University](#),¹⁴ who, while fighting pancreatic cancer, truly gave his [last lecture](#),¹⁵ which inspired many. [Here](#)¹⁶ is a segment on time management and the document, "[Managing Your Time: Words and Advice from Randy Pauch's Last Lecture](#),"¹⁷ created based on Dr. Pausch's lecture and book. [\[Return to reading\]](#)

- **Teamwork** - Depending on the structure of the online course, you may be required to work with your fellow classmates on special course projects, communicating with each other both synchronously (in real time) and asynchronously (not in real time). [\[Return to reading\]](#)

⁷ <http://www.inc.com/>

⁸ <http://www.inc.com/guides/growth/23032.html>

⁹ <http://www.inc.com/articles/2000/04/18618.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.inc.com/articles/2000/04/18619.html>

¹¹ <http://www.inc.com/articles/2001/04/22457.html>

¹² http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_88.htm

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy_Pausch

¹⁴ www.cmu.edu/index.shtml

¹⁵ <http://www.cmu.edu/randyslecture/index.shtml>

¹⁶ <http://youtu.be/dsnDPoDW5O8>

¹⁷ http://www.cmu.edu/acadev/fastfact/pauschff_web.pdf

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- *Technical Skills* - You must know how to work efficiently on a computer and navigate around online and offline electronic environments. Computer- and Internet-related proficiencies that will come in handy as an online student include knowing how to:
 - copy, paste, delete, and save files;
 - download and install software;
 - keep your computer in good working order, including proper maintenance and backup procedures;
 - use word processing software ([Microsoft Word](#),¹⁸ [Google Docs](#),¹⁹ etc.), presentation software ([Microsoft PowerPoint](#),²⁰ [Keynote](#),²¹ [Prezi](#),²² etc.), and spreadsheet software ([Microsoft Excel](#),²³ [Google Docs Spreadsheets](#),²⁴ etc.), depending on the program enrolled in;
 - [create PDF documents](#);²⁵
 - attach documents to e-mail communications;
 - be information literate (see below) — in short, the ability to search effectively online, including analyzing resources and the utilization of an online library service;
 - manage and organize computer files and folders;
 - effectively use a web browser and its favorites folder;
 - participate in synchronous and/or asynchronous discussion forums; and
 - navigate within an online course management system where many of the elements of your course will be displayed.

Most online programs provide students with online orientation sessions that are facsimiles of an actual online course. Many programs will require that you enroll in an online orientation session prior to taking your first full course. Sometimes these courses will award students with one credit upon successful completion. You also typically can find free demonstrations of actual online courses, open to the general public, at many of the online programs' websites. [\[Return to reading\]](#)

- *Course Technologies* - Like any higher education course, there will more than likely be a good amount of [reading](#) and [writing](#) required of you. Depending on the technology being utilized, you can expect some viewing and listening to digitized audio and video presentations and PowerPoint slide shows. The utilization of modern, “Web 2.0”

¹⁸ <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/word/microsoft-word-2010-FX101825658.aspx>

¹⁹ <https://docs.google.com>

²⁰ <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/powerpoint/>

²¹ <http://www.apple.com/iwork/keynote/>

²² <http://prezi.com/>

²³ <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/excel/>

²⁴ <http://docs.google.com>

²⁵ <http://www.adobe.com/pdf/>

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educational technologies (podcasting, [social media](#), [blogging](#), etc.) may also come into play. Other elements of an online course could include taking [online quizzes and exams](#), participating in [live chat sessions and teleconferences](#), the use of a whiteboard in a live teleconference (it acts similarly to a chalkboard in a traditional classroom), and viewing sophisticated digitized [simulations](#) related to course subject matter. [\[Return to reading\]](#)

- *Being Information Literate* - According to the [Association of College and Research Libraries](#) (ACRL),²⁶ a division of the [American Library Association](#) (ALA),²⁷ being information literate means having a “set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information.” In today’s Digital Information Age, where “Googling” has become commonplace, the notion of being information literate has grown in importance. ACRL, for instance, points to author [David Shenk’s](#)²⁸ ideas about “[data smog](#),”²⁹ where “too much information can create a barrier in our lives. This data smog is produced by the amount of information, the speed at which it comes to us from all directions, the need to make fast decisions, and the feeling of anxiety that we are making decisions without having ALL the information that is available or that we need.” In short, students who become information literate learn how to deal with all the data smog that is too readily and easily accessible through search engines.

The University of Idaho offers another great [resource](#)³⁰ to help you understand information literacy and gauge your level of information literacy.

[Wired Magazine](#),³¹ a popular magazine focused on science, technology, entertainment and culture, also featured an article on information literacy that may interest you - [Clive Thompson on New Literacy](#).³²

The team at [Project Information Literacy](#)³³ has also created some [great videos](#)³⁴ about information literacy and the college experience today. These are ongoing studies and new videos are added periodically. And while they tend to focus on a more 'traditional' student population they still have good information for everyone. [\[Return to reading\]](#)

- *Library Services* - The library services an institution offers to online students is another important consideration. Some questions to ask include: Does the online library have an easily accessible and relevant collection of scholarly journals and other online materials, such as newspapers, magazines and other publications and databases, that are relevant

²⁶ <http://www.ala.org/acrl/>

²⁷ <http://www.ala.org/>

²⁸ <http://www.davidshenk.com/>

²⁹ http://davidshenk.com/books_data.html

³⁰ http://www.webs.uidaho.edu/info_literacy/

³¹ <http://www.wired.com/>

³² http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-09/st_thompson

³³ <http://projectinfolit.org/>

³⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/user/ProjInfoLit>

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to your course of study? Does the program have a dedicated librarian(s) who helps online learners effectively use all of the online library services available to them? Does the institution provide an online tutorial or course on how to develop your information literacy skills and habits? [\[Return to reading\]](#)

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APPENDIX B

FINDING CONTEXT:

What Today's College Students Say about Conducting Research in the Digital Age



BY ALISON J. HEAD, PH.D. AND MICHAEL B. EISENBERG, PH.D.

PROJECT INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRESS REPORT

FEBRUARY 4, 2009

THE INFORMATION SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

RESEARCH SPONSORED BY A GIFT FROM PROQUEST

Abstract: A report of preliminary findings and analysis from student discussion groups held on 7 U.S. campuses in Fall 2008, as part of Project Information Literacy. Qualitative data from discussions with higher education students across the country suggest that conducting research is particularly challenging. Students' greatest challenges are related to their perceived inability to find desired materials. Students seek "contexts" as part of the research process. A preliminary typology of the research contexts is developed and introduced. Finding contexts for "backgrounding" topics and for figuring out how to traverse complex information landscapes may be the most difficult part of the research process. Our findings also suggest that students create effective methods for conducting research by using traditional methods, such as libraries, and self-taught, creative workarounds, such as "presearch" and Wikipedia, in different ways.

Introduction

What is it like to be a college student in the digital age?

In a world teeming with information technology and overflowing with access to data, how do students find the information they need? How do students conduct research for course-related assignments? How do they conduct research for use in their everyday lives? What frustrations and obstacles do they encounter? What strategies have students developed to meet their information needs?

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a national research study based in the University of Washington's Information School. We seek to answer these questions by studying how college students function in the digital age—their tasks, their situations, their solutions, and their systems.^{1,2}

We want to learn how these “early adults” resolve issues of credibility, authority, relevance, and currency of resources used for course-related research and for what we call “everyday life research.” At the same time, we ask what insights can be gleaned from studying students, through the lens of their own experiences, for improving the transfer, teaching, learning, and measurement of information literacy competencies.

During the fall semester of 2008, we conducted 11 discussion groups on 7 college and university campuses across the United States. We talked with 86 full-time students studying the humanities and social sciences and enrolled in private colleges and universities, public colleges and universities, and community colleges.³ In our discussion groups we heard first-hand accounts about what conducting research means, what the stages of research entail, and what techniques, strategies, and solutions students apply throughout the process.

So far, we have found that no matter where students are enrolled, no matter what information resources they may have at their disposal, and no matter how much time they have, the abundance of information technology and the proliferation of digital information resources make conducting research uniquely paradoxical: **Research seems to be far more difficult to conduct in the digital age than it did in previous times.**

In this progress report we share some of the perceptions that led to this conclusion and several of the trends in problem-solving strategies that have emerged. The findings and analysis presented here should not be viewed as complete, but rather as part of our ongoing research that will be explored further and tested more rigorously.

¹ The research for Year One of Project Information Literacy (PIL) is sponsored by a generous gift from ProQuest to the University of Washington's Information School for the further study of information literacy.

² PIL is co-directed by Dr. Alison J. Head, Affiliate Assistant Professor in the iSchool and Michael B. Eisenberg, Dean Emeritus and Professor in the iSchool. For an overview of the findings, see a short video (4:06 minutes) produced by the PIL Team at <http://tinyurl.com/3fubgk> and the PIL Web Site at <http://projectinfolit.org>. Communication about this progress report should be sent to Dr. Alison Head at ajhead1@u.washington.edu or Dr. Michael Eisenberg at mbe@u.washington.edu.

³ We held 90-minute student discussion sessions with sophomores, juniors, and seniors at Harvard University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Mills College, University of Washington, and with students, who had completed at least one semester, at three community colleges, including Diablo Valley College (CA), West Valley College (CA), and Shoreline Community College (WA), during October, November, and December 2008. For more about our methods and sampling procedures, see the Appendix of this report.

The Activity of Research

We define course-related research as those activities that commence upon receiving an assignment and continue through collecting research resources until the writing of the final paper. In our sessions, we found the signature course-related research assignment for the humanities and social sciences is the 5- to 7-page argument paper. Students are usually free to choose a topic as long as it is related to the course curriculum and has “evidence,” culled from scholarly or other reputable sources that back up a position, an opinion, or an argument.

Student paper topics widely varied. Among the topics students researched and wrote about were the Algerian War, Macs vs. PCs, Puerto Ricans’ immigration to Philadelphia, Post-Soviet economics, disability rights activism, theories of intersectionality, *Jane Eyre* and feminism, multiple intelligence theories, animal-assisted psychotherapies, and alternative Indian religions.

Another type of research students frequently conduct we call “everyday life research.” We define everyday life research as the ongoing information seeking strategies for solving problems that may arise in daily life (e.g., health and wellness, finance and commerce, news, politics, and/or policy).

Most topics of everyday life research discussed by students in the sessions dealt with five themes: (1) Health and wellness (e.g., Lyme disease from a recent tick bite, a relative just diagnosed with cancer); (2) news (e.g., checking a hometown paper online, finding out how to cast an absentee ballot, following the Obama-McCain race); (3) domestic (e.g., finding out about which neighborhood to move to next summer, how to get trash collection for my group house, figure out why my computer is “freaking out”); (4) career (e.g., are jobs available with this major, what salary do people in this profession earn); and (5) spiritual (e.g., finding out about a religious group and what values it holds).

We found that everyday life research is different from course-related research in four significant ways:

1. Everyday life research was defined as personal and having no deadline set by someone else, unlike course-related research. The most frequently reported first step for everyday life research was Google. Next, students used a blog with which they were already familiar, or Wikipedia. Academic libraries, professors, and course texts were not used as sources in any of the examples we heard.
2. Everyday life research was often an open-ended search for information. Students reported that searches for everyday life information could last for days, and were driven by curiosity, as students clicked on Google results or Wikipedia citations and unfolded layers of information.
3. Personal curiosity was more easily satisfied in searches for everyday life research, even if participants turned up answers that were admittedly not as conclusive and accurate as they might have been. Clearly, course-related research did not afford participants the same luxury. Readers and graders of research papers were not so easily satisfied and the cost of error demanded more rigor and accountability from students.
4. Participants in our sessions reported almost twice as many frustrations, overall, with conducting course-related research than with everyday life research, though the nature or type of participants’ frustrations had underlying similarities. Nine out of 15 (60%) of the frustrations students reported for course-related research had to do with an inability with finding the desired materials. Similarly, 5 out of 8 (63%) of the frustrations participants reported involved locating research materials.

Frustrations and Challenges

Our data suggest that conducting research, whether for course assignments or everyday life problems, comes with its own set of challenges that are usually exacerbated in digital environments. Challenges are often deep-seated frustrations tied to finding resources students know exist, somehow, somewhere, but are unable to access. (See Figure 1, “What Frustrates Students When They Conduct Research?”)

FIGURE 1: What Frustrates Students When They Conduct Research?

Course-Related Research	Everyday Life Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information overload (e.g., the more you know, the less you know, it's depressing). • Too much irrelevant information, can't locate what is needed from online results. • Beginning and getting started on an assignment. • Trying to find the “perfect source.” • Not knowing what to look for, yet still sifting through articles that might fit. • Trouble finding books needed on library shelves. • Can find the citation online, but cannot find the full-text article in a database. • Scholarly databases or library books are out-of-date. • Finding statistical information online. • Having to change and refine how to write a research paper from class to class. • Not having access to same materials as professors (e.g., rare documents). • Having to buy a source unavailable on campus • Trying to find the .05% of things of interest not on Web. • Feeling that nothing new is being said and feels like the same information again and again. • Conducting research to meet another's expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too many results from a Google search and the need to sort through them. • Knowing the “answer” is online, but not being able to find it. • Figuring out what is a credible source, and what is not. • Figuring out if something is up to date. • Knowing that everything is not online, especially when searching the Web. • Never can find enough information on the obscure topic being searched. • Once a great source is found online, how is it found again when it is needed? • Don't have a computer at home, so online searches for information involves some travel.

List runs from most to least frequently mentioned frustrations by students, n = 86

The Need for Context

For many students conducting research may feel a lot like being an inexperienced sailor heading directly into an oncoming wind, sails wildly flapping, and not being able to maneuver and get to a desired destination.

But why is this so? What did we find from students through the retelling of their experiences that helps to more deeply explain why the research process is so complicated for undergraduates?

In a word, “context.”

Context, as we came to understand it in the sessions, is a key to understanding how students operationalize and prioritize their course-related and everyday life research activities. In our discussions, students consistently referred to “finding context,” in one form or another, as the most laborious, yet requisite, part of the research process.

In particular we found that:

1. Students usually needed to obtain several different kinds of context for course-related research.
2. Students seek different kinds of context with varying degrees of efforts or engagement, depending on whether the research was academic or everyday life research and what interest the topic held for them.
3. Students have developed strategies, techniques, and workarounds through trial and error and designed their own methods that sometimes, but not always, help them find context.

A Typology of Contexts

As an outgrowth of the sessions across campuses, we have come up with a preliminary typology that represents research contexts, which students need at various times, and in varying degrees.

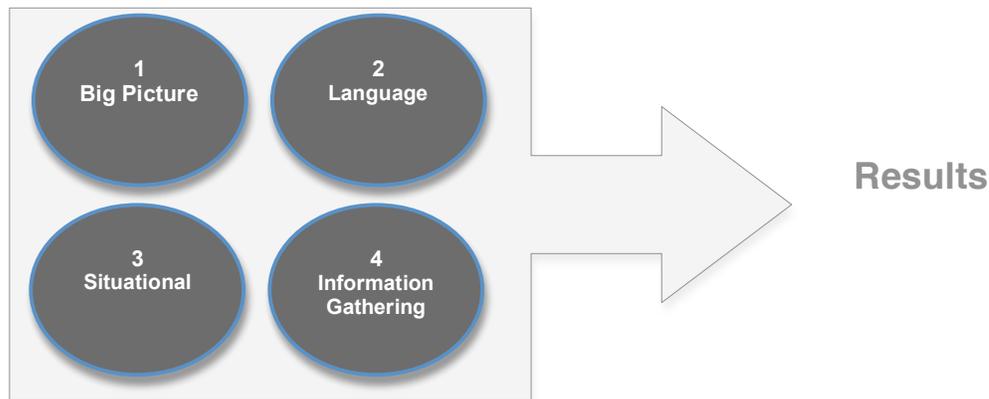
Our typology is meant to provide: (1) a deeper understanding of the difficulties of the research process for early adults, as viewed through the lens of the student experience; and (2) a backdrop for our discussion of what we have learned so far about how students develop strategies for succeeding. We intend to refine and modify our typology with more data, as our research activities continue.

We have identified four types of context that students reported they tried to obtain during the research process. In order to undertake research, students may seek (to varying degrees) the following contexts:

- 1. Big picture**
- 2. Language**
- 3. Situational**
- 4. Information Gathering**

Figure 2 presents a graphical representation of the contextual foundations students require. Students require a need for each context in different degrees of intensity, depending on whether students are conducting course-related or everyday life research and their level of engagement, given the research task.

FIGURE 2: A Preliminary Model of the Undergraduate Research Process



Each category of contextual foundation is discussed in detail.

1. Big picture context involves selecting and defining a topic, understanding multiple sides of an argument, figuring out how the topic might best fit into the course curriculum—all exercises in critical thinking, a significant learning outcome of the higher education experience.

In our sessions, participants working on course-related research reported a much stronger need for big picture context than they did for everyday life research. Even though students had the freedom to write on topics of their own choosing, the ability to choose a topic, itself, could be daunting. Many students reported that they often had little or no idea how to choose, define, and limit the scope of a topic.

One student related the following account:

"In my philosophy class there was a research paper about Socrates and his whole ideals and the professor asked us to write something that we can relate to present-day history and what would happen back in Socrates' time. Most of the students in my class were international students and I don't know if they go over that in their native countries, like old Roman history, so it was hard in that aspect, a lot of people just didn't understand what we were supposed to write about, and Socrates really wasn't covered in class too much. It was too broad of a research assignment to the point of where if I picked anything, sure, I could write about it, but I wouldn't know if that was the right thing to write about, or the wrong thing, I just didn't know where to begin."

For students in our sessions, like this one, an early step in the research process was synthesizing and delineating a topic, and figuring out how it might best fit into the course curriculum. In their own words, students in our sessions described their need for a big picture context in terms of "thinking about a topic in a different way," and "narrowing down a topic area that can seem too broad," and "finding the common knowledge about a topic area, that is going to reoccur over and over again."

Only then, students said, could they get some traction with an assignment, expand their knowledge of it, and search for other resources, usually scholarly ones, as needed. One student summed up his need for background context, by saying "The longest part of research is getting to the question to ask."

The Waiting Game

In our sessions, some students said they delayed starting their search for sources until after they had taken a week or so, to think through an assignment. Often this reflective phase was related to obtaining the big picture context a student needs in order to begin research activities. One participant called this her “stew mode,” a phase at the beginning of the research process that involved thinking about the assignment, letting it “percolate.”

Another student said she needed to go out into the world and see if she could come up with ideas for her paper. She said, “maybe I’ll see something when I’m riding the bus, a billboard, a newspaper, a book someone is reading and it gives me an idea and then I jot down a few notes in my iPod’s to do list.” Other students mentioned they would comb through one of their course texts, looking for ideas for their research paper.⁴

Truth be told, however, the majority of students we interviewed did not start on an assignment—thinking about it, researching, or writing—until two or three days before it was due.

Most of the students we interviewed—8 out of 10—were self-described procrastinators. There was a strong consensus among students that they waited until course-related research assignments were nearly due to begin or to really expend time and effort on an assignment. That is, a large majority of students reported spending three hours on research and another two hours on writing—one or two days before a 5-7 page course-related research paper was due.

In rare cases, some students would “dive into an assignment” as soon as they received it, but only if the topic really intrigued them. Overall, though, we found more than 80% of students interviewed procrastinated on more than 80% of their course-related research assignments.

The tendency to procrastinate occurred most frequently among students enrolled at research institutions. In these settings, students have online access to large library collections and multiple libraries on their campuses, where they were “sure to find something to cite”—even at the last minute. Students would start a research project by inputting a few search terms in the search engine of a database that had brought them “luck” on a previous assignment (e.g., JSTOR, ProQuest, or EBSCO).

However, the story was a little different at smaller institutions with limited library collections. In these settings, participants told us they would begin working on a course-related research assignment several weeks in advance. They would need to search scholarly databases (e.g., ProQuest), find a few articles they could review, and then order them, if need be, to read later. In other cases, some students would begin by ordering books through library interlibrary loan services.

Students procrastinated sometimes as a source of motivation to get them working; sometimes as byproduct of frustration with not easily finding the resources they wanted. One student at a research institution had a formula for applying to course-related research assignments: “Decreasing time equals increasing motivation.” Another participant added, “I have to be under pressure to get motivated, since I’m constantly juggling so many things at once.”

⁴ In our 2007 study about how humanities and social science majors conducted research at Saint Mary’s College of California, we found that the largest percentage of students (40%) in our sample at the small, private liberal arts institution reported that they started the research process by consulting a course textbook or other assigned class readings. See “Information Literacy from the Trenches: How Do Humanities and Social Science Majors Conduct Academic Research?” Preprint publication by Alison J. Head, *College and Research Libraries*, September 2008, vol. 69, no. 4, <http://tinyurl.com/akpqpe>, (39 pages).

On another campus, a student explained her need to mobilize and leverage a high level of what she dubbed, “functional anxiety.”

She related the following account:

“Procrastination, for me, is about the adrenaline rush. I’ll write a response paper in less than an hour before it is due. It’s always just like a race. Can I find some quotes pull them out and put them together? Oh, look, I need to get this done in 20 minutes and turn it in. And once you know you can do it and get a good grade, you do it, especially if you can get away with it.”

Even though participants admitted having a tendency to procrastinate, they also told us when they conducted course research they were often frustrated “by always feeling too rushed.”

At one point in the sessions, we asked participants “What one word sums up how you feel at the moment you receive a course-related research assignment?” It came as no surprise to hear them say: *angst, tired, dread, fear, anxious, annoyed, stressed, disgusted, intrigued, excited, confused, and overwhelmed.*

2. Language context involves becoming more comfortable with the language, terms, and discourse of a topic area. Obtaining the meaning and use of language is an essential context in the research process for either course-related or everyday life research. Without a context for the vocabulary and terminology of a topic—what things are called and what they mean—students could not proceed with any confidence and reported that they usually did so with little success.

In our sessions, we found that students needed far more language particulars for conducting course-related research than they did for everyday life research, especially when it came to formulating search terms.

One participant reported the following experience:

“I wanted to write about how using animals can help people. But I needed different terms, other terms to use when I was searching and trying to look up other things on other sites. I found there’s, like, dolphin-assisted therapies, horse therapies, and then there’s psychotherapies...I guess they’re all different themes, I guess that’s what they are, and then I found out I needed animal-assisted therapy, that’s what it’s called, that’s what I found out I needed.”

Some students in our sessions, who were majoring in the humanities, especially a language, expressed their own frustrations with obtaining the language context for translating terms in one language to another one. Still other students reported that a limited understanding of the technical jargon found in their initial searches, usually in scholarly journals, hampered their progress. Students who did not know enough about the terminology of a field lacked the language context to make discerning decisions in their searches for information.

3. Situational context involves setting the parameters of a topic, especially how efforts may fit into expectations and a set of surrounding circumstances. For everyday life research, students in our sessions defined the need for situational context in terms of their own need to know for personal gratification, curiosity, and/or the pressing need of the query (e.g., a health-related concern).

Course-related research, however, involved meeting the expectations of someone else, usually an instructor, who was assigning a grade and was therefore far more difficult to define. Students told us they usually had some need for situational context about research assignments, especially “figuring out what a professor wants,” “meeting a professor’s expectations and getting a good grade” and “figure out how far to go with something.”

One participant enrolled in a large research institution explained:

“Professors are the ‘source’ they are the experts about the topic and about the assignment, but they are so hard to get a hold of, it’s not like a professor is going to pass out their ‘buddy list’ to 600 students sitting in a large lecture...I swear professors skipped right from high school to being a professor and they have no idea where we are going and what we need to do for papers so that we can get a passing grade, but they are the ones giving out the assignment.”

At smaller, more teaching-focused institutions, participants tended to view professors (and librarians) as forthcoming and helpful in providing them with the situational context that they needed to work on course-related research assignments. At larger research-focused institutions, the story was different. In general, these students reported they had less contact with professors as research coaches than did students at teaching institutions and they struggled with finding the situational context for an assignment.

In some cases, the kinds of primary research method professors used at research institutions did not help students learn the nuts and bolts of secondary research they needed. One student said, “if a professor shows something in class they dug up from the ground in Scandinavia last summer, sure, that’s may be research to him, but it’s not the kind of research I need to do.”

4. Information-gathering context involves finding, accessing, and securing relevant research resources that “satisfice” individual research needs. In our sessions, students described information-gathering context in terms of a “hunt” for information. We found finding information sources for everyday life research or researching personal topics tended to be far less rigorous than deadline-driven course-related research in the academy.

Participants discussed how “interfacing between the library and the Internet” was difficult for course-related research and “trying to find what I found online also in the library, hoping it’s not lost, overdue, or shelved in the wrong place.”

One student in a session described her hunt for information:

“I spend so much more time on researching, just trying to find information than I ever do on writing the paper. I seem to spend the most time coming to the library, trying to find out where the hell the article I need is, getting it, copying it. We’re supposed to have a link to the article right on the Web Site, but we actually don’t because they haven’t updated the site so now I have to go and try to find the article in the main stacks, physically, and it takes so much of my time, it’s so confusing.”

For such participants, we would say that findability was often the most intimidating part of course-related research. We apply Peter Morville's definition of findability as "the quality of being locatable or navigable, the degree to which a particular object is easy to discover or locate, and the degree to which a system or environment supports navigation and retrieval."⁵ Overall, students in the sessions said they were "overwhelmed by all the choices," "lacked a necessary orientation to find things," and, in general, "always have trouble finding what I am looking for" (both online and in the library).

Strategies, Techniques, and Workarounds

So far, our research has found that course-related or everyday life research for early adults is replete with its own frustration and challenges, many of which involve finding certain contexts for carrying out research tasks. At the same time, we found that students are not without their own strategies and workarounds for resolving the difficulties they face with obtaining certain kinds of contexts. One solution is found in libraries, the other through a self-taught, online method.

Use of Libraries

In light of the context typology, students value libraries for giving them the *information-gathering context* that they need to carry out course-related research. We found students valued libraries, and librarians, especially in assisting them with their strategies for retrieving "citable stuff" and for helping them navigate complex information spaces, especially on larger campuses.

Participants in our sessions reported they valued libraries (i.e., library resources and librarians) for the following reasons:

1. For the online library start page, which they used, usually off-site, as gateway to scholarly research databases.
2. For librarians as "navigational sources," which they used most often used for making sense out of the complex library system on campus.
3. For librarians as "information coaches," who they used for refining thesis statements or helping them locate hard-to-find resources (i.e., statistics or government documents).

Students, who used libraries, looked to them, and especially to the reference librarians they consulted as sense-makers. Librarians helped students *satisfice* their individual, often time sensitive, information needs.⁶ One student said, "librarians on this campus can be saviors, you need them to show you how to navigate a complex library system."

⁵ See Peter Morville's, *Ambient Findability: What We Find Changes Who We Become*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2005. Morville, who first defined the concept of "findability," is also, thankfully, on the Advisory Board of Project Information Literacy.

⁶ Herbert Simon, the Nobel-winning psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University, first coined the term, "satisfice" to describe a type of decision-making that is a hybrid of satisfying and sufficing (1957). We apply satisfice here as it applies to students making a choice that suffices to fulfill the minimum requirements to achieve an objective (i.e., finish conducting research about a topic), without special regard for utility maximization or optimization of one's preferences.

A student in a session recalled her first few weeks, saying:

“My first semester here I was very daunted by the library system. It’s a very daunting library system, there are so many separate libraries on this campus, there are millions of books. It makes no sense. And then someone said to me, “Oh yeah, what’s the LC?” And I said, “What’s an LC?” Then it hit me that must mean the Library of Congress where they have all these abbreviations that they throw around. It wasn’t until my Human Rights Seminar, when a group of four of us organized a library research seminar, one hour with a research librarian, who went through all possible things you can do to find credible sources, which databases you can look up, then I was able to go out and get my hands dirty with research...it helped immensely.”

Many participants considered formal library instruction (one-time, individual class visits) of little value to them, too. Throughout our sessions, participants reported that “library talks” (i.e., bibliographic instruction) made sense at the time, but that it was hard to recall and apply months later, when students were working on a research assignment.

Other participants reported that they infrequently consulted librarians with the search terms they entered into scholarly research databases. Students told us “we are just as capable to enter basic search terms as librarians can,” “that I’ve been able to get by, so far, without librarians,” and “I don’t need a tour of the library, I just need to find one thing...now.” One student said, “my first step used to be the library, but it was too much information, now I just go to the Web.”

We found, generally, that when students did not receive (or request) the service they value delivered at the moment they need it from librarians, they quickly change course. Participants found a solution on their own, which is usually found online and derived from self-taught techniques that help them find the context they need.

Use of Wikipedia

We found Wikipedia was a unique and indispensable research source for students. The online, collaborative, community-based online encyclopedia gave students a workaround for obtaining the *big picture* and *language contexts* they frequently lacked for course-related and to a lesser degree, everyday life research. In nearly three-quarters of the student discussions—8 out of 11 sessions—there was a strong consensus among students that their research process began with Wikipedia.

Wikipedia? Yes, Wikipedia.

Students described Wikipedia as their “first go-to place” because Wikipedia entries offer a “preview” and provide “a simple narrative that gives you a grasp” and “can point you in the right direction,” and “helps when I have no idea what to do for a research paper.”

A student related the following account:

“I go to Wikipedia just so to get an understanding of a topic. Like, I did a paper on Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia and I went to Wikipedia first just to check it out. I looked at the history of Puerto Rico and then, Puerto Ricans in the United States. Just to get a basic understanding, so that, I could say to myself, okay, I know the beginning now, I know the current situation, I’m okay, and now I’ve got some citations and stuff, I’ve got a stepping stone to get deeper into the issue I’ve chosen.”

Students who used Wikipedia were precise in characterizing the online and collaborative encyclopedia as “a .5 step in my research process” or “the very beginning of the very beginning for me.” As one student summed it up, “Wikipedia is my presearch tool.” In other words, Wikipedia was used for pre-researching a topic and preceded what students described as “serious research,” which involved searching scholarly databases, such as ProQuest, JSTOR, or EBSCO.⁷

Students who used scholarly databases after a Wikipedia search said that they avoided starting with scholarly databases first because it was “too much too soon.” Overall, students reported that scholarly articles had “too much technical jargon before I understand what I am writing about” and “were often not up to date as Wikipedia.” Before talking to a professor, students admitted, too, they needed background about a topic. (See Figure 3, “Why Do Students Use Wikipedia?”)

FIGURE 3: Why Do Students Use Wikipedia?

1. Provides background and brief overview; helps where scholarly journals can be too specific or narrow as a beginning step in the research process.
2. Identifies and defines search terms that students can use when they search scholarly research databases next.
3. List citations at the bottom that serve as a jumping-off point for using scholarly research databases.
4. Often includes timelines and charts that help with visual learning.
5. Uses “good English” that is written by “real people” and that is easily understood (e.g., Wikipedia has content written in a style with “no fluff”).
6. Provides current, up-to-date information (e.g., “everything is there, even ‘Joe the Plumber’ is in there”).
7. Interface is usable (e.g., links are highlighted, entries are short, and “above the fold” information is prioritized).
8. Builds confidence and helps students start to get the work done (e.g., “if Wikipedia can summarize something that seems so broad and huge to me, then I know I can do it to for my assignment”).
9. Shows another network of research sources that exist (e.g., “I was working on a paper about the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, I had my list of resources that I could compare with the citations on Wikipedia to see someone there came up with”).
10. Open-sourced functionality allows for updates and changes that can increase the authority and accuracy of information.

(n = 86)

⁷ As a point of interest, none of the participants brought up use of one of Gale’s subject encyclopedias for “backgrounding” a topic. In one session, an English major said she went to SparkNotes to get background for a research assignment, another student responded to her, “But SparkNotes doesn’t have everything, like Wikipedia does.” There was a consensus in our sessions that Wikipedia rarely disappoints. One student said, “Wikipedia even has Joe the Plumber listed, I’ve checked.”

Participants told us they were fully aware of the controversy over using Wikipedia, especially for college-level research and assignments. Some students openly called their Wikipedia use “naughty,” admitting they were “embarrassed to say” but they frequently used the site. Another student said, “Wikipedia? It’s a great place to start, and a horrible place to end, at least that’s what my professor says.”

While some students mentioned the penalties for using Wikipedia for course-related research assignments (e.g., ranging from public humiliation in class to receiving a failing grade), we found the majority of students ignored the negatives and went to the site anyway. Most students depended on and used Wikipedia for information cited in papers, but just never included Wikipedia entries on their *Works Cited* page.

In our sessions, students also discussed concerns over Wikipedia and accuracy. However, most participants believed that they, themselves, had the ability to discern the credibility of a Wikipedia source, based on their “gut level” interpretation of Wikipedia’s rating system (e.g., posted notes by editors such as, “This article needs additional citations for verification”).

The relationship between the transparency of Wikipedia’s open source knowledge production methods and students’ concerns about credibility is an area we hope to explore further in our research.⁸

Overall, as far as the students in our sessions were concerned, the advantages of using Wikipedia definitely outweighed its perceived drawbacks. While Wikipedia may do little to help students figure out the situational context for an assignment, Wikipedia is a “one stop shop” for providing, some, not all students, every time, with the *big picture context* and *language context* they need to make sense out of an assignment and move onto what they described as serious research, or searching for scholarly materials, usually online.

Implications

Our findings offer some rich and intriguing insights into the behavior and motivations of early adults and the ways in which they seek information in the digital age—in their own words, through the retelling of their own experiences.

In general, students reported being challenged, confused, and frustrated by the research process, despite the convenience, relative ease, or ubiquity of the Internet. In our sessions, frustrations included the effects of information overload and being inundated with resources, but more. Participants also reported having particular difficulty traversing a vast and ever-changing information landscape. Specifically, participants greatest challenges were related to finding the materials they desired, knew existed, and needed on a “just in time” basis.

Overall, we conclude that students are challenged and often inexperienced with “finding context”—a requisite for conducting course-related research and to a lesser extent, everyday life research. We have developed a preliminary typology of contexts to describe the kinds of backgrounds college students may need when they conceptualize and operationalize the research process, especially in the early stages, whether they are at large research institutions or teaching colleges.

⁸ For a further discussion, see Simson L. Garfinkle’s, “Wikipedia and the Meaning of Truth: Why the online encyclopedia’s epistemology should worry those who care about traditional notions of accuracy,” *MIT Technology Review*, November/December 2008. The author argues that Wikipedia’s standard of truth is consensus and that their standard for verifiability is “really an appeal to authority—not the authority of truth, but the authority of other publications.”

Our hope is that our typology, as we refine it with further research, will offer an inside view of the student research process, help identify its “pain points,” and have some benefit to those involved in transferring and teaching information literacy competencies to students. Our goal in our future work is to make some recommendations to faculty and librarians.

We believe a deeper understanding of how students conceptualize research processes may be the basis for identifying and narrowing gaps between types of research practiced by students compared to those used by faculty. In particular, we hope to make recommendations for how faculty can provide students with a greater understanding of a topic’s *big picture context* as well as providing more details about the *situational context* of an assignment.

For librarians, a further understanding of what kinds of contexts students seek during different times of the research process may help librarians with their ongoing efforts to make bibliographic instruction more “student-centered” and contextual, based on students’ needs at given times. At the conclusion of our full research study, we hope to recommend more ways librarians can supply the *information-gathering context* students report they need when they conduct research.

Next Steps

In Spring 2009, we plan to test our preliminary typology further with a larger sample and a student survey administered on three campuses, enrolled in similar institutions (i.e., community colleges, public colleges and universities, and private colleges and universities). In particular, in the next phase of our work, we will explore our findings, in the hope to:

1. Collect quantitative data about the student research process to obtain a more systematic and formal understanding of the existence of research contexts and test our typology further. With a goal of finding out more about the “early adult” research process, including when the needs for different context arises, under what conditions and in what order, if one applies, and how students obtain contexts for satisfying their information needs through pedagogical methods, and self-taught workarounds, such as Wikipedia.
2. Understand how and why the design of online resources used by campus libraries and produced by database vendors, enhances or detracts from early adults’ research experiences. With a goal of finding out when certain resources work best for helping students find the contexts they need for carrying out research.
3. Make recommendations, based on quantitative and qualitative data, for how faculty, librarians, and others involved in transferring, teaching, information literacy competencies to early adults, may be able to have a deeper understanding of what happens on the student side of the research process equation.

Appendix

Research Methods and Sampling

The Project Information Literacy Team conducted eleven 90-minute student discussion group sessions on 7 campuses in the U.S. between October and December 2008. Co-Principal Investigator Dr. Alison Head led the discussions with students. Project Information Literacy Team Member Sarah Vital, a reference librarian at Saint Mary's College of California, who worked on the 2007 study of students on that campus with Dr. Head, served as research associate and an observer at the majority of the sessions.

In total, there was a collective sample of 86 full-time sophomores, juniors, and seniors, who were studying humanities and social sciences and enrolled at public universities and private colleges and universities and at community colleges. Our sample was comprised of students who had completed more than one semester and had completed most of the prerequisites in the humanities and social sciences.

In order to facilitate data collection activities on each campus, we enlisted the help of a "research liaison" (i.e., the instruction librarian or library dean at each institution). Among the various types of schools, we selected campus sites based on their "best fit" for our sample (i.e., an institution's enrollment, an institution's resources dedicated to information literacy training modules, its library collection size, its geographic location, and whether it can be categorized as a teaching or research institution).

We also asked research liaisons (to the best of their knowledge and acknowledging "self-reporting") to rank the information literacy competencies levels of the undergraduates they served on their campus. We used a 1-to-5- scale (1 being a low level of information literacy competency and 5 being a high level of information literacy competency) that is not reported here for privacy reasons. Our sampling criteria for selected institutions were also based on choosing schools that represented what our data reflected as both ends of the information literate competency scale. The table on the next page shows baseline information about each institution where data were collected.

Appendix, Figure 1: Institutions in the Fall Discussion Group Sample

Institution	Research Liaison	Date of Session(s)	Sample Size (n = 86)	Enrollment of Full-Time Undergrads
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (Private University)	Susan Gilroy, Head of Reference, Lamont Library	Tuesday, October 28, 2008	14	6,000
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, IL (Public University)	Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, Coordinator of Information Literacy Services	Thursday, November 6, 2008	18	30,895
Mills College Oakland, CA (Private college)	Carol Jarvis, Associate Library Director	Monday, November 10	14	973
Diablo Valley Community College Pleasant Hill, CA (Community College)	Andy Kivel, Library Department Chair	Friday, November 14	11	16,000
University of Washington Seattle, WA (Public University)	Deb Raftus, Romance Languages and Literatures Librarian	Tuesday, November 18	15	28,843
West Valley Community College Saratoga, CA (Community College)	Maryanne Mills, Library Department Chair	Thursday, November 20	7	3,378
Shoreline Community College Shoreline, WA (Community College)	Claire Lev Murata, Information Literacy Librarian	Tuesday, December 2	7	9,898

Student Sample

At four-year institutions, we recruited a voluntary sample of full-time undergraduates (sophomores, juniors, and seniors), who had taken a majority of their coursework in the humanities and/or social science disciplines. At two-year community colleges we conducted sessions with a voluntary sample of full-time students, who had completed more than 15 units and had taken more than four or five courses in humanities or social sciences.

We intentionally excluded any college freshman or first-year students from our sample. First-year students were more likely to discuss research strategies they had used in high school, instead of those they had developed (or were learning to develop) and had used, so far, in college. We also excluded those students majoring in the science our sample, for the most part,

who use labs for experiments and research assignments. Our intention was to talk to students most likely to use libraries, as a “lab,” for their research assignments. Admittedly, we acknowledge that self-report is always an unavoidable issue with discussion groups, such as the one used in our research design.

The PIL team worked closely with the research liaisons to organize and recruit the student sample. We used several methods to recruit participants for the discussion group, including: (1) research liaisons’ contact with students; (2) PIL flyers posted in classrooms, dormitories, and on hallway bulletin boards (i.e., not just in the library) with a call for discussion group participation; (3) a “refer a friend” incentive offered to students who had already signed up; (4) faculty contacts with students announcements in class or an email; and (5) a brief announcement online on the campus news site. In exchange for their time, student participants were given a \$15 iTunes card. The vast majority of our participants were recruited through library or faculty contact. Students wishing to participate were directed to an online form for study participation on the PIL Web Site and were contacted, if selected, by the PIL Team to schedule a session.

The mean GPA for the total student sample across all 7 schools was 3.44, or just above a B+. There was representation from students studying anthropology, art history, communication, economics, education, English, gender studies, global studies, health, history, international relations, languages, linguistics, music, political science, psychology, social studies, and sociology. To a much lesser degree (9% of the sample), some student “walk ins” in our sessions were studying computer science, nursing, engineering, and business administration.

Far more females (70%) than males participated in the sessions. However, we did not intentionally try to balance our sample for gender (one of the institutions in the campus sample, Mills College is a women’s college). Without Mills in the sample, more than half of the sample from co-ed campuses was female (63%).

The sample was limited in the number, nature, and range of participants who volunteered to participate. In some cases, our research liaisons contacted students who had jobs in the library. We made a concerted effort not to recruit a sample in which library student workers were disproportionately represented, since it was believed the student workers could introduce bias about using the library into the discussions. We found, however, that the opposite was true. Students who were library workers were often good “foils” for getting other students in the sessions, who had little or no awareness of library services, to share their thoughts and experiences.

Purpose of Discussion Groups, Use of Data

The purpose of conducting the student discussion groups was to collect qualitative data about early adults’ research habits, behaviors, experiences, and the obstacles they encounter. Qualitative data from the discussion groups will be used to inform the student survey instrument and its response categories, which we will administer in Spring 2009 on three campuses (i.e., a community college, public college or university, and private college or university).

The student discussion groups were an integral part of collecting data to begin answering PIL’s overarching research question: In the digital age, how do early adults conceptualize and operationalize course-related research and research for solving information problems related to their daily lives?

More specifically the trajectory of our overall research study seeks to answer the following research questions:

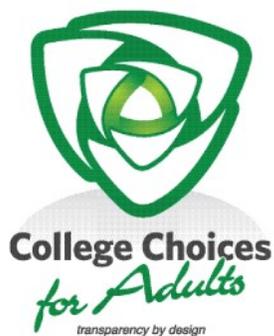
1. How do early adults define and conceptualize the process of research (i.e., both course-related and “everyday research”)?
 - 1.1 What does the activity of research mean to early adults (in their own words and from their own experiences)?
 - 1.2 What kind of barriers and obstacles exist for early adults that keep them from taking the first steps in both the course-related and everyday research?
2. What steps do early adults take to locate, evaluate, select, and use resources required for course-related research and for everyday research?
 - 2.1 What processes do early adults employ and what “workarounds” have they developed for evaluating and selecting resources?
 - 2.2 How do early adults engage in collaborative information problem solving with one another about conducting course-related and everyday research?
 - 2.3 How do early adults use peer-to-peer “socially constructed” digital resources (e.g., Wikipedia, course wikis, and/or blogs) when conducting course-related and everyday research?
 - 2.4 How do early adults determine if peer-to-peer resources are credible and reliable sources of information for course-related research assignments and/or for everyday research, if at all?
 - 2.5 How do early adults strategies for conducting course-related research vary from everyday life information problems?
 - 2.6 How do early adults’ strategies systematically vary within the population of institutional settings (i.e., community colleges vs. state colleges and universities vs. private colleges and universities)?

Ultimately, findings from PIL will have considerable impact in the understanding of information literacy in five major areas:

1. How information literacy education and coaching is provided to early adults by professors and librarians for conducting course-related research and for “everyday research.”
2. How college curriculum that requires course-related research and everyday research is developed and communicated to early adults.
3. How the design of online resources used by campus libraries and produced by database vendors, enhance or detract from early adults’ research experiences.
4. How (and by how much) different types of institutions impact the information-seeking strategies of their early adults.
5. How an understanding can be increased of the problem-solving potential of current U.S. college students who are an important subset of the “adult” cohort, given their unprecedented abundance in enrollment numbers, their professional destinies, and their likelihood to have “grown up digitally.”

- End of Report -

APPENDIX C



21 Questions to Ask Before Enrolling

Below is a list of 21 questions that will help you choose the degree program that is right for you:

1. What Will I Learn? What knowledge, skills, and/or competencies will I be expected to acquire and demonstrate by completing this degree or certificate program?
2. How does the program measure what I have learned? How does the institution test that students obtained the required knowledge, skills, and/or competencies expected of a student completing this degree or certificate program?
3. How have recent previous students performed on those measures of what was learned?
4. Will I be able to transfer credits earned at another institution? Which of those credits will count toward my degree requirements?
5. Can I get credit for prior learning and career experiences by 'testing-out' of courses through subject-matter examinations or by review of a portfolio showcasing my knowledge and skills?
6. What are the requirements, including any admissions tests, for being accepted into the program?
7. What are the academic/course requirements for earning a degree?
8. What kind of academic skills should I have before entering the program? Based on my background, will I need some remedial assistance (help with basic Mathematics, English, and study skills) prior to enrolling?
9. Is the program offered fully at a distance or online, or will there be times when I have to physically attend a course or visit a campus or other location for an orientation, academic seminar, or other event?
10. Is there a 'sample course' I can view to see how your courses work?
11. Approximately how many hours per week will I need to put into my studies, per course?
12. How long will it take to complete the program?
13. How engaged do students feel with their coursework, the faculty, and other academic experiences? What evidence does the institution have about how satisfied current students are with their entire educational experience at the institution?
14. How satisfied are alumni with the institution and their educational experience? Would they recommend the institution to others?
15. What costs or expenses will I have in addition to tuition?
16. What is your institution's refund policy?
17. What types of financial aid do you offer and how do I apply?
18. What academic and student support services (such as library, academic counseling, bookstore, tutoring, career counseling, and/or alumni services) does your institution provide at a distance?
19. What hardware, software, computer skills, or other technology considerations are required for me to participate effectively in the program?
20. Do you provide technical support? If so, what hours is it available and how is it provided (phone, chat, e-mail, other)?
21. How can I get a better idea about what your faculty and students are like? Are people like me (age, full-time/part-time) enrolled at this institution?