

Study shows universities may be failing to sufficiently teach basic research skills

November 8 2010, by Catherine O'Donnell

(PhysOrg.com) -- Colleges and universities may be failing their students at a time when research skills and collaborative learning are becoming more and more important. In today's information-driven workplace, people spend much of their time formulating questions, finding relevant information and drawing conclusions, often working in virtual teams scattered across the globe.

College [students](#) are among the savviest users of Web 2.0, right?

Well, yes and no. New research finds plenty of students use social networks, like [Facebook](#), to find information in their everyday lives, but few are using other Web 2.0 tools -- blogs, wikis, video sharing sites -- to manage or collaborate on course research assignments.

The latest Project Information Literacy report sees this as part of a larger problem: colleges and universities may be failing their students at a time when research skills and collaborative learning are becoming more and more important. In today's information-driven workplace, people spend much of their time formulating questions, finding relevant information and drawing conclusions, often working in virtual teams scattered across the globe.

Alison Head, a research scientist at the [University](#) of Washington Information School, and Michael Eisenberg, a professor and former dean at the school, surveyed 8,353 sophomores, juniors and seniors at 25 U.S. campuses this past spring. They found that many students fumble

research assignments. According to Head and Eisenberg, their new report is the largest scholarly analysis of [information literacy](#) among college students.

The researchers found that although many students consider themselves fairly adept at finding and evaluating information, especially from the web, 84 percent were often stymied at the outset of a research assignment. They'd been asked to formulate a research question without understanding what the process entails or requires. Of all the steps necessary in a course research project, survey respondents had the most difficulty determining the nature, scope and requirements of the assignment.

"Students grapple with what college-level research assignments mean and what is expected of them," Head and Eisenberg write.

In other words, they have big trouble just getting started, even though many have ideas.

They also wind up using the same research routines over and over, particularly for written papers. They've simply transferred high school skills to [college](#), researchers found in follow up interviews.

Nearly half of students, 49 percent, sought professors for help with course research. Almost two-thirds, 61 percent, reported checking personal research with friends and/or family members. Few students turned to campus librarians.

Overall, students reported far fewer problems finding information for personal use, though sorting research results hamstrung 41 percent.

To manage large amounts of information, the report says, "students in both large universities and small colleges use a risk-averse strategy based

on efficiency and predictability." In other words, students avoid drowning by limiting the sources they turn to and the amount of information they take in.

At the same time, however, those students worry how to sort what they've found, when to stop looking and whether they've done a good job.

As the result of their research, Head and Eisenberg recommend:

- Integrating research rubrics into research assignments. Define what makes top research, that it includes selecting and using multiple and diverse sources: blogs, wikis, books, scholarly journals, data collected from the field.
- Rethinking librarian training so it focuses on framing inquiries and dealing with the abundance of information that exists on campuses, rather than just instructing about what's available, which tends to overwhelm many students.
- Holding students more accountable. Assign tasks that help define the students' topics. Consider assigning an annotated bibliography or requiring students to compare several sources, setting the sources into the larger research conversation about the topic.

Head and Eisenberg's research, titled "[Truth be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age](#)" was funded by the MacArthur Foundation.

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