

After 17 Years, Project Information Literacy to End

One Final Contribution Will Launch This Month

Project Information Literacy (PIL), the internationally recognized research institute conducting large-scale national studies about students and their research habits, will close at the end of 2025.

As the director and a principal investigator at PIL, with 25 years of experience as a professor of new media and communication theory, I've spent much of my career focused on investigating what it's like to be a student in the digital age. For nearly two decades, a group of library and information science and new media researchers, including myself, has created a project that surveyed and interviewed over 22,500 undergraduates enrolled at more than 100 colleges and universities across the US.

This work has culminated in the release of 14 open access reports on a broad range of timely topics from algorithms and news engagement to opinions about climate change. Additionally, PIL published essays, interviews, peer-reviewed articles, videos, and op-eds exploring issues pertaining to the evolving field of information literacy. But as funding opportunities and support have continued to disappear for studying misinformation, news, algorithms, and climate change—PIL's mainstay—keeping the research institute afloat has become extremely challenging.

Despite our decision to end the long-running project, there is good news: As a final contribution, the PIL team has built an archival site for ongoing access to our research reports, survey instruments, datasets, essays, and interviews with leading thinkers. To make this transition seamless for users everywhere, the archival site for PIL will assume the same URL: projectinfolit.org.

Early Days, Ambitious Goals

First envisioned at the University of Washington's iSchool by myself, then a Senior Research Scientist, and Michael Eisenberg, codeveloper of the Big6 information skills curriculum, we had an ambitious goal: to study the fast-growing field of information literacy through the lens of the student research experience.

From the beginning, we set our sights on being a large-scale, ongoing, and expansive research program. Small teams of PIL researchers collected empirical data from a cross-disciplinary sample of undergraduates enrolled at four-year colleges and universities and

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community colleges across the US. In turn, we published extensive reports and freely circulated them to the broader academic community.

The timing was right for PIL's unique voice and research approach. The internet was an entirely different place in 2008, and as the web became a popular conduit for new forms of expression, the need for student instruction became even more pressing. But, while the number of publications describing how to teach information literacy grew, less was known about the student perspective: How did students find, evaluate, learn about, and interact with information?

The PIL team studied information literacy in three distinct areas where little was known: (1) students' changing online search habits for courses and in everyday life; (2) information transitions students make as they move from high school to college to the workplace and as lifelong learners; and (3) the impact of new technology on students' beliefs and understanding of the world, including misinformation, algorithms, COVID-19, artificial intelligence (AI) and climate anxiety (see Table 1).

Table 1. PIL's research reports, 2009–2024



The collective work from PIL stands out from other information literacy research in terms of sample size, institutional breadth, and research design, and our open access reports have blended rigorous methods and analysis with a clear and engaging journalistic style.

From one report to the next, we used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods in multi-institutional settings to collect data from students in their own words about the research they did. These rich firsthand accounts revealed strategies and workarounds students used for finding, using, and creating information while navigating a vast, ever-changing information landscape. The results informed how librarians and educators worked with students while shaping the profession's understanding of the evolving field of information literacy.

“The first PIL reports were published while I was in grad school, and I’ve read each many times and constantly refer back to findings,” Laura Hibbler, deputy university librarian at Brandeis University, noted, “and PIL’s research has been transformative in my own development as a librarian.”

Through the years, funding support for PIL's ongoing research came from a variety of sources, including ACRL, Fulbright World Learning Program, Harvard University, Institute of Museum and Library Services, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, ProQuest, and the University of Washington iSchool.

Building a Reservoir of Knowledge

PIL's research is widely recognized for providing insights into how students use information for academic work. Yet, we moved beyond this common focus for information literacy research by widening the lens to study everyday life and postcollege research practices, all the while using rigorous social science methods and computational analysis.

An IMLS-funded study explored what happens after graduation as students move from the classroom to the workplace. When questions arose around the rise of disinformation, we conducted a large study, partially funded by ACRL, of how college students consume and engage with news. As concerns grew around the prominence of algorithmic systems in our lives, PIL used Knight Foundation support to ask students about their awareness and experiences.

In 2016, Barbara Fister, writing for *Inside Higher Education*, called PIL “hands-down the most important long-term, multi-institutional research project ever launched on how students use information for school and beyond.”¹

Four years later, Fister joined PIL as its inaugural research scholar in residence, and together with PIL coresearcher Margy MacMillan, we wrote the groundbreaking report on information literacy in the age of algorithms.² Our work was honored with ACRL's Ilene F. Rockman Instruction Publication of the Year Award in 2021.

Findings and recommendations from PIL studies have informed and influenced the thinking and practices of diverse constituencies from all over the world in higher education, public libraries, newspapers, nonprofits, and workplaces. While PIL citations tend to come from work being done by other researchers in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, PIL's influence transcends international borders and supports considerable research being conducted in other regions of the world, such as Spain, Mexico, China, India, South Africa, and Malaysia.³

While our 2022 citation analysis showed the international reach of PIL, it also found that it's essential for librarians and educators to build capacity at institutions working towards their own information literacy instruction and research goals. In 2024, I had an opportunity to participate directly in this cross-cultural collaboration when I was awarded a Fulbright grant to travel to Australia. Together with librarians and scholars from Western Sydney University, we organized events for a three-week “PIL InfoLit Tour” with stops at universities in four cities and attracting more than 500 participants throughout Eastern Australia.

Those who have followed PIL's research over the years are often surprised to learn that, unlike many research institutes, PIL doesn't have a parent institution, a physical headquarters, a large operating budget, or permanent staff, since becoming a registered nonprofit in 2013.

Rather, it's been the highly collaborative approach and hands-on leadership that have made PIL's ongoing research endeavors possible with librarians, fellow researchers, and students. By word of mouth, PIL grew from a volunteer sample of 250 colleges and universities across the US, giving us access to 1 in 8 undergraduates in the country when selecting samples for our different studies.

All told, we achieved our ambitious goal at PIL of studying students through the lens of their experience and, in turn, became the longest-running study of information literacy in the world. This is in large part due to widespread grassroots support from hundreds of librarians devoted to understanding students' research practices and finding ways to improve their learning success during college.

While our active research is ending, we are proud that our research reports and resources will live on for years in our new PIL archival site, launched this month.

Acknowledgement

Steven Geoffrey, Kirsten Hostetler, and Margy MacMillan, PIL team members, contributed to this article. *zz*

Notes

1. Barbara Fister, “Information literacy and recent graduates: New from PIL,” *Inside Higher Education*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/information-literacy-and-recent-graduates-new-pil>.
2. Alison J. Head, Barbara Fister, and Margy MacMillan, “Information literacy in the age of algorithms,” Project Information Literacy Research Institute, January 2020, <https://projectinfolit.org/publications/algorithm-study>.
3. Alison J. Head, Barbara Fister, Steven Geoffrey, and Margy MacMillan, “The Project Information Literacy Retrospective: Insights from more than a decade of information literacy research, 2008-2022,” Project Information Research Institute, October 2022. <https://projectinfolit.org/publications/retrospective>.