

What Do They Know? Digital Literacy Competencies of First-Year College Students

Elizabeth McCarron (retired)
elizabeth.c.mccarron@gmail.com

Mark Frydenberg
mfrydenberg@bentley.edu

Computer Information Systems Department
Bentley University
Waltham, MA 02452, USA

Abstract

Many people assume today's college students, as digital natives, are digitally literate and prepared for the rigors of academic coursework, with no need for a basic "computers 101" college course. Many post-secondary faculty have experienced that this is not always true. Undertaken at a small New England institution considered a "business school" but also offering liberal arts degrees, this study sought to determine whether first-year college students are as digitally literate as many people assume they are by examining which digital skills and competencies students acquire before entering college, and if those skills are adequate to achieve academic success in college. To explore this, the following research questions were employed: RQ1) What digital devices are students using and with what frequency? RQ2) What digital literacy competencies (DLCs) do incoming first-year students possess? RQ3) How do first-year students self-rank their DLCs, and how does that compare to individual task self-ranking? RQ4) What DLCs do incoming first-year students perceive as the most important to know, and do they have those skills? Results showed that most K-12 students are learning on Macs or Chromebooks, using the Google Suite of applications. They may need to switch to Windows machines and/or Microsoft Office products upon entering college. Almost 16% reported taking no high school courses covering computer topics. On arrival at college, only 34% consider themselves "tech savvy" and most rank themselves at the beginner or intermediate level on DLCs. They believe the three most important skills to know are spreadsheets, programming, and word processing.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Information Technology Literacy, Competencies, Digital Skills, First-Year College Students

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