

## INFORMATION LITERACY FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

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Dr. Corey Seemiller's talk at the opening plenary of the 2018 LWI Biennial Conference<sup>1</sup> introduced the academic legal writing community to Generation Z<sup>2</sup> —the generation born starting in 1995, which now makes up a large cohort of entering law students. As with every generation, Generation Z students bring unique characteristics that we need to understand to effectively teach them. Dr. Seemiller's description of her research on Gen Z reinforced our belief that information literacy is an increasingly critical component of legal education, and particularly of legal research instruction.

Generation Z has grown up on the internet. They don't know a world where they can't jump online, type a few words into a search box, and get multiple answers. They suffer from information overload. As Dr. Seemiller noted, Gen Z students know a lot, but their knowledge is a mile wide and an inch deep. They are more likely to get information from someone they know personally than from other sources.<sup>3</sup> Those of us teaching Gen Z will have to help them to unlearn old information as much as learn new information and teach them to be discerning about sources. When these students arrive at law school, they will assume they know how to research because they've been doing it all their lives. What does that mean in terms of how we should teach them?

Legal research has changed dramatically over Gen Z's lifetime, and so has how we teach it. The algorithms used by major legal research services Lexis and Westlaw have gotten increasingly sophisticated, so it is increasingly unlikely that a search will yield no

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Corey Seemiller, Plenary Talk, LWI Biennial Conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (July 12, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> COREY SEEMILLER & MEGAN GRACE, GENERATION Z GOES TO COLLEGE (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Anderson, *Even Social Media-Savvy Teens Can't Spot a Fake News Story*, QUARTZ (Mar. 9, 2017), <https://qz.com/927543/even-social-media-savvy-teens-cant-spot-a-fake-news-story/>.

results. It has also become easier to search and find results on the free internet and through a variety of additional research products.<sup>4</sup> Across all platforms, typing words into a search box is certain to yield results. The challenge of legal research has shifted from finding results to sifting through numerous results and identifying what sources are relevant and important for legal problem-solving and analysis.

For Gen Z this will be a particular challenge. According to Dr. Seemiller, research for this generation is more about the quick answer than the correct one. Gen Z students are accustomed to quickly skimming through the top results from a search and selecting the most obvious references. This is antithetical to the methodical, deep-dive research that lawyers must engage in. An information literacy model of research instruction could be the key to helping these students understand how to do the thorough, detailed research the legal profession demands.

Information literacy is the ability to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.”<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, information literacy involved five core competencies, each of which is accompanied by a set of performance indicators and learning outcomes: students should (1) *know* what information they need; (2) be able to *access* that information efficiently and effectively; (3) be able to *evaluate* the information critically; (4) be able to *use* the information they gathered; and (5) be able to accomplish all of these tasks in a manner that is *ethical/legal*.<sup>6</sup> As we have previously noted, these information literacy concepts can be mapped onto legal research processes and sources to provide a framework to approach the process of legal research.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of currently popular research products such as Bloomberg, Fastcase, and Casetext, see *Best Online Legal Research Tools (2018)*, <https://lawyerist.com/technology/online-legal-research-tools/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report*, AM. LIBR. ASS'N, (Jan. 10, 1989), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ala.org/acrl/issues/infolit/standards/steps>; Dennis Kim-Prieto, *The Road Not Yet Taken: How Law Student Information Literacy Standards Address Identified Issues in Legal Research Education and Training*, 103 LAW LIBR. J. 605, 607-09 (2011).

<sup>7</sup> See generally Ellie Margolis and Kristen Murray, *Say Goodbye to the Books: Information Literacy as the New Legal Research Paradigm*, 38 U. DAYTON L. REV. 117 (2012).

We have previously described modern legal research as an “intricately woven web,” in contrast to the linear nature of bibliographic research.<sup>8</sup> Gen Z law students may find themselves tangled in this web in different ways than their millennial and Gen X predecessors. For example, Gen Z students may be overconfident about their research skills and lack the depth of knowledge they will need for rigorous legal research. As teachers of legal research, we need to understand these students’ approaches and attitudes about information to give them the tools they will need to evaluate legal research sources. Information literacy can be a particularly valuable framing device for this generation of students. Legal research technology is also going to keep changing, and information literacy provides the flexibility to create lifelong learners, positioning our Gen Z students to adapt their legal research skills as technology continues to grow and change.

Dr. Seemiller’s talk reminded us that a new generation of students is arriving in our classrooms and we should address them in our future scholarship. We look forward to welcoming them as we contemplate what an information literacy paradigm means for Gen Z.

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<sup>8</sup> Ellie Margolis & Kristen Murray, *Teaching Legal Research Through an Information Literacy Lens*, 30:2 THE SECOND DRAFT 13, 17 (2017).