Information Literacy Gaps in Minnesota: Postsecondary Faculty Signal Investment in School Library Media Specialists

Insights from Postsecondary Faculty Across Minnesota

The study

In fall 2025, Minnesota librarians partnered with Wilder Research to conduct interviews with 21 faculty teaching first-year students across colleges and universities statewide. Faculty assessed the importance of information and technology literacy and student readiness across four domains aligned with ITEM standards: information literacy, digital citizenship, technology and innovation, and literacy engagement. Findings reveal significant preparedness gaps with implications for student learning and potentially for Minnesota's workforce and civic health.

Information literacy education matters

Minnesota students are entering college without essential information literacy skills.

What is information literacy?

"…a set of skills that enable individuals to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information, including digital, media, visual, textual, and technology literacy" (New Jersey Department of Education, 2025).

In a pre-interview survey, 45% of faculty reported significant gaps in their students' information literacy skills, specifically:

1. **Evaluating sources for credibility and accuracy**
2. **Synthesizing and sharing findings ethically**

These findings reveal not only a student skills gap, but an instructional infrastructure gap.

Minnesota's status

Minnesota students lack sufficient access to the trained professionals whose role is to teach and embed information literacy across grade levels. Findings from the 2024-25 School Library Status (Minnesota Department of Education, 2025) show that:

- 250,375 Minnesota students across 521 schools had no access to a licensed school library media specialist.
- Only 19% of school libraries meet the full statutory definition (see Minnesota Statutes 2023, section 124D.911 for definition).
- Minnesota ranks 46th nationally in FTE per school for school library staff.

Why School Library Media Specialists (SLMS)?

SLMSs are trained to:

- Teach information literacy and research
- Teach digital citizenship and responsible AI use
- Co-teach standards-aligned lessons
- Provide professional development to classroom teachers

As artificial intelligence reshapes how information is created and consumed, and as misinformation spreads rapidly across social media, the ability to critically evaluate sources, use technology effectively, and engage responsibly in digital spaces has become fundamental to both workforce success and a functioning democracy.

Faculty report that many first-year students lack these foundational skills, signaling a systemic breakdown in preparation that begins well before college and requires coordinated K–12 policy attention.

> It feels pretty evident to me that information literacy is a content area that students should be taking classes in. There should be specific information literacy instruction.
> - Faculty

Faculty insights

#1: The largest skill gaps mirror the skills deemed most essential for postsecondary success.

According to faculty, many students enter college with widely varying skills in information literacy. They worry that students largely lack the knowledge and skills to appropriately:

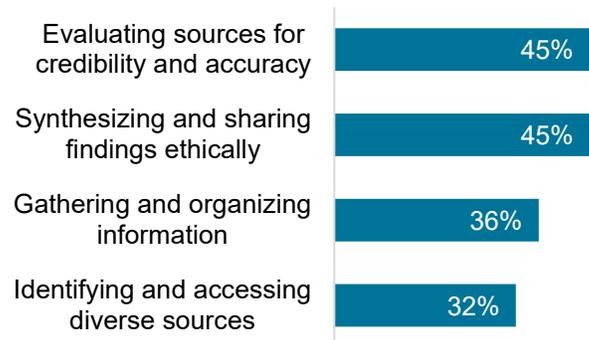- Identify and access diverse sources when gathering information
- Evaluate sources for credibility and accuracy
- Synthesize and share findings ethically

Percentage of faculty who indicated skill gap as "significant" (N=22)

Skill	Percentage
Evaluating sources for credibility and accuracy	45%
Synthesizing and sharing findings ethically	45%
Gathering and organizing information	36%
Identifying and accessing diverse sources	32%

This chart shows the skills for which the highest number of respondents saw "significant gaps" in skill. In each skill area, respondents were asked to choose from one of the following categories: no noticeable gaps, minor gaps, moderate gaps, or significant gaps.

#2: Information literacy gaps negatively affect teaching and, ultimately, student learning.

Many faculty noted information literacy skills apply to all disciplines and coursework in postsecondary. When left to individual instructors, many of whom are not trained to teach these skills, students may not receive the instruction they need to excel.

> …when these standards are integrated into curriculum without the expertise of a library or information professional, there's no responsibility or accountability for bringing these skills into the classroom… Having information professional librarians on staff, paid effectively, and supporting all subject areas from K–12 onward seems essential.
>
> **- Faculty**

Key instructional impacts include:

- Instructional time is being diverted from content to remediation

- Courses are slowing down and being redesigned to scaffold basic skills

- Faculty are changing assessments to compensate for AI and skill gaps

- Instructors are absorbing responsibilities beyond their discipline

- Learning experiences are becoming narrower and less intellectually rich

Incorporating basic information literacy learning strategies and often on top of basic reading strategies and comprehension, takes significant time away from learning content.

#3: AI and social media amplify misinformation risks, requiring targeted investment in information literacy.

Faculty report that many first-year students **increasingly rely on generative AI and surface-level search tools** in ways that **bypass core information literacy skills**. Students often struggle to evaluate sources, distinguish AI-generated content from credible evidence, and independently synthesize or defend ideas, leading to inaccurate claims, generic writing, and ethical risks.

While awareness of AI is growing, **skills remain uneven** (among students and faculty), **institutional guidance is inconsistent**, **and faculty lack shared frameworks for instruction**. These gaps undermine learning, workforce readiness, and students' capacity to navigate an AI-mediated information environment safely and responsibly. Given the challenges of today, the need for trained instructional leaders in information literacy is not optional—it is foundational.

> It's never been easier to find information—and never harder for students to know what to trust.
>
> **- Faculty**

Call to action

So far, efforts to establish licensed SLMSs across Minnesota schools have been inadequate (Granias & Li, 2025). Yet more than 50 years of research has illustrated the correlation between having SLMSs in K-12 schools and increased student proficiency in subjects like reading and math (Burress et al., 2023; Otero Martinez, 2024; Wine et al., 2023). The positive effects that SLMSs have on student achievement appear to increase as their FTE status increases (Burress et al.,

2023). In other words, a full-time SLMS has more positive impact on student achievement than a part-time SLMS, but a part-time SLMS has more impact than having no SLMS at all.

SLMSs have a proven track record of supporting students across a variety of subjects. In addition, SLMSs "teach students about inquiry skills, evaluating information, and using multiple literacies (including print and digital). They also collaborate with classroom teachers and provide professional development to teachers" (Wine et al., 2023). It is critical to have these valuable educators integrated into schools and classrooms at a time when students are exposed to a near-constant flow of information, especially through social media.

> **If we don't adopt K-12 information literacy standards as a state, we need to have skilled professionals that can guide the work of teachers in their classrooms, provide research instruction, and institute curriculum on the use of technology and digital citizenship.**
>
> **– Faculty**

To better support students along the education pipeline, including their entry into post-secondary education or the workforce, Minnesota must have strong support for information literacy education. The Information and Technology Educators of Minnesota (ITEM), a division of the Minnesota Library Association, is seeking **increased attention to and investment in information literacy education in state policy and resources.** Specifically:

- **Ensure adequate staffing of licensed school library media specialists:** It is critical that Minnesota schools have staff who are dedicated to teaching information literacy. We know from prior research, that even if a school has a

SLMS on payroll, that individual may be employed very part time or do not have the support they need to do tasks and activities fundamental to an effective SLMS position (Granias & Li, 2025).

- **Ensure districts have a plan to integrate information literacy instruction:** Minnesota's revised 2025–2026 ELA standards include information and media literacy components, but they are not comprehensive. ELA standards alone taught without guidance from an SLMS are likely insufficient to ensure students develop the full range of information literacy skills needed in today's complex media environment. Recently updated standards, developed by ITEM, provide a comprehensive, research-informed framework designed to be implemented by a licensed SLMS in collaboration with classroom teachers. Districts should adopt a statewide information literacy framework —such as the ITEM standards—and designate a SLMS as instructional leaders responsible for guiding integration and student learning. Minnesota can look to New Jersey, which in 2023 became the first state to mandate information literacy instruction in public school curricula (New Jersey State Library, 2024). With updated ITEM standards already in place, Minnesota is well positioned to take action.

- **Provide funding for an educational campaign for SLMS across school districts:** Despite statutory requirements, there is limited awareness of the role and value of a full-time, licensed SLMS for schools. The state should fund a coordinated initiative to clarify statutory expectations, support districts in implementation, and elevate the instructional leadership role of SLMS. Strengthening awareness and implementation would help ensure existing requirements translate into meaningful practice and improved student outcomes.

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