



## AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH

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### FACT SHEET: THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF AMERICA'S COLLEGE STUDENTS

The National Survey of America's College Students (NSACS) surveyed the English-language abilities of 1,827 students in their final year at 80 randomly selected 2-year and 4-year public and private colleges and universities across the United States.

The survey measured abilities related to three types of skills: prose, document, and quantitative literacy. Prose literacy indicates the ability to read and understand information in newspapers, brochures, and instructional materials. Document literacy involves the ability to comprehend job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and food or prescription drug labels. Quantitative literacy involves the ability to perform computations – including balancing a checkbook, calculating a tip, or completing an order form. Literacy levels were categorized as *Below Basic*, *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Proficient* based on the abilities of participants.

#### The Literacy of College Students Compared to the Nation

- The average prose, document, and quantitative literacy of students in 2- and 4-year institutions is significantly higher than the average literacy of adults in the nation.
  - Across the literacy scales, the percentage of students in 2- and 4-year institutions with *Below Basic* literacy is significantly lower than the percentage of adults in the nation with *Below Basic* literacy. *Below Basic* literacy involves simple literacy skills, such as reading instructions to find out what a patient is allowed to drink before a medical test, or adding up amounts on a bank deposit slip.
    - One percent of students in 4-year institutions have *Below Basic* prose literacy skills, while one percent have *Below Basic* document literacy, and another one percent have *Below Basic* quantitative literacy.
    - Students in 2-year institutions scored similarly, with one percent having *Below Basic* skills in the prose and document categories, while four percent are *Below Basic* in quantitative literacy.

- Students in 2- and 4-year colleges have the most difficulty with quantitative literacy: approximately 30 percent of students in 2-year institutions and nearly 20 percent of students in 4-year institutions have only *Basic* quantitative literacy. *Basic* literacy skills are those necessary to compare ticket prices or calculate the cost of a sandwich and a salad from a menu.
- Among college students, there are no significant differences in the average prose, document, and quantitative literacy of men and women – indicating that women may be making progress in bridging a divide that has long existed between the sexes.
- The average literacy of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian students in 4-year colleges is significantly higher than that of adults in the same racial and ethnic groups in the nation.
- The average prose and quantitative literacy of White students in 4-year institutions is higher than for any other racial/ethnic group, mirroring trends in the general population. White students also have the highest prose and document literacy among 2-year colleges.

### **Institutional Context and Literacy**

- There are no significant differences in the literacy of students graduating from public and private institutions. Additionally, there are no differences in the skills of part-time and full-time students. Generally, there is no relationship between literacy and the length of time it takes to earn a degree, or between literacy and an academic major.
- Students in 4-year colleges have higher average prose, document, and quantitative literacy than their peers in 2-year colleges.
- The literacy of students in 2-year schools does not differ based on the academic or technical curricular emphasis of the school.

### **Student Characteristics and Literacy**

- Among students in 2- and 4-year institutions, average prose, document, and quantitative literacy is higher for U.S.-born students than for their foreign-born peers.
- Despite variations in income, most differences in the literacy of students across income groups are not significant. The only significant differences exist between students in 4-year institutions with the lowest and highest income backgrounds. Students in the highest income group (either their personal income or the income of their parents) have higher prose and document literacy than students in the lowest income group.
- The literacy levels of college students are directly related to the education of their parents: children whose parents graduated college or attended graduate school have higher literacy than students whose parents did not graduate high school or stopped after receiving a high school diploma or GED.
  - This pattern of results related to parents' education among students in 2-year institutions is similar to that of their peers in 4-year institutions.
- Students who graduate from U.S. high schools have higher literacy than graduates from foreign

high schools, though the literacy of students from foreign schools is similar to or greater than the literacy of all U.S. adults.

### College Experience and Literacy

- Prose and document literacy is higher for students in 2- and 4-year institutions who take classes that emphasize analytic thinking, such as evaluating the strength of arguments and applying theories to practical problems or new situations. Prose and quantitative literacy is lower for students in 4-year colleges and universities who say they frequently meet with their professors outside of class to discuss readings.
- Although students who switch colleges may face challenges, the average literacy of students in 2- and 4-year institutions does not differ based on the number of institutions they attend.
- For students in 4-year colleges, average prose, document, and quantitative literacy is similar across most majors.
  - Students in 2-year institutions have similar literacy to one another regardless of major.
- Among students in 4-year colleges, document and quantitative literacy is highest for students who plan to earn a professional degree (e.g., law, medicine, or dentistry).
  - For students in 2-year institutions, literacy is lowest for students who report they will stop their education after obtaining an Associate's degree.

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