

College Health Center Websites Need Lower Reading Levels



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College students face unique challenges when they leave home and live independently for the first time – including accessing healthcare. More and more college students today come to campus with significant health needs, including mental health challenges. Many may also need help managing serious conditions like asthma, diabetes, ADHD, autism, eating disorders, addiction, and physical disabilities.

University health centers provide this support and basic services, like flu shots, and often more complex services such as lab work, imaging services, and exams. But would a student understand that by visiting its website?

While college students are not traditionally considered to be at risk for low health literacy, [disparities exist](#). Using health resources independently may be a new experience for many, and with higher reading levels required, some may face additional barriers to understanding and using the health resources found on these websites.

In 2021, my colleagues and I conducted a study to evaluate the readability and suitability of a university health center's public website. Our research, now published in the journal [Perspectives in Health Information Management](#), found the website's content averaged above a 12th-grade reading level.

Universities should review websites to ensure materials provided are easily understood by everyone in the student body – especially any content related to healthcare. While there may be school-specific requirements in terms of website layout, format, and style, the patient education resources provided on the website should be examined for reading level.

There are tools available to assist with determining reading levels.

These tools look at things like the number of syllables in a word, number of words in a sentence, and number of sentences on a page. Results are reported out by grade level (years of education) required to understand the material. Examples:

- [Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level \(F-KGL\)](#)
- [Flesch Reading Ease \(FRE\)](#)
- [Simple Measure of Gobbledygook \(SMOG\)](#)

With [Healthy People 2030](#) health literacy goals in mind, universities have a responsibility to provide health information that is easy to access, understand, and use.

The demand for health services in college settings will continue to rise as enrollment of students with disabilities and mental health concerns among other medical conditions continue to increase.

Recognizing the varying abilities – including reading skills – of students is an important step in improving health literacy on college campuses, and beyond.

Health information professionals working in higher education settings can advocate for improved readability and accessibility of patient education and resources on websites.

While we usually think of health information professionals in healthcare organization settings, opportunities exist in college health centers where an impact can be made to assist students.

Notably, and of importance to the profession, both the [American College Health Association](#) and the [Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors](#) support the Cures Act Final Rule as a means to empower college students as consumers of health and mental health services and issued official [guidance](#) in May 2022.

As students graduate and move into new careers, self-management of healthcare becomes a part of life. Using readability tools to improve website content is a basic step to improving communication and health literacy.

About the Author

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Dr. Alice Noblin is an Associate Professor in the School of Health Management and Informatics, and currently serves as interim Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Community Innovation and Education at the University of Central Florida. She has been in academia since 2001. Prior to this, she worked in a variety of inpatient and outpatient settings, including as manager and independent contractor. She is past president of the Florida Health Information Management Association (FHIMA) and has been recognized with two AHIMA Triumph Awards, for Educator and Research.