The availability of information on the Internet and its near-universal accessibility make it a tremendously useful tool for research. More and more, students are conducting their research exclusively on the Internet. While the Internet can be a valuable source of information, it is important for counseling students, emerging scholars in the field, to recognize that the material on the Internet is of uneven quality. Academic journals and books have already been evaluated by scholars and publishers, but information on the Internet has no filters or review process. Thus, conducting academic research on the Internet is a specialized skill that requires thought, patience, perseverance, and a critical approach to the information.

**Electronic Databases and On-line Journals.** Academic libraries at colleges and universities participate in a scholarly community of resources that includes electronic databases. These databases catalog academic journals and books that are available either on-line or through print resources. Electronic databases that catalog only scholarly works serve, in essence, as a clearinghouse for scholars. Material included in these databases, most commonly journal articles and scholarly books, has met the rigorous standards of the academic discipline. At present, most (but not all) academic journals are available in both electronic and print format. The electronic copy is a duplicate of what appears in print and has met the same rigorous standards of peer review. Your university pays a fee to allow students and faculty to access this material, just as they would pay a subscription fee to have print copies available in the library. Other journal articles are not available electronically or do not have copies of the journal from previous years available in electronic format, and you will need to physically go to the library to obtain this information. There are hundreds of different electronic databases, and many are specifically tailored to particular disciplines. For example, your university might have access to PsychLit®, PsychInfo®, ERIC®, or MedLine®. All of these databases include scholarly information related to the field of counseling (PsychLit® and PsychInfo® are primarily for psychology and the social sciences, whereas ERIC® is an educational clearinghouse, and MedLine® contains information about medicine and health). There are other databases that are available and may be relevant to scholars in the field. You will need to search your library’s electronic database collection to know what material can be accessed from your university. EBSCOHost® is a popular, very inclusive, database that many universities have available for their students and faculty. However, EBSCOHost® contains both academic and non-academic (general) resources, and users must differentiate between scholarly and general information. It may be useful for you to ask the faculty in your program which electronic databases they use and recommend for your college or university.

**Search Engines.** Popular search engines (e.g., Google®, Yahoo®, MSN®) allow users to access billions of websites that are available on the Internet. However, access to information is not the same as access to high quality, accurate, useful information. Google Scholar® is a freely-accessible search engine that indexes the full text of scholarly literature across a wide variety of disciplines. Students who have access to university libraries, however, will find that they often must pay a subscription fee to access full text of articles in Google Scholar® whereas this same information may be available for free through the university’s electronic databases. Thus, Google Scholar® and other academic search engines (e.g., Elsevier®, Web of Science®) may be useful places to start an academic search, but to access full text of articles, it may be most cost-effective to use the university’s databases.
Websites. The Internet is a level playing field. Anyone can develop a Web page, and all information, from the highest quality to the most questionable, is equally available to anyone who browses the Internet. Kirk (1996) cautions that the Internet epitomizes the concept of Caveat lector: Let the reader beware. Students should exercise extreme caution in including information from commercial websites in their scholarly work, as most professors do not consider this information to meet criteria for academic work. If websites are to be used for scholarly purposes, there are five major criteria to help evaluate the quality of a website (Germain & Horne, 1997; Kapoun, 1998)

- **Accuracy**
  - Who is the author?
  - What are his/her credentials and affiliation(s)?
  - Do the affiliations indicate possibility of bias?
  - Does the website include contact information?
  - Is the information presented factual?
  - Does the author support information with evidence?

- **Authority/Credibility**
  - Who published the website (check the URL)?
  - If information is included from other sources, is it properly cited?
  - What is the domain designation:
    - com: commercial, hosted by a company
    - .org: non-profit organization
    - .mil: military branch of the government
    - .net: usually an internet service provider
    - .gov: governmental website
    - .edu: educational institution

- **Objectivity**
  - What are the goals/objectives of the website?
  - What opinions (if any) are expressed?
  - Is the website a "mask" for advertising?
  - Use a critical eye – ask, Why was this written and for whom?

- **Timeliness**
  - When was the website produced? Has it been updated?
  - Are the links updated frequently?

- **Coverage**
  - Is the information accessible?
  - Do you have to pay an additional fee to access any of the material?