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Kathy Campbell and Leslie Adebonojo

The baby boomer generation is larger than any generation that has preceded it. Boomers are more likely to live longer and better than previous generations, and they have changed jobs more often than previous generations. They understand the necessity and have the desire to be life-long learners. As a whole, boomers are an idealistic and optimistic group of people who expect to be active and productive well into their retirement. Many expect to work beyond the traditional retirement age so they return to school to either learn new skills or enhance their present skills. Others return to school for self-actualization—they want to get that diploma that they were not able to get when they were younger, satisfy their curiosity, or learn skills that will help them give back to their communities. A third group attends classes for the social opportunities that colleges and universities offer.

Many baby boomers, who are attending college for the first time or going back after long absences, are shocked when they first enter an academic library. While they may have experience using e-mail, Facebook, or the Internet for simple searches, they do not know where to begin to find the resources that they need for their class assignments. Librarians not only have to show baby boomer students how to find sources, but also have to help them develop the confidence they need to succeed.

According to the U.S, Department of Education, in 2005 "…adults 50 and older represent 3.8 percent of the 17 million students nationwide who are enrolled in for-credit courses at degree-granting colleges and universities" (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 3). Whether to train for job advancement, satisfy intellectual curiosity, or socialize, baby boomers are returning to college. "The population 65 and over has increased from 35 million in 2000 to 41.4 million in 2011 and is projected to more than double to 92 million in 2060… People 65 and over represent 13.3% of the population in 2011 but are expected to grow to be 21% of the population by 2040" (Administration on Aging, 2012, p. 3). Based on these statistics, we predict that academic librarians can expect to serve many more baby boomers in their libraries.

Both the federal and state governments recognize the potential of this group of older adults for growing our economy. The U.S. Department of Education views the attainment of a college degree by adults as a critical issue and has developed a manual for state and local policy makers to help them increase the number of adult graduates. This "tool kit" focuses on three areas: access to college; initiatives to enhance the quality of both faculty and programs; and the development of services that support graduation by addressing student barriers. Within each stage of development, this report stresses that state and local governments need to build partnerships and support services that help adult students persist through barriers to graduation (Tolbert, 2012). Good libraries with strong service orientations are a critical part of the equation for academic success; therefore, academic librarians should include services for older students as they develop strategic plans for their libraries.

Many states are also recognizing the potential of this pool of people. For example, the State of Tennessee has set a goal that 55 percent of the population between the ages of 25 and 65 will have college degrees by 2025 in order to be competitive internationally (Wright, 2011). A supporting report further states that "in order to reach top international competitiveness by 2025, the U.S. and 32 states (including Tennessee) cannot close the gap with even best performance with traditional college students.

They must rely on the reentry pipeline—getting older adults back into the education system and on track attaining college degrees" (Wright, 2011, slide 15).

As an incentive to encourage older residents to go back to school, the State of Tennessee allows senior citizens to attend public colleges and universities to audit or seek a degree with waivers and tuition discounts. According to Middle Tennessee State University's website:

. . .persons who will become sixty (60) years of age or older during the academic quarter or semester in which such persons begin classes and, who are domiciled in Tennessee, may audit courses at any state-supported college or university without paying tuition charges, maintenance fees, student activity fees or registration fees; however, this privilege may be limited or denied by the college or university on an individual classroom basis according to space availability.

Furthermore,

. . .persons who will become sixty-five (65) years of age or older during the academic quarter or semester, whichever is applicable, in which such persons begin classes and, who are domiciled in Tennessee, may be enrolled in courses, for credit at state-supported colleges and universities without payment of tuition charges, maintenance fees, student activity fees or registration fees, except that the board of trustees of the University of Tennessee and the board of regents of the state university and community college system may provide for a service fee which may be charged by the institutions under their respective jurisdictions, the fee to be for the purpose of helping to defray the cost of keeping the records of such students and not to exceed seventy dollars ($70) a semester (Bursar's Office, 2014).

Between 2008 and 2012 (fall semesters) at East Tennessee State University (ETSU), 6,328 out of 70,632 students were over age 40. Of these students, 285 were freshmen. During the fall semesters of 2011 and 2012, 1,104 out of 4,392 graduate students were over 40 years old. Regardless of whether baby boomers are entering college for the first time or returning to school to work on a master's degree after twenty years, nontraditional (older) students have different needs than younger students. While younger students grew up with computers, boomers did not, and many come to college with varying computer skills. The librarians at ETSU have found that baby boomers not only have different needs than younger students, but that first time students may have also have different needs from returning students. Baby boomers who are returning to complete a degree or work on a master's degree often feel intimidated by all the online resources. Students often ask where the card catalog is located since they used a card catalog when they were last in school. After learning that the card catalog has been "retired," the next question is "But how will I find books?" Boomers who are entering college for the first time have the same fears about online resources, but are also adapting to an academic environment that is totally foreign to anything they have experienced before. As librarians who have taught library instruction sessions, we routinely interrupt classes to help students (most of them older) set up e-mail accounts, change passwords (explaining why it is not advisable to use social security numbers for passwords), and catch them up to the rest of the class. They lack confidence and can be easily intimidated in classes where younger students seem to have the advantage. Along with teaching research and library skills, librarians need to act as cheerleaders who help students develop an "I CAN DO IT" attitude.

It helps students to be able to talk to people who can empathize with their experiences. They need to work with librarians who are helpful and patient. How do we know? We've been there ourselves. The head of reference likes to tell older students about how she came to ETSU. She earned her master's degree in 1979 and her previous library experience had been in small libraries that did not have computers. She not only had to learn how to use electronic databases, but also how to use a computer. In fact, she had never sent an e-mail before she applied for a position at ETSU and had to wake her husband up at 11:30 p.m. to show her how to attach the application document to an e-mail. After getting the job, she also called him regularly during the day for help while her abilities grew. The learning curve was high, but she persevered and mastered the necessary skills. She can honestly tell students, "I did it and you can too!"

The undergraduate student services librarian, on the other hand, went back to school to obtain a degree that was required for the job she wanted. She had received a master's degree over 35 years earlier, but

had not been in a classroom since that time. She worried about several things, including whether she was smart enough to keep up with the younger students. Fortunately, she realized after several weeks that they were not smarter, just quicker to grasp the information.

Research and writing were other concerns. Even though she was a librarian, she was not prepared for the changes in searching databases and using an online catalog. The university library had over 110 databases, which presented an overwhelming array of resources. She had not written a research paper in over 25 years. She did not have experience with any kind of word processing system as she only used her home computer for sending e-mails. As she recalls, "The first paper assignment almost caused me to have a heart attack (remember baby boomers take success very seriously)! Luckily for me the professor told me to go the university tutoring center for advice."

We have discovered that baby boomers are some of the best students to work with because they have a strong desire to be successful in their classes. Since these students are often juggling jobs and family responsibilities as well as school, they realize the importance of managing their time. Consequently, they pay attention in library instruction classes and ask questions to ensure comprehension of the materials. They also take advantage of opportunities to meet individually with librarians for help on their specific projects. In fact, many will come several times over the course of their studies to catch up with what is new in the library since they value services that can save them time and effort.

So how can academic librarians best serve their older students? The key is to understand their particular needs. Here are some things that librarians need to keep in mind when working with boomers:

- Some students may be unfamiliar with technology that we take for granted. When working with them in the library, librarians might have to explain a skill (such as how to change a password or how to attach a document to an e-mail) several times. They might even need to help new students find a course outside the university that teaches very basic computer skills since colleges and universities expect their students to have certain computer skills before they take classes. Remember that these students are highly motivated to succeed but that they may require a little extra time to get up to speed.
- Librarians also need to be aware that boomers might have some physical issues that younger students may not have. It is one of the unfortunate facts of life that many people will lose their hearing as they age. Simple strategies to employ when talking to people with hearing loss include facing patrons, speaking clearly and slowly, avoiding complex sentences, and keeping your hands away from your face while speaking. For more tips, check out the University of California San Francisco Medical Center's "Communicating with People with Hearing Loss" at **http://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/communicating_with_people_with_hearing_loss/**.
- During 2007-2009, "one in five (22%) adults in the United States report having doctor diagnosed arthritis" (Centers for Disease Control, 2010). Arthritic fingers can make typing a nightmare. Sometimes helping patrons with a search might go beyond suggesting search terms and actually typing the search for them.
- Baby boomers have many outside obligations so librarians must be flexible about scheduling one-on-one appointments. It is important to accommodate students who cannot meet within the normal 8-4:30, Monday through Friday work schedule. It even may be advantageous to meet in a location outside of the library that has wireless connections (e.g., McDonald's or a local public library).
- Baby boomers have many adjustments to make as they return to college. The head of reference (who returned to college to work on her master's degree after two years in the work force) recalls that one of the most difficult adjustments for her was to relearn how to work under deadlines. We suspect that many new or returning students also find this adjustment difficult in addition to dealing with all the red tape involved with attending school, so librarians should be prepared to deal patiently with frustrated students.
- Most librarians are invited to teach library instruction classes by individual instructors. Since they usually have only one opportunity to meet with students, librarians instinctively want to cram as much information as possible into one 55-minute session so they move quickly from one topic to another. Consequently, it can be extremely challenging for many students to keep up with the

- librarian, and students may be too embarrassed to stop the class and ask for help. Librarians should encourage their students to make one-on-one appointments for more help. Leave business cards by the door so students can pick them up as they leave.
- Older students can be reluctant to jump in and explore online library resources because they fear the possibility of crashing the system if they press the wrong key. Librarians should reinforce the need to experiment with online resources and help students replace their fear of breaking expensive equipment with the confidence necessary to work effectively with technology.
- Language matters. Many boomers do not see themselves as seniors or older adults, so marketing that uses these terms will not catch their attention. According to *Mapping New Directions: Higher Education for Older Adults*, "terms such as *third age* and *lifelong learning* are appealing to older adults across age cohorts because they imply a continuum of learning" (American Council on Education, 2008, p. 3).

It is difficult to offer library services specifically targeted to baby boomers since universities do not segregate them from younger students; however, the following list contains suggestions that would be helpful to boomers (as well as many younger students):

- The most important service that a library can offer to their baby boomer students is one-on-one appointments. Many older students will come more than once for information, advice, and sympathy.
- Baby boomers might enjoy having a personal librarian. When they feel overwhelmed by all they need to do when returning to school, they might appreciate having one less decision to make. We give students a handout assigning them to a librarian when they come to campus for orientation.
- Library hours should include lots of evening and weekend hours to accommodate people who are working or have family obligations. Look at your statistics to determine when you answer most of your reference questions. Check the work schedule to be sure that the reference desk is staffed with reference librarians rather than graduate assistants during peak periods. Be sure to have librarians provide back up at the reference desk when it is scheduled with staff or graduate assistants.
- A federated search engine, such as EBSCO Discovery Service, is a great tool to discover the depth of a library's collection, but this may not be the best tool for people who are overwhelmed with resources and not sure how to narrow down their results (think of students trying to select the best 5 resources for a paper when their search retrieves 4,500 citations). Try steering them to one or two appropriate databases and be sure that they know how to use the limit features of these databases.
- If possible, answer reference questions with individualized short videos. These can help older students grasp ideas. Examples of types of questions to answers with a video include how to fill in a database search box or how to search the online catalog for an ebook.
- Contact offices on campus that provide services to older students (the Adult, Commuter & Transfer Services Office at ETSU) and ask to give a presentation to their staff and students. Also see if they will post a PDF of your library brochure on their home page.
- Offer short (30 minute) brown bag classes on a regular basis. Topics can vary (e.g., using Google Scholar, searching PubMed, or learning how to export journal citations into RefWorks) as can the time when they are offered. This is a great way to connect with students who do not have other opportunities to get this type of information.

Libraries can develop fantastic services, but the success of these services really depends on how they are marketed. We encourage the use of a variety of marketing tools. Traditional methods of marketing, including fliers posted on bulletin boards around campus (include individual departments, student hangouts, and cars), articles in the student newspaper, table tents placed in cafeterias, and announcements on campus radio stations, are very effective. Departmental assistants can also help spread your message to faculty and students. Check to see if your university posts announcements on their home page and feed them information to post. According to the Pew Research Center, "Among the Boomer-aged segment of Internet users ages 50-64, social networking site usage on a typical day grew a significant 60% (from 20% to 32%)," so do not forget to post information for baby boomers on Facebook

and other social media sites (Madden, 2011).

In conclusion, librarians who work with baby boomers must remember that boomers come back to school for a variety of reasons and with a variety of technological and research skills. They also bring a determination to succeed so it is our job to help them be successful. While these students may have needs that make working with them challenging, librarians might very well discover that if they treat older students with patience and respect, these students might very easily become favorite patrons.

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