

Five Things Libraries Need to Know About Emerging Adults

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📖 He is currently reading *Being Peace* by Thich Nhat Hanh and *Moonglow* by Michael Chabon.

Emerging adults are people ages 18 to 30 who are somewhere on the way towards reaching the five traditional markers of adulthood (leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, having kids). Over the last few months, a group of California librarians and I have been researching this group in order to identify service models for them in a white paper under the auspices of the California State Library/California Library Association's first-ever Leadership

Challenge.¹ One of the biggest surprises for me was that while there have been more than a thousand empirical studies published about emerging adults in academia since 2000, barely a morsel of this has made it into library literature. Other than Audrey Barbakoff's *Adults Just Wanna Have Fun: Programs for Emerging Adults* (ALA Editions, 2016) and a few webinars, librarians don't seem to pay much attention to the post-teen set. This is a shame because services aimed at emerging adults align

squarely with the purposes and missions of nearly every library. What follows are a few take-aways from our research that can help you get started.

Inroads to Engagement

Emerging adulthood is a major time for identity development. During these years almost everything about a young person's life tends to be in flux. This fact highlights opportunities for libraries such as assistance in career planning; developing purpose and values through social

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activities (such as the ones in Barbakoff's book); skill-sharing; building social opportunity; and promoting stronger community connections between emerging adults and civic organizations. While emerging adults who attend college may already be seeing some of these types of programs (perhaps through their university libraries), it is obvious that there is a need for deeper engagement on transitional issues for non-college and at-risk emerging adults.

Here Comes Generation Z

A new generation is replacing Millennials as the forthcoming crop of emerging adults, and our environmental scan showed that, as the most diverse generation in American history, their values emphasize inclusion and authenticity from their institutions. Libraries need to take cues from this when hiring, training, designing marketing materials, and envisioning their services. If members of Generation Z don't see their diversity represented in libraries, they're going to wonder why, and there's a strong chance they'll raise these questions publicly on social media. We know that Millennials love libraries,² but we also need to be actively connecting with the incoming generation on their terms. That means less as book-lending institutions and more as places that "provide some unique service like special events, speakers, or even something like video game tournaments," according to an

interview with Jacob Chang and Nadya Okamoto of the teen-led JÜV Consulting.³

The Need for Purpose

Purpose is defined in Kendall Bronk's *Purpose in Life: A Critical Component of Optimal Youth Development* (Springer, 2014) as "a stable and generalized intention that is at once meaningful to the self and at the same time leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond-the-self."⁴ A review of studies in the same book shows that roughly 25% of young adults demonstrate a clear sense of purpose in life, a figure that does not increase into adulthood. This means that the majority of emerging adults are either stuck somewhere in their purpose-seeking or have no clear sense of it at all. Focusing on purpose development is one way libraries can have a meaningful influence on the lives of emerging adults in the present and moving forward, especially since the presence of purpose through various life stages is associated with better health, resilience, long-term psychological well-being, and day-to-day contentedness.

What We Know

After having read probably a hundred articles and a few books on emerging adulthood, it has become clear to me that there are a few things about which researchers are fairly certain:

- Mentorship in various areas of

life (career, education, relationship) is extremely beneficial to the long-term prospects of at-risk emerging adults.

- There is a huge opportunity gap between college and non-college age youth, but studies show that two-year community colleges can do a great deal to mitigate this.
- While volunteerism among emerging adults is currently in an upswing, many institutions such as unions, religious organizations, and civic groups that, in decades past, used to usher non-college youth into civic engagement have been seeing decreases in membership for quite a while.
- Rising marriage age and the increasing cost of education, among other factors, mean that we can expect the intermediary period known as emerging adulthood to continue to expand. Currently, the average ages are 18 to 30, but the next decades could see young adults "settle down" even later. This has consequences for communities, since those who aren't in a position to put down roots in a place tend to remain uninvolved in shaping it.

Unsurprising Results

As part of our research, we conducted an online and in-person survey where we gathered information from around 160 emerging adults.⁵ What we found was in line with what the academic

literature has shown about emerging adults. For example, current goals were related to reaching the traditional markers of adulthood. When asked what they wanted to see in their communities, top answers were events in the community, less racism (echoing the previous Generation Z section), a clean neighborhood, and opportunities to learn life skills. Top three reasons respondents visited the library were to check out books, study, and for a quiet environment. Top three reasons some didn't visit the library were their busy schedule, inconvenient library hours, and no interest in library services. In informal conversations with some of the respondents, it quickly became clear that many were not aware of the breadth of services public libraries offer.

Conclusion

Indeed, little of the findings can lead to action if the models for reaching emerging adults remain the same. Emerging adults will not accidentally find public libraries and benefit from their services, particularly at-risk youth. The onus is on us to establish strategic partnerships with community-based organizations who serve the target age group or we need to leave the library and make direct connections with emerging adults. This won't occur if librarians and library management expect the future of libraries to sit squarely in staffing service desks and maintaining collections. That said, I'm optimistic that librarians will make the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of the next generations! 📖

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The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) is seeking applications for its seventh biennial "Bill Morris Seminar: Book Evaluation Training," to be held on Friday, January 24, 2020, prior to the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. The Morris Seminar will bring new ALSC members and members with limited evaluation experience together with those who have served on ALSC's media evaluation committees in an environment to train and mentor them in the group process and in children's media evaluation techniques. The Morris Endowment supports those selected to attend by offering the seminar at no charge to the attendee. This includes all materials, breakfast, lunch, and afternoon break on Friday. To help defray additional costs for hotel and other expenses, a \$350 stipend for each attendee will be provided by the endowment. Information and the application form are available on the ALSC website at www.ala.org/alsc/morrisseminar. Applications must be received by September 2, 2019. Attendees selected to attend the seminar will be notified in early October. 📖