

An Age-Based Comparison of Information Seeking Habits at the McClung Historical Collection of the Knox County Public Library System

Abstract

This research paper compares user habits at the McClung Historical Collection of the Knox County Public Library System by age group. It focuses on the age differences and how age can play a factor in what types of interfaces patrons use. Drawing on previous literature and research the survey was conducted over a week's time. This survey, a general questionnaire, was simple in format, but posed questions specifically relating to computer usage. The methodology and results of this survey are discussed in detail. Recommendations for immediate and further action are proposed as well. The purpose of this study was to statistically prove older patrons at the McClung Collection rely on print materials and interpersonal communication more than they rely on computer interaction.

Introduction

Information seeking habits of patrons visiting the McClung Historical Collection can vary depending on age. With the advent of technological advancements in the Information Sciences profession and libraries in particular, many demographics of users continue to feel isolated. Often this group comprises itself of seniors in the community. Seniors do not have the advantage of growing up in an era when computers played a prominent role in their homes, schools, or workplaces, as they do today. This

unfamiliarity with technology, primarily concerning computers and the Internet, exists as a credible barrier to information gathering. This view parallels much research conducted on the topic, including that by researcher Don Wicks. His extensive research points to the fact that many seniors prefer to have interpersonal communication rather than technological communication, or as they see it, “impersonal” communication (Wicks 2004).

In the McClung Historical Collection, which specializes in Genealogy and local History of the Knoxville area, resources continually shift to computer technology. The ‘Card Catalog’ exists only on computer in the form of a PAC terminal, many indexes no longer exist in a hardcopy format, and much Genealogical material exists only via the Internet. Granted, at the McClung Collection all of these sources readily await patron use, but the main problems rest with those patrons afraid or intimidated by the technological formats, not the information itself. While many patrons value the ease of use, speed of information and the flexibility of electronic information, other users, seniors in particular, see these changes as obstacles to research (Fasulo 2001). This analysis examines results from an original study focusing on the variations of information seeking habits of different age groups at the McClung Historical Collection and how these results could be used to improve services to all patrons regardless of age. This study represents imperative and vital research considering the fact that on an observational level, the average age demographic of McClung patrons fall on the higher end of most age range groups, as compared to most public library users and more specifically compared to the overall user group of the Knox County Public Library System. This analysis will particularly observe

electronic mediums to ascertain the level of difficulty in accessing desired information and which age groups are affected the most.

It should be noted that this study makes no assumptions or generalizations regarding the age of patrons who fall within this category. Many seniors feel entirely comfortable with electronic formats and that number continues to rise. (Kelly and Hibner 2005). Individuals in other age groups may feel uncomfortable with technology as well, negating the fact that only seniors have this phobia. However, a large contingent of seniors have not gained that confidence level. Focusing on the senior population of the McClung Collection however, makes the most sense, in that they comprise the largest group of users to the Collection and comprise the largest group of individuals that might potentially feel intimidated by technological advancements. Although the primary goal of this project hopes to discover the information-seeking habits of seniors, patrons of all ages will be examined to gain a better understanding of the differences in these age groups. The end result of this research project will be to find potential solutions to bridge the gap between the patrons that have obtained a certain comfort level with technology and those that have not.

Literature

The obvious beginning point for this project starts with an examination of any previous studies relating to, or complimenting the goal of this particular study. No individual studies have been performed at the McClung Collection on user access and age-based comparisons. In that regard this study deems itself unique. However, research has been conducted on the broader topic of seniors, and seniors and any problems that have arisen due to the increased use of computers in society. (Lawhorn and Ennis, Ellis

and Allaire, and Hanson). On the whole, large amounts of research exist covering the topic of seniors and their unfamiliarity with computers and the Internet. A search on one database alone, Dialog, resulted in nearly 100 articles, most covering the topic from a broader perspective. Searches on other databases, such as the Tennessee Electronic Library, GoogleScholar, and the University of Tennessee Libraries Catalog resulted in hundreds or even thousands of hits depending on the database being used. This research will focus on literature relating to the actual relationship of seniors and their specific library environments once they enter a specific facility. For the purposes of this paper that 'environment' will be the McClung Historical Collection. This analysis will not access homebound seniors, or those that choose not to be library patrons. Nor will it look at research based on seniors and computer use outside of the library setting. This literature review attempted to focus on material published in the last 3-4 years, as the fast-paced world of the Internet has dramatically changed and the Internet user base continues to grow. Older articles that include pertinent and relevant information may also be discussed. These factors narrowed the field of applicable research considerably.

Relevancy and Approaches of Applicable Literature

Scrutinizing the related articles on this topic and applying the parameters set above, roughly thirty were used as comparable studies. Narrowing the field further, only twenty contained relevant information on the interaction of seniors and technology in library settings. The most prolific author on this topic in recent years seems to be Dan Wicks. His article "Older Adults and Their Information Seeking" (2004) has been cited by many other researchers. He has also written several different articles on the subject and conducted much supplementary research. In addition to Wicks, Linda Fasulo

conducted research at the Collier County Public Library in Collier County Florida on teaching seniors to use library computers and the Internet in the Collier County system. This study, as well as a study performed at Woodson Regional Library in Chicago, Illinois by Lisa Burwell, closely parallels the goal of the McClung study. Due to the topical nature of the research being conducted and the previous research indicating that seniors preferred interpersonal communications, the methodologies tend toward qualitative analysis. Interviews, discussion groups and questionnaires seem to be the primary methods used. Generally, the researchers used more than one of those methodologies. Following this trend, the research performed at the McClung Collection will consist of a questionnaire and possible one-on-one follow-up discussions. The questionnaire will consist of yes/no questions, short-answer questions, and a section for patrons to list any additional items not included in the questionnaire itself. In addition to the questionnaire, participants will be encouraged to verbally share any ideas, concerns or suggestions with the researcher.

Strengths and Gaps of Pertinent Literature

Overall the research compiled thus far consistently agrees that there continues to be a problem between seniors and their library environments, but more specifically between this group of users and any electronic forms of interaction. Nearly all of the research within the last four years shows that this divide grows smaller with each passing year. However, many library systems do not address the issue or make changes reflecting the needs of this demographic. It should be noted that this topic has warranted much research and much discussion, which represents a significant asset to the topic as a whole. Many researchers have investigated this general topic and are applying their findings to

help find solutions. The vast amount of research helps the information community understand how to improve services for seniors and suggests what types of systems seniors prefer. Especially with the large number of people fitting into this demographic, libraries should benefit from the studies that have already been conducted. Public library branches that have no special collections departments do not necessarily have to perform individual studies, they have already been done. Library managers and administrators can examine this research and find comparisons to their own branches or systems. The McClung Historical Collection, however, ranks as a special collection branch of the public library. This type of facility consists of unique rules and unique materials. In addition to the unique nature of the facility, the user base generally consists of a specific demographic, with a large senior population comprising these users. Analysis of special collection libraries did not surface during the literature review. This fact also warranted this research project.

A general gap in the existing literature refers to the limited number of studies directly related to seniors and their interactions with different information systems once they enter a library facility. Many of the studies emphasized how the group gathers information in their daily lives and whether or not that includes the library. (Smith and Knight 2005). Other studies examined the fear many seniors have when discussing computers and computer use. (Fasulo 2001) Still others only looked at how to manage computer-training classes for seniors. (Webb 2002, Burwell 2001, Kelly and Hibner 2005) While these studies hold a level of importance in the field, they do not explain the steps this demographic follow to find information once they enter their own library setting. This study will examine this topic on a very small, specific scale.

A more specific gap in the available research that addresses this individual project relates to the fact that no one has yet examined this issue at the McClung Historical Collection. The librarians and staff understand the limitations of many patrons that frequent McClung and attempt to work with them accordingly. However, to better address this as a branch, the McClung Collection would benefit from patron input and additional research. Gathering applicable data to better understand the depth of this problem will enable all employees to gain a better understanding of the patron base and their information seeking habits, why they choose certain formats over other formats, and where McClung can improve its services.

Methodology

No research has been conducted on the age-based differences of information seeking habits of patrons at the McClung Historical Collection. With this in mind, it was decided that a quantitative survey would be a valid starting point for the research. To better evaluate patron use, the survey consists of 14 multi-part, yes/no or 'please comment' questions. These questions ask patrons what types of materials they used and why they did or did not use other types of materials. The questionnaire does contain one question, number twelve, on the participant's age and what age bracket the particular user falls within. The six age categories are: Under 35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75 and 76 and over. In addition to the yes/no or comment questions, participants are given space to write any additional comments or suggestions. The purpose of the questionnaire is twofold. First, it will provide valuable information to the management of the McClung Collection on user habits and user satisfaction in general. Second, it will provide information on different age groups and how their habits do or do not differ from one

another. Questions two, three and four all pertain to the use of the electronic card catalog and the ability of the respondents to find applicable information and resources with that particular interface. Question five, which is a three-part question, pertains to the use of the Internet computers. Finally, question six, which is also a three-part question, pertains to the use of microfilm resources. These five questions represent the primary focus of this study. Are materials available through these interfaces user-friendly? Do certain age groups feel more comfortable with certain types of materials and interfaces? Does age matter at all when accessing materials at McClung?

Assumptions

The researcher's personal assumptions prior to beginning the data collection consisted of one major concept about the user group. That concept rests with the idea that individual users in higher age brackets, more than likely the top three age brackets examined, 56-65, 66-75 and 76 and over, will not be as proficient or comfortable with technological interfaces. This assumption may be incorrect. However, a primary goal of this research project is evaluating the results and examining any alternatives the McClung Collection may have for reference librarians when assisting patrons, specifically senior patrons. While the researcher makes this assumption based solely on observation, it will make no recommendations until all research results are evaluated. In addition, the findings may show seniors use alternative methods or alternative interfaces for reasons other than feeling intimidated by the technology, such as eyestrain, or being physically uncomfortable in a computer workstation. If participants share this information honestly, the answers will be represented in the results. If they do not share this information the results could warrant further research.

Looking past the researcher's personal assumptions of the patrons themselves, the assumptions being made for research purposes are the following: customer foot traffic will be on par with normal foot traffic, user habits will be similar to normal user habits, no major changes will occur involving technical interfaces at the McClung Collection, all computers and databases will be operational, and all materials and services will be available to patrons. If these assumptions are accurate the research should not contain any obvious or extreme biases. These assumptions also ensure that the environment of the patrons during the collection of the data is no different than at any other time.

Possible Biases

This survey and the results taken from the survey, attempt to be unbiased. As with any research this may not be possible. The survey will be a random sampling of patrons. The McClung Collection requires all patrons to sign a guest register when they enter the facility. At their point of entry they were asked if they would like to participate in a patron survey. Since this method gives patrons the option of taking part, the final sample may not be completely representative of the McClung audience. Patrons that could provide insightful information might be included in the group of users choosing not to participate. In addition, the focus group of users, 'seniors', may choose not to participate for a variety of reasons, such as the ones listed above that refer to physical hardships, which might skew the results as well.

The questionnaire was administered over a 6-day period from Tuesday through Sunday. The project started with the goal of collecting at least 50 completed questionnaires. With the management of McClung, it was decided that an intensive collection of surveys over a few days would give a clear picture of user habits. Some

qualifiers for this were: have at least one evening shift included, and have at least one weekend shift included. The end results will contain information from one evening, two weekend and three weekday samples. This type of collection might lead to other sorts of biases. For instance the week chosen may have anomalies in the visitors to the building. Large groups of school age children could be using the collection for research purposes, which is not the norm, or large groups of tourists could be using the collection for purposes other than research. While these users' needs are important, having a large percentage of their responses included in the findings could misconstrue the research figures. These groups of users are not regular patrons and as such, would not constitute the core focus of the study. To ensure that this type of event does not occur, the administrators of the project attempted to evaluate patrons as they entered the collection to ascertain if they were with a school group, only walking through the facility, or with any other type of group that would be out of the norm for McClung users. This type of on-the-spot evaluation can also lead to bias by eliminating certain users, but the focus of the research is on those patrons that use specific materials, exactly how they use those materials and what methods they use to access information. Eliminating these groups from consideration does not automatically constitute a strong bias in the researcher's opinion. Quite the contrary, it enabled the focus group to be smaller and more manageable. Another potential bias lies with those assisting in distributing the survey itself. The researcher solicited volunteers to help administer the surveys. These were other reference librarians at the McClung Collection. While these librarians are knowledgeable and understood the purpose of the survey, some admitted to giving the survey to certain patrons they deemed insightful or that might give the responses we were

looking for. While this decision-making on their part represented good intentions, it could potentially result in skewed numbers and could end up as a form of purposive sampling.

Variables

The primary variable within this study will be age. This will be a mutually exclusive, independent variable where respondents will only belong to one category. This variable will be a guiding force in evaluating the final data. If a respondent falls within a certain age category, their patterns of use and how they differ from respondents that fall in other age categories will be evaluated. Two antecedent variables could be the education level of the patrons and any computer training the patrons have received. These variables will not be addressed in the survey, but could play a role in accessing materials. The dependent variables will be patterns of use once respondents enter the McClung Collection. For instance: Do patrons use the card catalog first? Do they shelf-read to find appropriate titles? Do they immediately use the Internet computers? Or do they ask for assistance from the librarians? These dependent variables, representing user habits, will be analyzed to see if a corollary exists between age and the use of resources. There may be no existing corollary at all. Two other variables studied will be the familiarity users have with the computer resources at McClung and the familiarity users have with all resources available at McClung. Computer familiarity will play a vital role in the study. Those patrons, regardless of age, that do not have a comfort level with computers, may choose not to access any materials via that technology, but may be able to access limited amounts of information at McClung due to familiarity. Another variable will be the regular patrons that are so familiar with the collection they rarely need assistance, other than with the specialized materials. Many of these patrons never

need to use the card catalog because they are incredibly familiar with the organization of the collection.

Sampling

This project strived to collect 50 completed surveys. The number 50 was chosen with the help of the Manager of the McClung Collection. After evaluating the timeframe and purpose of the survey, this number seemed fair and achievable. One factor that helped decide the number of participants was the homogenous nature of the patron base at McClung. Generally speaking the core audience is comprised of white, men and women, in the higher age-bracket categories. Due to the demographic make-up of the audience it was established fairly soon that an intensive, high participant completion rate would not be necessary. Another factor considered when looking at sample size was the professionally recommended sample size for certain research populations. The patron use statistics at the McClung Collection were consulted to get an accurate count of foot traffic in a normal week. Using these statistics and the recommended sample size the number 50 was finally decided upon.

The collection of data was completed over a six-day period. Other than eliminating patrons that were with groups, or individuals touring the collection without doing research, no patrons were eliminated as potential respondents. However, they were given the option of completing the questionnaire. By approaching the patrons in this manner, the patrons had the option of eliminating themselves. The researcher did not use a systematic sampling approach, as discussed in Patten's, "Understanding Research Methods", by choosing every "nth" person. The approach used was more equivalent to the simple random sample method mentioned in the same title.

As each anonymous survey was returned, it was given a corresponding number for analysis purposes and then the data was entered in an excel spreadsheet. At the end of the data collection week, all surveys were entered and examined. The results of this study will contain complete data information, including the final number of respondents, as well as any findings that are available.

Findings

The original goal of 50 completed surveys was not realized. One assumption in the methodology section of this research paper indicated that foot traffic would be the same or similar to normal business hours. The researcher had no knowledge of any event that might impact the normal foot traffic at the library during this six-day collection period. The three busiest days for the McClung Collection are generally Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The assumption regarding foot traffic proved to be false. The week the surveys were completed turned out to be an incredibly nice weekend as far as weather is concerned. Due to this unforeseen factor, foot traffic was very low and thus the available audience to complete the surveys dropped dramatically. Instead of 50 completed surveys, 36 were completed out of the 45 that were distributed. Although this number is lower than expected, it represents a completion rate of 80 percent and still represents a viable sample. Figure 1 illustrates the 14 questions asked on the user survey. In addition to these 14 questions, any questions with an asterisk had additional follow-up inquiries on the original questionnaire.

Figure 1 Survey Questions

*Q.1. Is this the first time you have visited the McClung Historical Collection?	*Q.8. Did you access any folders such as, “Genealogy”, “Biography”, “Subject Files”, or “First Families of Tennessee”?
*Q.2. Did you use the card catalog?	*Q.9. If you did not find the materials you needed during your most recent visit did you ask a staff member for assistance?
Q.3. Did you have a Librarian access the card catalog for you?	Q.10. Overall, was your most recent visit to the McClung Collection a successful, positive experience?
*Q.4 If you did not access the card catalog, did you find the materials you needed?	*Q. 11. If your experience was not positive, did you communicate this to a staff member?
*Q.5. Did you use the Internet computers?	Q. 12. Please Circle your age group: Under 35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66-75, 76 and over
*Q.6. Did you use any microfilm resources?	Q. 13. How did you learn about the McClung Collection?
*Q.7. Did you inquire about any materials housed in different locations that staff members retrieved for you, such as rare books, maps, pamphlets, manuscripts, etc?	Q. 14. Do you plan to visit the McClung Historical Collection again in the future?

Review of Purpose

The purpose of this survey was twofold. The instrument’s main purpose was as a user survey for the McClung Collection. It enabled the management of the collection to better understand what materials were being used, and by whom. The second purpose was to examine the differences between age groups, especially those of the senior population. More specifically the second purpose examined the senior population of McClung users and how they used electronic interfaces and whether their use was less, more or the same as the non-senior population.

Demographic Findings

The first major finding of this study relates to age demographics. Figure 2 breaks down the age categories of users. It is clear from this illustration that the user demographic at the McClung Collection comprises itself of older individuals. For simplifications sake this project will focus on the top three age brackets listed below:

“56-65”, “66-75”, and “76 and over” and will refer to these groups as the “senior” population. Many may not consider 56 years old “senior”, but it gives this study a definitive age to begin analyzing data. Of the 36 respondents to this questionnaire, 25 were 56 or older. This is statistically representative of 70 % of McClung users. Although this number is not surprising based on observational analysis, having a statistical figure of the overall McClung user-base is important for many reasons. First, it will allow the McClung Historical Collection to address patron issues better and possibly provide specialized services if they are deemed necessary. It also represents a beginning point for analyzing the results of this particular project. The average age of McClung users could not be obtained from the data because respondents were not asked to give their exact age, only to specify which age bracket they belonged. A final assumption not discussed in the methodology section assumes patrons will be truthful, whether in relation to their actual age or to the questions they will be answering.

Figure 2 Age Demographics

Under 35	3
36-45	4
46-55	4
56-65	11
66-75	10
76 and over	4
TOTAL	36

Electronic User Differences

The major hypothesis of this research, that being a difference in the user habits of seniors versus other demographics and how they use electronic interfaces, with seniors using these interfaces less, was proved partially true, if only on a small scale. The three questions that focused on electronic interfaces were the following: Q2 – Did you use the card catalog computers?, Q3 – Did you have a librarian access the card catalog for you?, and Q5 – Did you use the Internet computers? (Figure 3) A pattern did emerge after analyzing all of the results. Primarily the majority of users that did not use the electronic card catalog or Internet computers and did need assistance from a librarian with the card catalog were in the top three age brackets.

Figure 3 Electronic Use Statistics

Focus Questions	Yes	No	No Answer
Q 2 – Did you use the card catalog?	23	12	1
Q3 - Did you have a librarian access the card catalog for you?	12	22	2
Q5 – Did you use the internet computers?	21	12	3

Of the twelve respondents that did not use the card catalog, eight were over the age of 55 and the one “no answer” was also over the age of 55. Of the twelve respondents that had a librarian access the card catalog for them, ten were over the age of 55 with one of the two “no answers” also being over the age of 55. Of the twelve respondents that did

not use the Internet computers, ten were over 55 with all three of the “no answers” also being over 55. (Figure 4) The “no answers” are being included with these results, not as a hard primary finding, but as a secondary finding. They will be discussed primarily because an unforeseen pattern established itself concerning the age of these patrons as well. Five of six “no answers” were entered by patrons over the age of 55, placing them in the age focus group for this study. The literature review found references to senior patrons that felt intimidated by technology. (Kelly and Hibner, 2005, Fasulo, 2001 and Wicks, 2004). With this in mind, the “no answers” could potentially represent seniors not having enough of a comfort level with even a discussion of technology in their library, even in an anonymous format. However, this minor finding would warrant further research.

Figure 4 Electronic Use-Over the age of 55

Question		Over 55	No Answers	No Answers Over 55
Q2 – Did you access the card catalog?	No Responses 12	8	1	1
Q3 – Did you have a librarian access the card catalog for you?	Yes Responses 12	10	2	1
Q5- Did you use the Internet computers?	No Responses 12	10	3	3

Additional Findings

One interesting fact that did emerge relates to the number of respondents to each of the three focus questions that did not use technology. Each question had a final number of twelve. Initially it appeared these might be the same twelve individuals. However, upon further inspection that was not the case. There were only four respondents that did not use the card catalog, did not use the Internet and had a librarian assist them with the

card catalog. This type of pattern in the other eight individuals might infer several different things. First it might mean there is a growing comfort level with some forms of technology in this age bracket. They could be comfortable with certain formats but not others. Additionally it could mean these respondents might be using the Internet at home instead of at the library. It could also mean there might be other extenuating circumstances that could prevent the use of technology other than age. For instance, some of these patrons could have a physical condition that might prevent them from sitting at a computer terminal for extended periods of time, or they might have poor eyesight that would prevent the use of a computer. Their age may not relate to their lack of computer use at all. This type of answer, however, might only be found in a further qualitative study of this topic.

Results Conclusion

The results acquired during this study represent a fair assessment of user habits of all McClung users. Although the study's primary focus related to how seniors accessed electronic materials, the researcher felt it was important to survey users in all age brackets to have a viable comparison. The results proved there is still a difference between the user habits of seniors, in this case over 55, compared to other age groups. Although the difference does not seem insurmountable, it still exists. Having accumulated these statistics and research, the question that now presents itself, is with what to do with the information.

The McClung Collection has a very high percentage of senior users in its patron base. This audience and the needs of this audience cannot be ignored. These findings can now be used to either further the research conducted here, perhaps with a qualitative

analysis, or by implementing changes within the branch. McClung prides itself on its collection of materials and its national reputation. This project takes the focus away from the materials themselves and examines the users. This type of research has never been conducted at the McClung Historical Collection. Hopefully the results can be used to further the topic and make any viable and pertinent changes that are necessary for the largest age demographic of McClung users.

Discussion Section

This study concludes several things in its findings. Some items fall into the primary findings category, while others fall into the secondary findings category. A large percentage of McClung users, roughly 70 %, are over the age of 55. This factor cannot be ignored. The needs of senior library patrons can be different than those of library users in different age brackets. Some of the secondary findings emerged when examining these needs.

For instance, during the “additional comments” section of the survey, the only surveys that mentioned the need for better and larger signage came from users in the higher age groups. This may not necessarily mean these patrons are the only users to notice such environmental shortcomings; they may be the only patrons willing to express their opinion on the matter, or they may have vision deficiencies. However, since this user group relies more heavily on print materials than other users, it makes sense, regardless of any perceived vision deficiencies, that they would be more troubled by the absence of appropriate signage. In addition, there were several mentions regarding the long walk to the restroom that also came from this age group. Many patrons, regardless of age, have commented on the distance to the restrooms. Perhaps seniors felt more

comfortable being vocal about the topic in the survey, or it may be more difficult for them to walk longer distances. Although these factors need to be mentioned, by themselves they do not add up to hard statistics. In addition to these secondary findings, the primary conclusion of the hypothesis also holds true. A divide still exists between seniors and other age groups at the McClung Collection and how these different age groups access information. Seniors use electronic interfaces less and print materials more.

Existing Evidence

Of the non-computer users in this study, nearly all were over the age of 55. This includes those that did not use the Internet computers, those that did not use the card catalog computers and those that needed assistance from librarians to access the card catalog computers. This evidence points to a still existing divide when comparing age groups. Past research points to the desire for interpersonal communications and print materials for these age groups. (Webb 2002, Wicks 2004) Of those that did use the Internet computers, the trend was toward email and easier to use genealogy websites such as www.familysearch.org and www.ancestrylibrary.com. These two websites have a simple search function with specific name search capabilities. This evidence is concurrent with other research in the field. There are several recommendations pertinent to the research conducted at the McClung Historical Collection. Some could be implemented with little or no cost and could be in place in the near future. Other recommendations would require more staff or additional funding and would be implemented at a later date, if ever.

Current Recommendations

Currently McClung offers several genealogy and Internet genealogy classes to the public free of charge. These courses are very well attended, but are geared for computer users, not patrons with little or no computer experience. There are no classes offered at the East Tennessee History Center, which houses the McClung Historical Collection, specifically for seniors or any patrons that are not comfortable with technology. The main branch of the Knox County Public Library System, Lawson McGhee Library, offers several different computer classes, including “Introducing the Computer” and “Web Basics”. These courses are informative and useful to patrons unfamiliar with the technology, but for whatever reason they are not reaching the patron base at McClung. The first recommendation would be to either offer some of these courses at the East Tennessee History Center, which boasts a new computer classroom, or promote the current location better to the library patrons at McClung.

Another immediate recommendation would be to improve signage and user guides for all computer workstations, including both the Internet computers and the card catalog computers alike. The card catalog computers in particular might see higher use by all users, regardless of age, if even brief operational instructions were displayed around the workstations. In addition to signage, awareness training with the reference staff is recommended. While it is apparent to most staff members that many patrons are older, it is not always apparent the level of uncertainty these patrons feel about computers. Many of these patrons never ask for help and may never approach a computer workstation on their own, regardless of the function of the computer. Although this particular issue may affect the patrons and staff at the McClung Collection more than other branches of the

public library due to demographic differences, it could be a viable topic for any upcoming staff development workshops for the entire library system.

Future Recommendations

Some further recommendations will now be discussed. While this study proved the initial hypothesis to be true, it is by no means a comprehensive study. To delve deeper into this topic a qualitative analysis would be recommended. The time and expense involved in such a study is not practical at this point. However, the information that was gathered here could be the beginning point for further analysis. Interviews and discussion groups would provide better information on this subject matter. One-on-one interviews might provide a more conducive environment for the collection of additional information. The findings might show differences in computer use lie, not only in age, but also in other factors, which could not be ascertained with a simple questionnaire. While the questionnaire used in this study proved useful, another questionnaire could be developed that focused solely on computers and human-computer interaction. Since this was the first user survey completed at the McClung Historical Collection, the decision to create a general user satisfaction survey, with several questions pertaining specifically to computer use was sound. However, if another researcher chose to compile further statistics, a far more specialized instrument would be needed.

Further study could also be given to “best practices” in other libraries, especially genealogical and historical libraries that may have similar demographics. Two questions that might be asked are: What types of suggestions do these libraries have for the McClung Collection? and What has been successfully implemented in alleviating the intimidation factor that computers may represent to certain patrons? There is a great deal

of information and research available on the topic of seniors and computers. An additional, more thorough, literature review might be beneficial to this type of “best practices” study.

Two final recommendations that are not viable at this time due to staffing and funding issues, involve seniors themselves. First, McClung could contact local, senior organizations for suggestions on teaching seniors how to use computers. They might have recommendations or even representatives they could send to McClung to do hands-on training with staff members. If they could not provide a representative, then a list of suggestions would be helpful. Second, enlisting the help of senior volunteers to train other seniors on the computer systems would also be proposed. Many senior McClung users are very tech savvy and could provide valuable assistance, as well as a higher comfort level to other seniors that younger staff members might not be able to provide. These volunteers could be sent from the local senior organizations, but having McClung patrons in these positions might prove even more successful. Since the McClung Collection is a special collection with many idiosyncrasies, those familiar with its layout might be better instructors. It can be intimidating enough learning how to use the collection, but if a patron is also intimidated by technology, the intimidation factor could be overwhelming.

Final Conclusion

This project has examined the reality of the differences in age groups and how they access information at the McClung Historical Collection. In overall terms this research project was small in nature. However, it mirrors an overall issue of seniors and technology. While this issue is still present and important in the field, the numbers do

seem to be getting smaller every day. Seniors are finding ways to succeed in information environments. Some do it by utilizing and embracing the technology. Others seem to find ways around the technology when possible. For instance, this study found some patrons shelf-reading to find applicable titles, while others asked for assistance from reference staff. In the latter case the technology is not preventing these users from finding the materials they need it is just taking them longer. The difference seems to lie in the use of the Internet computers and the card catalog computers specifically. The users that felt comfortable with these interfaces found information in a more efficient manner. It seems that as information technology becomes more and more prevalent, the number of technology savvy seniors will increase as well. This fact should not be forgotten. In five or ten years this particular study may be less relevant than it is today. However, that should not negate its current importance. This project was original in nature and played a role in furthering the topic in the field. It is the hope of the researcher that some recommendations will be implemented immediately, with the knowledge that funding and staffing may not be available for long-term recommendations.

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