

# Older Adult Perspectives on Public Librarian Education in an Aging Society: Early Findings

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the reality of an aging society, public library engagement of older adults is a patchwork system across the US which does not always pursue the perspectives of older adults in what should be offered. Since formal library education is a major input into library practice, this conference paper presents early findings of a multi-year study into how public librarian education can be shaped for better cooperation and systematic engagement with older adults. Grounded in the Integrative Critical Gerontology Information Framework, this exploratory study creates a schema of the skills, services, and values that 11 interviewed older adults in 1 Southeastern US community want from public librarians. The resulting schema—a product of ongoing constructivist grounded theory analysis—will be further empirically and theoretically developed with interviews of older adults in 5 additional communities across the United States, national survey, and eventual free training resource if awarded federal funding materializes.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Community-led services; Critical librarianship; Public libraries; Social justice; Specific populations.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Aging society; Critical gerontology; Exploratory research; Older adults.

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# INTRODUCTION

Societal aging is—and will continue to be—a dominant theme of twenty-first century life (Chappel, 2024; Dychtwald, 2000; United Nations, 2023). The reality of this demographic transformation begs the question: are public librarians prepared to serve an aging society? The answer—"it depends"—leaves much to be desired. For instance, Lenstra et al. (2020) found that public library services to older adults in the US is a patchwork system in which many communities—particularly those with lower socioeconomic means—go without. There has also been recent research which shows how libraries across the country are serving older adults as reported by librarians (Lenstra et al., 2022). But representation of older adults' perspectives on library services to their population are rarer in research and indicate that however skillfully these services are offered and discussed by librarians, they do not always align with older adults' interests and values (Dalmer et al., 2024). Considering these findings, the purpose of this conference paper is to report early results on a multi-year study to understand and take action around what older adults deem important for public librarian education.

But why public librarian education? Today's students will be tomorrow's librarians and library administrators. The aging society will be a dominant theme in their careers. But you would not know that by looking at librarian education. For instance, the Master of Science of Library and Information Science (MSLIS) or equivalent is seen by many as the foundation of a successful librarian career with many libraries requiring their librarians to have the degree, and to have it from an American Library Association (ALA) accredited program. As such, the content of these programs is essential to the shaping of the field and its workers.

Yet Winberry (2021) found that while 96% of his study's MSLIS student participants at ALA accredited master programs shared that it was important that their programs offer classes on serving older adults, 86% reported that their programs had classes on meeting needs of children or teenagers, but not older adults, and 80% felt that they could become more interested in serving older adults if their training exposed them more to the needs of this population. These findings indicate that while older adults are often woefully underrepresented in MSLIS curriculum, a vast majority of future librarians would be interested in learning how they could better serve older adults. This initial study explores this interest with the experts themselves.

# RESEARCH DESIGN

Since representation and discussion of older adult perspectives are currently so limited in LIS education literature (Winberry, 2025), the decision was made to interview older adults on what they thought was important for public librarian education. To consider what to ask them, the researchers turned to the Integrative Critical Gerontology Information (ICGI) Framework. Winberry and Mehra (2022) created the ICGI framework to take a holistic, anti-ageist view of the needs of this population. The framework's summarized propositions include:

- 1) Building a broad understanding of what health and information needs means for older adults so that information professionals may serve their full person

- 2) Integrating older adults' contexts and intersecting realities into an understanding of their aging conditions and circumstances
- 3) Appreciating inherent strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the older adult's existing social networks and structures
- 4) Viewing older adults from a constructive point of view rather than from a deficit perspective as "problem people" to potentially develop and utilize information that can eliminate systemic structural and/or institutional barriers for them, not create more challenges and hurdle

As visualized in Figure 1, these propositions were operationalized so that they could help obtain tangible insights from older adults on what skills, services, and values this population would like embedded in public librarian education and practice. While the purpose of this study was shared in an IRB-approved consent form, the questions were designed to elicit various responses regardless of participant knowledge of modern library realities. Follow-up questions were then used to ask more specific questions around skills, services, and values as necessary. Participants were recruited with the help of the local department on aging because we correctly assumed there would be both library users and non-users in the sample. Doing so also helped us avoid potential research scammers who may have responded to an open, online call for participants (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2024)—an experience the lead author had in a previous interview study of older adults.

For the purposes of this report on early findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 adults aged 60 years and older in 1 Southeastern US community. The resulting audio-recorded interviews—which range from 15 minutes to 1 hour—were transcribed, initially coded by two researchers, and subsequently thematically analyzed for examples of skills, services, and values. The resulting findings of focused codes represent an early schema that will be expanded through interviews with older adults in 5 other communities across the US over the next year and eventual survey in another 50 or so US communities with ALA-accredited master programs; they are also a starting point for future theoretical development through continued application of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The long term goal of this project is to create a free, online training series for anyone wishing to work in public libraries with older adults which centers the topics and responses raised by study participants.

## **Figure 1**

### *Study Operationalization*

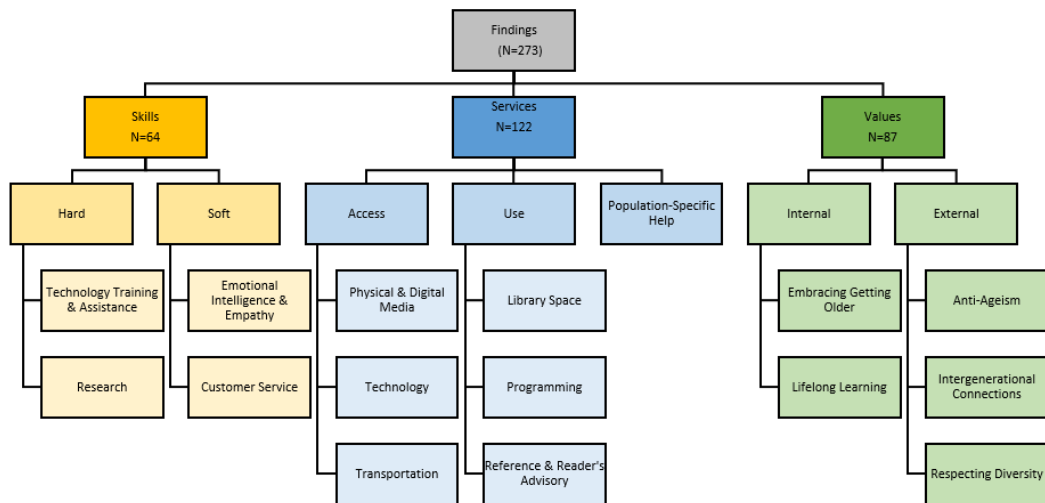
ICGI Proposition	Research Question	Interview Questions
1	What skills do older adults appreciate in librarians?	1) If someone has the opportunity to serve older adults, what is something they need to be good at?
		2) If you have a question about something, who are you most likely to contact and why?
		3) Have you ever asked a librarian for help and if so, what was helpful or unhelpful about their response?
2	What services do older adults want from libraries?	4) What do you think of when I say the word "library"?
		5) Is there anything library staff could do to make you use it more and to encourage your family and friends to do the same?
		6) What is something you would like to learn more about?
3, 4	What values do older adults expect from librarians?	7) Is it important to "respect one's elders" and if so, what does that look like?
		8) How do you feel service providers treat you now in comparison to when you were in your thirties?
		9) What is something you would want younger people to know about getting older?

## FINDINGS

There were 273 initial codes which emerged from the interview analysis that were ultimately focused across the 3 themes of skills, services, and values, 8 areas, and 10 sub-themes. These findings are represented in Figure 2 and described in greater detail below.

**Figure 2**

*Emerging Schema*



## Skills

Sixty-four codes were related to skills. According to a Google AI overview, skills are learned or innate abilities to perform tasks effectively and efficiently, encompassing both understanding and proficiency in specific activities, methods, and techniques. In the review of the skills codes, 4 themes emerged across 2 areas. Hard skills were the technical competencies used to complete specific tasks. The hard skills themes were technology training & assistance, and research. Soft skills represent the ways that you do your work. The 2 soft skills identified were emotional intelligence & empathy, and customer service.

Emotional Intelligence & Empathy (N=24) came through as librarians being able to read the circumstances of an older person and respond appropriately. Several participants shared the importance of developing patience and listening. “They really need any more with the libraries having computers,” shared interviewee 6, an 81-year-old white woman. “They need to be able to assist those people without getting impatient.” This theme is different than customer service, however, because more than helping a patron with a task, you must be able empathize with the specific reality that many older adults face. “One needs to be cognizant of the stereotypes that are sometimes assigned to older people and not assume that they're not able to do something or understand something because of their age,” described interviewee 3, a white 81-year-old woman.

Customer Service (N=9) were the activities that demark good assistance without necessitating population-specific knowledge or empathy. When asked about librarians, interviewee 7 recounted “I would say they're very helpful. Oh, I think at one time I tried to get some books out. I was trying to get some books out and then, uh, my library card expired, and so she—the lady there—helped me renew it, so that's one instance I could remember.” Interviewee 9, a 78-year-old white woman, stated, “I assume they would have good customer service skills. And if somebody needed help, I would assume they would try to guide them. I mean, sometimes the librarian will take me to the actual shelf that particular book may be on.”

Technology Training & Assistance (N=18) involved helping older adults use various technologies as well as teaching them to use them on their own. Interviewee 5, a 66-year-old white male, in talking about patron technology use, mentioned, “If they're computer illiterate, they can't do it by themselves. But if they need a librarian to help them, they can do that.” When teaching older adults how to use technology for instance, interviewee 2, who described herself as “79 and ¾” discussed how older adults needed to be trained. “Making things, especially with technology, simple enough and talking slowly enough for some of us to write notes or comprehend and practice at least once before dismissing them so you know what to do. We don't.”

Research (N=13) represented being able to find information. Interviewee 2, a retired professor, remarked, “Of course, when I was working, I always thought, oh, I can handle my own research. But sometimes I really needed help. So I would ask the reference librarians, and I love reference librarians.” Oftentimes, the research needs were more routine. Interviewee 7, a 76-year-old Chinese woman, mentioned she looked for books herself. “But sometimes, if I'm being lazy, I'll just run over to the counter...”

## Services

Services—described as intangible activities or benefits according to Google’s AI overview—represented 122 codes. Three areas of service were access, use, and population-specific help.

Access themes are about connecting people with library services including physical & digital media, technology, and transportation of patrons & library materials. Physical & Digital Media (N=27) refer to access to resources such as books, magazines, and newspapers. Technology (N=11) included computers but also language learning software, copy machines, and artificial intelligence. Transportation of patrons & library materials (N=13) referred to delivering books for those who were homebound but also several participants raised the idea of transportation of older adults to and from libraries. “I’m not Christian, but the church always has a van to pick people up...With the library, it would be nice if they had a van...”

Use themes exist for making something of the library access such as library space, programming, or reference & reader’s advisory. Library space (N=5) means patrons gathering for activities such as meeting friends or tinkering in a maker space. Programming (N=22) is information and activities on specific topics; some of those mentioned by participants ranged from reading programs for grandchildren, to hobby-specific programming, to major topics like legal documents and end of life care. Reference & Reader’s Advisory (N=16) were examples of older adults interested in asking librarians for research inquiries or how to find a book of interest.

Population-Specific Help (N=14) came in the form of people wanting the library to be open earlier, a preference for engagement with more staff than technology, and recognition of cultural differences between groups of older adults such as those of European or Asian descent. But the population being specified by the older adult participants were not always specific to their age group. Interviewee 11, a 69-year-old white bisexual woman, mused “I love it that kids can check out toys—at least at this library.”

## Values

Eighty-seven of the codes were labeled as values which refers to broad preferences concerning appropriate courses of actions or outcomes according to the Google AI overview. Values shown as internal or external. Internally focused values included embracing being older and lifelong learning. Externally focused values were anti-ageism, intergenerational connections, and respecting diversity.

Embracing getting older (N=12) was about being proud of someone’s age. Said Interviewee 11, “On the contrary to some people's popular hopes, you are going to get old. If you're lucky.” Interviewee 10 concurred. “Yeah, to just be open to getting older and enjoy that and don't be stuck in any of the other views you have been creating yourself. It's more fun that way.” Lifelong learning (N=6) is the process of continuing to develop oneself across the lifespan. “If you don't use it, you lose it. [LAUGHS] I really think it's important to stay mentally sharp and physically active and engaged in order to reach your seventh, eighth, ninth decades with everything intact,” smiled Interviewee 11.

Anti-Ageism (N=28) refers to rejecting stereotypes and the belittling of older adults. Participants described how ageism can sometimes show up in good intentions. Interviewee 3 shared, “They do treat me differently. Sometimes it's annoying. If I'm about to walk up steps and somebody runs up and wants to give me a hand, I find that that's annoying. Because I can do it myself.” Interviewee 2 had a slightly different perspective. “I appreciate it when people see that I'm stumbling, and they try to come to my aid. I don't object to that. Although, sometimes I feel like, I'm OK.” Believing in intergenerational connections (N=35) was major value among participants. “Be glad to associate with old people, and the old, be glad to associate with young people. Be part of society and be part of it, sharing what it has, and accept what it has to offer,” instructed Interviewee 5. Similarly, Interviewee 2 remarked, “I think that elders should respect young people's perspectives and try to learn about it. That's actually essential, I think.” Respecting diversity (N=6) beyond age differences was also present. “I mean, individuals and perspectives, you can't just assume everybody shares the same culture just because they're the same age.”

## CONCLUSION

This conference paper—restricted by tight word limits—has provided a brief overview of three emergent areas of older adult interest in public library education and practice: skills, services, and values. It is perhaps unsurprising that services are the largest area of responses given how it is the most tangible for public library patrons. You could also look at this schema and see that there are many themes—especially in skills and services—that could apply to many user groups. But these findings do provide a starting point from which researchers and practitioners alike can consider the stated needs of a growing population at a pivotal moment.

The researchers intend to complete interviews in 5 other communities in the United States to further develop the schema introduced here. This would be followed by a survey sent to older adults living in other communities with ALA-accredited master programs as these institutions are best prepared to influence public library education in accordance. Beyond academic research, the three-year federal grant funding this work would require a white paper on the findings for public libraries, librarian education programs, and offices on aging, as well as a training framework for the creation of a free video series for public librarian students and practitioners wanting to improve in the areas older adults believe important. While recent executive orders by the president represent a real threat to the continued funding of this project, he is—as the oldest president ever inaugurated as of 2025—an emblem of the aging society in which public librarians operate (ALA, 2025; Diaz, 2025). While time will tell whether his vision of record funding cuts to libraries will be fulfilled, it is unclear how an aging society could succeed without supportive libraries supported by those of us who are caregivers to elders, older adults ourselves, or—with time's grace—the older adults of the future.

**AI Statement**

No generative AI or AI-assisted tools, except grammatical and spelling tools and 3 AI-generated definitions from Google, were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

**Author CRediT statement:**

- Joseph Winberry: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Project administration, Supervision, Writing - Original Draft
- Griffin Powell: Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – Review & Editing
- Tara O'Donnell: Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing

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