

OLDER ADULTS: A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY

By David A. Ucko

In chemistry, a catalyst lowers the “activation energy,” making it easier for a reaction to occur. The COVID-19 pandemic can play an analogous role for institutions that may be averse to change under more normal circumstances. The disruption created in “business as usual” provides a rationale and opportunity for boards and staff to review fundamental questions that might otherwise not have been considered.

One critical issue that should be re-examined is the priority of audiences to be served. Recent attention has appropriately been focused on increasing diversity and the significant need for greater inclusion. Less attention has been given to the dramatic change in age distribution. For the first time in U.S. history, older adults are projected to outnumber those under 18, as the last of the boomer cohort turns 65 in 2030. A similar trend can be observed in other developed nations, most notably in Japan and Europe. This population shift is especially relevant for institutions with a primary focus on children and youth, whose numbers are in decline.

Institutions have been slow to address the demographic transition underway. As a result, older adults are outliers in most museums today. A few have begun to offer participatory arts programs under the heading of “creative aging” or programs targeting adults with dementia. These are steps in the right direction, but museums can play an even greater role by responding directly to the overwhelming desire of older adults to slow cognitive decline.

Through a series of epidemiological and neuroscience studies, researchers have found that forms of cognitive engagement, such as those offered by museum experiences,

can reduce the risk of dementia. By increasing “cognitive reserve,” they can enhance brain resilience and mitigate or compensate for the effects of decline. To best apply these findings, museums should consider creating targeted programs in partnership with university and medical school faculty having expertise in cognitive neuroscience and gerontology, along with the learning sciences, psychology, and related disciplines. Factors to be considered include imparting new knowledge and skills, challenging older adults within the range of their capabilities, encouraging social interaction, and offering novelty in the types of cognitive stimulation. A forthcoming article (Ucko 2022) provides further background and guidance on promoting healthy cognitive aging.

The growing body of neuroscience research presents museums with a strategic opportunity to serve as sites for “public health intervention” that specifically focus on addressing the increasing personal and societal challenges of cognitive decline. In response, museums will gain access to a rapidly expanding, largely untapped audience of older adults while further expanding their community impact.

REFERENCE

Ucko, D. A. 2022. Museums and the aging brain. *Curator* 65(1), in press. doi:10.1111/cura.12448

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AMERICANS WANT ARTS AND CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS TO CHANGE

By Madeline Smith

If there’s a silver lining to the past year plus of COVID-related disruptions in the arts and culture sector, it’s that disruption can be a catalyst for much-needed change. The

national Culture + Community research I’ve been working on throughout the pandemic illuminates important opportunities for arts and culture organizations to become more