

Guest Post — Gen Z and Academic Libraries: Reading, but Differently

By JANE JIANG | MAR 12, 2026

BOOKS | EDUCATION | LIBRARIES | READING | RESEARCH | TECHNOLOGY | WORLD OF TOMORROW

Editor's note: Today's post is by Jane Jiang, Director of Libraries at UCNJ Union College, a community college in Union County, New Jersey. Reviewer credit to [Chef Stephanie Lovegrove Hansen](https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/author/slhansen/) (<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/author/slhansen/>).

Many academic libraries host annual “Best Reads,” book clubs, or similar reading initiatives, which are designed to highlight notable titles, encourage engagement beyond assigned coursework, and support collection development. Over time, these programs have functioned as informal indicators of reading culture within academic communities. In recent years, participation across many institutions has become more modest, prompting renewed questions about how students encounter and engage with books today.



This shift does not necessarily signal a rejection of reading. Rather, it reflects broader changes in reading habits, library use, and discovery platforms shaped by digital media, social networks, and emerging technologies such as generative AI. As attention becomes increasingly fragmented, traditional models of reading promotion face structural constraints. At the same time, survey data suggests that reading persists — though in altered forms, formats, and contexts.

To better understand these changes, it is useful to examine recent data on reading behavior, with particular attention to younger readers.

How Much Are We Reading Today?

Survey data from the past decade shows a gradual but consistent decline in the number of books read by U.S. adults. According to a [Gallup survey \(https://news.gallup.com/poll/388541/americans-reading-fewer-books-past.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com\)](https://news.gallup.com/poll/388541/americans-reading-fewer-books-past.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com), U.S. adults reported reading an average of 12.6 books in 2021, down from 15.6 books in 2016. About three-quarters of adults still report reading at least one book per year, the overall intensity of reading appears to be diminishing.

Expanding formats hasn't solved the problem. The Pew Research Center reports (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/21/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america/>) that 65% of U.S. adults read print books and 30% read e-books, suggesting that broader access alone has not reversed declining reading volume.

Reading for pleasure has also declined over time. An analysis of the American Time Use Survey, published in *iScience* ([https://www.cell.com/iscience/fulltext/S2589-0042\(25\)01549-4](https://www.cell.com/iscience/fulltext/S2589-0042(25)01549-4)), found that only about 16% of U.S. adults reported reading for pleasure on an average day in 2023, continuing a long-term decline in daily leisure reading. Together, these findings point not to an abandonment of reading, but to reduced time and sustained attention devoted to it.

At the same time, other formats such as audiobooks have been expanding, offering new ways for readers — especially younger audiences — to engage with books. Industry reporting from the Audio Publishers Association (https://www.audiopub.org/surveys?utm_source=chatgpt.com) indicates that more than half of U.S. adults have listened to an audiobook, while the format continues to grow commercially, with U.S. audiobook revenue reaching about \$2.22 billion in 2024. For students balancing academic workloads and busy schedules, audio formats can extend opportunities to engage with books during commuting, exercise, or other routine activities.

Gen Z: Reading, but Differently

Despite fears of screen overwhelm, Gen Z reading hasn't vanished — it has evolved. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube now play a central role in how young readers encounter books. In a survey of more than 2,000 readers aged 16–25 conducted by the UK Publishers Association, nearly 60% reported that BookTok or other book influencers helped them discover books or develop an interest in reading—a shift with clear implications for both libraries and publishers.

(UK Publishers Association, The BookTok Generation (https://www.publishers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/BookTok-for-WEBSITE.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

AI and digital reading platforms are also reshaping academic reading practices. Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT are used for summarization, note-taking, and comprehension support, while platforms like Perusall facilitate collaborative annotation, discussion, and engagement. Major subscription databases — including Elsevier and Gale — are increasingly integrating AI-driven features to support discovery and analysis. These tools can reduce friction and improve efficiency, but they also introduce new questions around depth of reading, academic integrity, and ethical use, particularly when it comes to sustained engagement with long-form texts — areas that libraries and instructors are only beginning to explore.

Academic Libraries: Changing Patterns of Use

These broader trends are visible in academic library circulation data. Undergraduate students in English, History, and other programs now typically borrow fewer than two print books per semester, compared with three to four titles a decade ago. At the same time, use of digital collections has increased, with students frequently supplementing print materials with e-books and online journals to accommodate hybrid learning environments.

Disciplinary demand has also become more concentrated. In one recent example, an academic library's top 30 circulating titles in 2025 were dominated by nursing study guides and major-focused reference materials, with only a single literary title appearing on the list. This pattern reflects a growing emphasis on career-oriented and exam-driven resources, often at the expense of leisure or literary reading.

These shifts are unfolding alongside a sustained expansion in publishing output as well. Industry reporting based on Bowker's ISBN data (https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/91574-self-publishing-is-thriving-according-to-bowker-report.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com) shows that self-published ISBN registrations in the United States exceeded 2.3 million in 2021, reflecting broad growth in book output even as traditional bestseller lists capture only a small fraction of new titles.

Within academic libraries, circulation patterns increasingly suggest that traditional "Best Reads" or bestseller-driven collections attract less attention than they once did.

Implications for Publishers and Libraries

For publishers, recent reading patterns point to practical adjustments rather than a need for reinvention. Discoverability increasingly begins outside traditional channels, making it important to consider how titles surface on social platforms, course syllabi, and digital learning environments. Short-form excerpts, sample chapters, and visually oriented metadata may help bridge the gap between social-media discovery and sustained reading. In academic and professional publishing, formats that support annotation, section-level access, and classroom integration are increasingly aligned with how Gen Z readers engage with texts.

Similarly, rather than relying primarily on standalone reading promotions, academic libraries can embed reading more directly into coursework through course reserves, multi-format access, and partnerships with teaching faculty. Circulation data suggests that students respond more consistently to materials that clearly support academic goals, particularly when access is convenient, and format choice is flexible. Libraries are also well positioned to support ethical and effective use of AI-assisted reading tools, reinforcing critical reading and interpretation alongside efficiency.

Taken together, these approaches suggest that supporting Gen Z reading may be less about restoring earlier models and more about adapting to current behavior. Reading remains central to academic work, but it is now shaped by digital discovery, social recommendation, and efficiency-driven workflows. For publishers and libraries alike, the challenge is not whether reading still matters, but how to support it in ways that align with how today's students learn, select, and engage with texts.



Jane Jiang

Jane Jiang is the Director of Libraries at UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ. She holds master's degrees in education and library and information science, and has served in both academic and public libraries for over 25 years. In addition to her library leadership, Ms. Jiang is also a writer, poet, and translator, with several original works and seven published translations.

Discussion

2 THOUGHTS ON "GUEST POST – GEN Z AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: READING, BUT DIFFERENTLY"



I wonder how many people are reading old/classic books from cover to cover and pausing at regular intervals to reflect on what they have read. If there is a steady and significant drop in people doing this, then reading is being abandoned.

By ANONYMOUS | MAR 12, 2026, 12:43 PM



I have read nearly 1,000 books as a librarian. Just before the pandemic, I founded a Book Club at Sabancı University, Türkiye, and we have been continuing this journey for six years.

We started our Book Club adventure with 8 people, and today we continue with 65 members. The number of books we have read together has reached 108.

Bringing the right book to the right person at the right time is the job of librarians. I encourage everyone who is curious about books to visit libraries.

By CEM ÖZEL | MAR 13, 2026, 7:51 AM



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