NCSALL Seminar Guide:

Supports and Barriers to Persistence

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National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

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Supports and Barriers to Persistence

This seminar guide was created by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) to introduce adult education practitioners to the research on adult student persistence and its implications for practice. Programs or professional developers may want to use this seminar in place of a regularly scheduled meeting, such as a statewide training or a local program staff meeting.

Objectives:

By the end of the seminar, participants will be able to:

- Recommend some instructional and programmatic strategies for improving student persistence
- Propose ways programs can develop sponsors and assist students in expanding networks of sponsorship
- Explain some reasons why students leave programs

Participants: 8 to 12 practitioners who work in adult education—teachers, tutors, counselors, program administrators, and others

Time: 4 hours

Agenda:

20 minutes	1. Welcome and Introductions
10 minutes	2. Objectives and Agenda
45 minutes	3. Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out
60 minutes	4. Discussion of Readings
15 minutes	***Break***
50 minutes	5. Sponsors
30 minutes	6. Planning Next Steps
10 minutes	7. Evaluation of the Seminar

Session Preparation:

This guide includes the information and materials needed to conduct the seminar—step-by-step instructions for the activities, approximate time for each activity, and notes and other ideas for conducting the activities. The handouts and readings, ready for photocopying, are at the end of the guide.

Participants should receive the following readings at least 10 days before the seminar:

- **The K-12 School Experiences of High School Dropouts** by Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn (*Focus on Basics*, Volume 4, Issue D, April 2001)

- **Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills** by Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn (*Focus on Basics*, Volume 4, Issue D, April 2001)

The facilitator should read the articles, study the seminar steps, and prepare the materials on the following list.

Newsprints (Prepare ahead of time.)

___ Objectives and Agenda (p. 4)

___ Definition of Persistence (p. 5)

___ Four Supports to Persistence (p. 5)

___ Discussion Questions (p. 7)

___ Implications of the Findings (p. 7)

___ Sponsorship Questions (p. 8)

___ Next Steps (p. 9)

___ Useful/How to Improve (p. 10)

Handouts (Make copies for each participant.)

___ *Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out*

___ *Sponsors and Sponsorships: Initial Findings from the Second Phase of the NCSALL Persistence Study*

___ *Action Plan*

Readings (Have two or three extra copies available for participants who forget to bring theirs.)

___ **The K-12 School Experience of High School Dropouts**

___ **Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills**

Materials

___ Newsprint easel

___ Markers, pens, tape

___ Sticky dots

Steps:

1. Welcome and Introductions (20 minutes)

- **Welcome participants** to the seminar. **Introduce yourself** and state your role as facilitator. Explain how you came to facilitate this seminar and who is sponsoring it.
- **Ask participants to introduce themselves** (name, program, and role) and briefly describe what barriers their students have to participating in adult education classes.
- **Make sure that participants know** where bathrooms are located, when the session will end, when the break will be, and any other housekeeping information.

Note to Facilitator
Since time is very tight, it's important to move participants along gently but firmly if they are exceeding their time limit for introductions.

2. Objectives and Agenda (10 minutes)

- **Post the newsprint <u>Objectives and Agenda</u>** and review the objectives and steps with the participants.

Objectives

By the end of the seminar, you will be able to:

- Recommend some instructional and programmatic strategies for improving student persistence
- Propose ways programs can develop sponsors and assist students in expanding networks of sponsorship
- Explain some reasons why students leave programs

Agenda

1. Welcome and Introductions (Done!)
2. Objectives and Agenda (Doing)
3. Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out
4. Discussion of Readings
5. Sponsors
6. Planning Next Steps
7. Evaluation of the Seminar

- **Post the newsprint <u>Definition of Persistence.</u>**

> **Definition of Persistence**
>
> Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow.

- **Review the** Adult Student Persistence Study's **definition of persistence. Ask participants to comment on the ways this definition of persistence is similar to or different** than the ones they use.

- **Post the newsprint <u>Four Supports to Persistence.</u>** These supports were identified in the Adult Student Persistence Study.

> **Four Supports to Persistence**
>
> - Awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence
> - Self-efficacy
> - Establishment of a goal by the student
> - Progress toward reaching a goal

- **Explain that the group will be focusing on the first support,** awareness and management of positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence, during this session.

3. Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out (45 minutes)

- **Distribute the handout *Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out.* Summarize the article:** The author suggests that students and teachers may have different perceptions of what it means when adult learners leave programs. When interviewing students who have left ABE programs, Belzer found that those students who left planned to return and none expressed a sense of personal failure when leaving. The study revealed that various obstacles and supports create different outcomes for individuals and, while there is no single answer to the

issue of retention, peer contact outside of class and the use of self-study materials may encourage lifelong learning.

- **Ask participants to take 15 minutes to individually read the article and make a list of three questions** they might like to ask their students in learning more about the forces that hinder or support persistence.

- Then ask participants to take 10 minutes to work in trios to select one or two question to share with the group.

- **Reconvene the group and ask the trios for a sampling of the questions.** Encourage each trio to share at least one question.

4. Discussion of Readings (60 minutes)

- **Explain that in this next activity participants will reflect on the readings for today's meeting.**

  [Note to facilitator: In the first article, **The K-12 School Experiences of High School Dropouts,** the authors write that data gathered as part of NCSALL's Longitudinal Study of Adult Learners indicate that "school resisters" may be a minority of participants in adult basic education (ABE) programs. They explain that most adult students have positive prior school experiences. A majority of the research participants who are currently enrolled in ABE programs reported boredom and a sense of not belonging as primary reasons for leaving high school. The authors suggest that these findings may have implications for program design and instruction in ABE.

  In the second article, **Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills,** data from NCSALL's Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning indicate that self-study is prevalent among high school dropouts. The authors assert that informal, self-directed learning may be an important aspect of adult literacy development and that this is a component largely overlooked by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. They argue that turnover in programs may be part of a broader process of skill development over time and that it is important to examine learner participation from a student rather than administrative perspective in order to gain a more accurate understanding of students' experiences.]

- **Post the newsprint <u>Discussion Questions.</u>** Ask participants to share their comments and questions from the readings, and then lead a general discussion of the articles using the following discussion questions as a guide.

Discussion Questions

- What did you see as the key points of this article?
- What evidence do you think the authors gave to back up these practices? What might be the strengths and weaknesses of this evidence?
- Which of the findings did you find surprising or intriguing? Why?
- What questions might you have about the research?

- **Post the newsprint <u>Implications of the Findings.</u>** Ask the participants to work in pairs to make a list of the implications of these findings for the design of their programs and for how instruction is provided in their programs. For example, how could programs measure "time on task" when students are engaged in self study? Give participants about 20 minutes to discuss the implications.

Implications of the Findings

Consider the findings from the research described in the readings and the discussion of the articles.

- What do you see as implications for program design?
- What do see as implications for providing instruction?
- What resources might be needed to implement any changes to the program or instruction practices?

- Reconvene the whole group. **Ask pairs to take turns reading one item** from their list until all of the implications are shared.

Break (15 minutes)

5. Sponsors (50 minutes)

- **Distribute the handout *Sponsors and Sponsorship: Initial Findings from the Second Phase of the NCSALL Persistence Study.* Summarize the article:** In their research on how personal relationships help and/or hinder persistence, the authors identified personal, official, and intermediate sponsors as important supports for learner persistence. The authors propose that programs systematically identify students' sponsors and develop strategies for engaging sponsors to help learners persist.

  Ask participants to take 10 minutes **to silently read** the article.

- **Post the newsprint <u>Sponsorship Questions.</u> Ask participants to form three small groups** and assign each group a type of sponsorship —personal, official, or intermediate. Ask participants to review the section of the article that addresses the type of sponsorship assigned to their small group. Then **ask the groups to take 20 minutes to discuss the following questions and record their ideas on newsprint.**

Sponsorship Questions

- How can you see this type of sponsorship supporting persistence?
- What approaches might programs take for building sponsorships and expanding students' networks of sponsorship?

- **Reconvene the whole group and ask small groups to summarize** their discussions, using the points on the posted newsprints. After each group presents, there should be time allotted for questions and comments from other groups. (This should be encouraged by the facilitator.)

6. Planning Next Steps (30 minutes)

- **Distribute the handout *Action Plan.* Ask participants to take 10 minutes to review the ideas** for enhancing supports and reducing barriers for student persistence generated during the session. Then ask the participants to choose one or two to try in their programs or

classrooms and briefly write down a plan for how they will implement the idea and what evidence or data they will collect to determine if the idea works.

- **Post the newsprint <u>Next Steps.</u>** Explain that now that the individual participants have plans to try out in their programs and/or classrooms, the group should make a plan about the group's next steps**.**

Next Steps

- How might you share with each other how your plans worked, or how might you ask each other questions?

- **Write up potential next steps,** such as scheduling a follow-up meeting or organizing an e-mail list, on the newsprint as the participants mention them. After five minutes of brainstorming, ask participants to silently look at the options and individually decide on two ways for the group to continue the discussions.

- **Hand out two sticky dots to each participant** and ask the group to put their dots next to the one or two ideas that they would most like the group to do. If they don't want to do any of the activities, they should not put their dots on the newsprint.

- **Lead the group in organizing its choice. For example:**

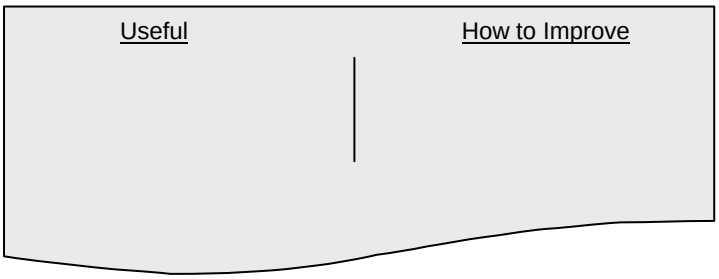
  - If they choose to schedule a follow-up meeting, set the date, time, and place for the meeting, and brainstorm an agenda for the meeting. Determine who will definitely be coming and who will take the responsibility to cancel the meeting in case of bad weather.

  - If they choose to organize an e-mail list, pass around a sheet for everyone to list their e-mail addresses. Decide who is going to start the first posting, and discuss what types of discussion or postings people would like to see (e.g., asking questions about how to try out their ideas, describing what happened after they tried it, sharing other resources about adult student persistence, etc.).

7. Evaluation of the Seminar (10 minutes)

- **Explain to participants that, in the time left, you would like to get feedback from them about this seminar.** You will use this feedback in shaping future seminars.

- **Post the newsprint Useful/How to Improve.**



  Ask participants first to tell you what was useful or helpful to them about the design and content of this seminar. Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under "Useful."

- **Then ask participants for suggestions on how to improve the design and content**. Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under "How to Improve." If anyone makes a negative comment that's not in the form of a suggestion, ask the person to rephrase it as a suggestion for improvement, and then write the suggestion on the newsprint.

- **Do not make any response to participants' comments during this evaluation.** It is very important for you not to defend or justify anything you have done in the seminar or anything about the design or content, as this will discourage further suggestions. If anyone makes a suggestion you don't agree with, just nod your head. If you feel some response is needed, rephrase their concern: "So you feel that what we should do instead of the small-group discussion is . . . ? Is that right?"

- **Refer participants to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy Web site (www.ncsall.net) for further information**. Point out that most NSCALL publications may be downloaded for free from the Web site. Print versions can be ordered by contacting NSCALL at World Education: ncsall@worlded.org.

- **Thank everyone** for coming and participating in the seminar.

Reading

(To be read by participants *before* the session.)

The K-12 School Experience of High School Dropouts

by Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn
Focus on Basics, Vol. 4, Issue D, April 2001, pp. 13-15

New data indicate that "school resisters" may be a minority. What does that mean for ABE programs?

Initial findings from NCSALL's Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) are challenging the prevailing notion that individuals in the target population for adult education tend to have had negative experiences in K-12 schools, and that these experiences limit their participation in adult education. The LSAL data provide little support for this view, long held by many researchers and practitioners in adult education (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1990). Based on the idea that prior negative school experiences, difficulties in learning school curricula, and the stigma of dropping out combine to produce "school resisters" who are reluctant to go back to school or participate in programs, many adult educators have attempted to make their programs less school-like. Although a small percentage of the target population studied by LSAL does resemble the typical "school resister," many others do not fit that profile, and, in fact, feel positive about their prior school experiences. Furthermore, among LSAL's target population, individuals who do participate in adult education programs have very similar K-12 experiences to those who do not participate.

Prior School Experiences

By definition, LSAL's study population is entirely high school dropouts who had not received a certificate of General Educational Development (GED) or equivalent by the time of the first interview. They reported dropping out of high school for diverse reasons. Although it was commonly assumed that pregnancy was one of the leading reasons women dropped out of high school a generation ago, this is no longer the case among LSAL respondents. Fewer than one in 10 (nine percent) reported pregnancy or health-related concerns as the main reason for dropping out. The two most commonly reported reasons for leaving school were boredom or feeling that one didn't belong in school (29%) and school performance problems (26%). A variety of other reasons relating to family, relationships, and employment were also commonly reported (see Table 1).

Table 1. **Reasons for leaving school**

Reason	Percentage*
Bored, didn't like, didn't belong	29
Problems with school performance	26
Job-related	17
Relationship problems	15
Family issues	10
Pregnancy or health problem	9

*Percentages do not add to 100% because respondent may have selected more than one reason. n=940.

When individuals were asked to evaluate their overall K-12 school experiences, they reported a wide range of experiences. Their overall evaluations, on a five-point scale ranging from "very negative" to "very positive," are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. **Evaluation of K-12 school experience**

Overall Evaluation of K-12 School Experience	Percentage*
Very negative	11
Somewhat negative	17
Neutral	33
Somewhat positive	30
Very positive	10

*Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding. n=940.

Table 2 makes several points. First, it is not true, as many might believe, that most individuals who drop out of high school have had negative school experiences. A larger percentage (40%) report positive (either "somewhat positive" or "very positive") experiences than report negative ones (28%). Although an identifiable group (11%) of individuals in our study population had "very negative" school experiences, a nearly equal number (10%) had "very positive" experiences. As might be expected, individuals who repeated grades, or who left school because of problems with academic performance, tend to evaluate their overall school experiences more negatively.

Program Participants and Nonparticipants: Similarities and Differences

LSAL is particularly interested in contrasting the life experiences of individuals in the study population who do and do not participate in adult education programs. An important and somewhat surprising finding from the first year of data is that within the LSAL population, individuals who have participated in adult education are highly similar to their counterparts who have not participated, in their demographics, previous K-12 school experiences, literacy proficiencies, and other salient variables. Table 3 displays characteristics that do not differ between participants and nonparticipants.

Table 3. **Selected characteristics of the LSAL population, participants and non-**

Demographic characteristic	Percentage
Minority	35
Lives in poverty	34
Welfare recipient in past year	11
Special Education in K-12	34
Weeks worked past year	34

n=940.

Although some statistically significant differences can be found between the two subpopulations, these are usually small in magnitude. For example, the two groups differ slightly in average age. Those who have participated in programs are somewhat younger (average age, 27 years) than those who have never participated (average age, 29 years). The participant group shows a slightly higher percentage (12 %) of immigrants than does the nonparticipant (eight percent) group. A somewhat higher percentage (41%) of adult education participants repeated a grade during K-12 than those who never participated in adult education (33%).

Discussion and Implications

The baseline LSAL data provide little support for the view of the adult education student as a school resister. Although a small percentage of individuals in the target population had very negative K-12 experiences, far more had positive school experiences even though they dropped out before graduating. Furthermore, there is little indication that previous K-12 experiences are a major force in determining who among the target population participates in adult education programs. For example, if we believe that individuals who evaluate their K-12 experiences negatively are less likely to participate in adult education,

we should expect a correspondingly different pattern of responses to the K-12 evaluation question among those who do and do not participate in adult education programs. In fact, there is no overall statistically significant difference between the K-12 evaluations of those who have participated and those who have never participated in adult education classes. Although some individuals fit the conception of the "school resistor," they are relatively few. Efforts to reform programs to increase outreach and retention should not assume that negative school experiences are a common barrier. Such models of the adult learner have based their argument on a few compelling case studies of learners, rather than on a broader look at the target population comparing those who do and do not choose to participate in programs.

Many of the questions we hope LSAL will answer must await the analysis of subsequent years of data showing change over time in the study population. The baseline data can already contribute important new information to the field of adult education, and will help to dispel prevalent myths. For example, the finding that, within the target population for adult education, those who choose to participate are quite similar in many respects to those who do not participate is important. That these two groups have generally similar K-12 experiences is especially important, because it counters the widespread perception that negative prior school experiences are a major impediment to improving outreach and retention in adult education programs. The two groups might not be as comparable in other locales, where characteristics of both local K-12 schools and adult education programs differ from those in our area (Portland, OR). A lack of comparability elsewhere should be established by research rather than being generally assumed and illustrated by example or anecdote, as has too often been done. The LSAL findings reported here may be broadly applicable. NCSALL's Persistence Study, which examined a range of adult learners and programs in the northeastern United States, found negative prior school experiences to be relatively unimportant in adult students' reasons for enrolling and persisting in programs.

As follow-up data from LSAL become available, we plan to look more closely at relationships among individuals' previous school experiences, the characteristics of their families of origin, and the ways in which they form life goals. Better understanding of these relationships will help us to understand the part adult education plays in their lives. Understanding the dynamics of these relationships will help us better understand why individuals enroll in adult education programs, the factors affecting their persistence and learning in the programs, and ways in which new program designs could better serve a broader base of potential students.

References

Beder, H. (1991). *Adult Literacy: Issues for Policy and Practice*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Quigley, B.A. (1990). "Hidden logic: Reproduction and resistance in adult literacy and basic education." *Adult Education Quarterly*, 40, 103-115.

About the Authors

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Reading

(To be read by participants *before* the session.)

Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills

by Stephen Reder and Clare Strawn
Focus on Basics, Vol. 4, Issue D, April 2001, pp. 15-18

LSAL's data indicate that self-study is prevalent among high school dropouts. How can ABE programs take those efforts into account?

An analysis of baseline data collected by the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) offers a tantalizing glimpse of the formal and informal learning activities underlying adults' literacy development. Few adult educators will be surprised to hear that many in the LSAL population participate in adult basic or secondary education programs to improve their reading, writing, and math skills. After all, that's why these programs exist. More surprising is the finding that substantial numbers of adults in the LSAL population engage in self-directed learning activities to improve their basic skills or prepare for the tests of General Educational Development (GED). This is true both for individuals who have previously participated in adult education programs and for those who never have. A better understanding of the relationship between program participation and self-directed study for basic skill improvement could offer some interesting new ways to think about program design and outreach, student retention, and lifelong learning.

The Design of LSAL

The design of NCSALL's Longitudinal Study helps us to investigate these and a range of other important issues in adult literacy and education. Two features of the LSAL design are particularly relevant here. First, the LSAL is a *panel study*: it closely follows the same group of individuals over time. They are periodically interviewed, their literacy assessed, and information is collected about their program participation, informal learning activities, uses of written materials, employment, social networks, personal goals, social and economic status, among other information. The LSAL panel consists of approximately 1,000 individuals randomly sampled from its target population: individuals who, at the time the study began, lived in the Portland, OR, area; were aged 18-44 years; did not have a high school diploma or GED; were not still in high school; and spoke English proficiently. A second major feature is its *comparison group* methodology: approximately equal numbers of the target

population were sampled who had or had not recently enrolled in local adult education programs. The design allows us to make important comparisons between those in the target population who participate in programs with those who do not. These comparisons provide new and important views of the distinctive characteristics of participants and of the contributions that program participation makes to adults' literacy and life development.

Self-Study and Program Participation

Most American research on adults' self-directed learning has focused on professionals and others with relatively high levels of formal education, who are presumed to have "learned how to learn" through their years of formal schooling (e.g., Aslanian, 1980). Few studies have investigated the self-directed learning activities of adults who dropped out of high school. We know little about their self-directed learning, especially among those who never participate in adult education programs. Can they improve their skills on their own? Do they need to participate in formal programs to develop their literacy abilities?

We explored some of these issues a number of ways in the first (or baseline) interviews. For example, individuals were asked about many aspects of their preceding life histories, including whether they had, after leaving school, ever studied by themselves to improve their reading, writing, or math skills or to prepare for the GED. We were careful to differentiate such self-study from homework activities associated with any adult education classes they might have taken. When individuals responded affirmatively, we asked further questions for details about when and how intensively they had studied by themselves to improve their skills.

Although we need several years of data to observe literacy development directly, the LSAL baseline data already indicate that informal, self-directed learning may be an important part of adult literacy development. This component has largely been overlooked by both researchers and programs. One in three (34%) of those who have never participated in adult education programs have studied by themselves to improve their skills. Nearly half (46%) of those who have previously participated in programs have also self-studied to improve their skills or prepare for the GED.

Adult educators are often challenged and sometimes frustrated by the high turnover in classes. Data from the LSAL may help us to reconceptualize such sporadic participation in ABE programs as part of a broader process of cumulative skill development over time. Most program administrative data use 12 hours of seat time as the standard for minimum participation (and funding). LSAL quantifies participation in finer detail, recognizing a

minimum of one class session as a period of participation. By "period of participation" we mean one or more sessions with the same teacher that ends because the student leaves or the class ends. Periods of participation may or may not conform to the standard number of weeks per term. This focus helps us see more varied and complex patterns of participation. Among those in the LSAL population who have ever participated in classes, more than half (58%) have done so in more than one period of participation. Individuals attending programs in multiple periods of participation often go to different programs, with varying intensities, duration, and reasons for starting and stopping during each period of participation.

This complex, sometimes fragmented process of participation is best captured and understood from the learner's perspective rather than through the lens of administrative data in which students' participation is studied only in relation to the outreach, recruitment, and retention of students in the current program. When analyzing the same LSAL data from two different perspectives, that of cumulative participation hours and that of hours accumulated in individual program attempts, we get two different representations of participation. Framed as individual program attempts, stopping in and out of different classes might be interpreted as a series of failures. Students, however, experience moving in and out of programs as a process of accumulating participation and development over time. In the LSAL survey, students were asked how many classes they had participated in, how many hours per week the class met, and how many weeks they stayed in the class. Table 1 illustrates how the math works out differently if you only start counting class hours after 12 hours of seat time.

Table 1. **Two ways of counting participation**

Class 1	**Program count**	**LSAL count**
Hours	—	4 hours per week
Weeks	—	2 weeks
Total time in class 1	—	8 hours
Class 2		
Hours	4 hrs per week	4 hrs per week
Weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks
Total time in class 2	32 hours	32 hours
Total participation time counted	1 class, 32 hours	2 classes, 40 hours

We used the initial LSAL data to compare these data and learner perspectives, illuminating somewhat different patterns of participation. If we look at periods of participation prior to the baseline (first) interview,[1] on average, learners experience 54 hours (median) of instruction per period of participation. Using

the 12-hour threshold common in administrative data, however, we would report only 27 hours. When we look at cumulative hours over periods of participation, on average, 10% of learners stop participating before completing 12 hours of instruction. However, that increases to 22% of students who leave when the 12 hours of participation are limited to one attempt. Instruction appears to have longer duration in the learners' perspective than from the program's frame of measurement. In future reports, we will be able to compare the actual administrative data collected by the state to the self reports of students. When periods of focused study outside of program participation are added to this picture, programmatic perspectives on skill development may shift significantly to reflect learners' experiences more closely.

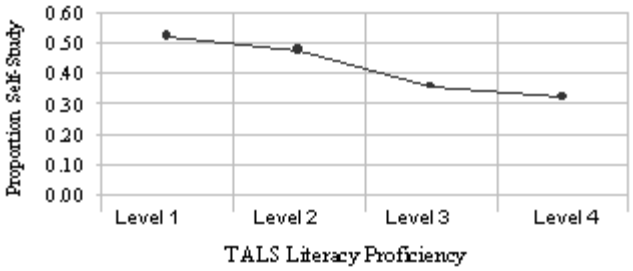
Learning without Program Participation

Although it is perhaps not surprising that so many individuals who participate in programs also engage in self-directed efforts to improve their basic skills and prepare for the GED, it is somewhat unexpected that such a large proportion of those who never go to programs also engage in such self-study. This suggests that a substantial reservoir of individuals may be actively trying to improve their skills, and that programs are not reaching or are unable to serve them through their current offerings. Perhaps new conceptions of how to support and enhance such independent learning (through the use of distance technologies and new media, for example) will better connect these learners with adult education programs.

Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency

The ability to study on one's own may depend on having certain levels of basic skills. The surprisingly high rate of self-study found in the LSAL population may be related to the study populations' relatively high levels of literacy proficiency. The LSAL population, by definition, is comprised entirely of high school dropouts who have not passed the GED. They do, however, have relatively high levels of literacy proficiency as measured by the Test of Adult Literacy Skills (TALS), which are the scales used in many familiar state, national, and international adult literacy assessments (Kirsch et al. 1993; OECD, 1995). Figure 1 plots the percentage of individuals reporting previous self-study as a function of their assessed TALS literacy proficiency.[2] Instead of the expected finding that individuals with higher skills are more likely to engage in self-study, the figure shows the opposite. Individuals with higher skill levels are less likely to have engaged in self-study efforts to improve their skills or prepare for the GED. Individuals at the lowest levels of skill are the most likely to engage in such self-study efforts; about half of the LSAL population functioning at the lowest proficiency level (level 1) has previously engaged in such self-study activities.

Figure 1. **Self-Study and Literacy Proficiency**



Program Participation and Literacy Proficiency

Literacy proficiency may affect not only self-directed learning of basic skills but also participation and learning within basic skills programs. LSAL data show a clear negative association between students' assessed literacy proficiency and their evaluations of program effectiveness. Table 2 shows that those who are most satisfied with their adult education have lower literacy proficiency scores than those reporting that programs did not help to improve their skills.

Table 2. **Program satisfaction and literacy proficiency**

Extent to which programs helped improve skills	%	Literacy Proficiency*
Not at all	25	290
Somewhat	44	281
A great deal	31	267

* TALS scores. [2]

Our interpretation of such data will be more definitive after we have directly measured changes in individuals' skills over time. Until then, a tentative interpretation of these baseline data is that local adult education programs appear to assist students within a relatively narrow range of literacy proficiency. Students coming in with skills above this range may not be well served.

Is there a relationship between the lower satisfaction with programs and the lower rates of self-study we observed among people with higher literacy proficiency? We might reasonably surmise that dissatisfaction with programs

leads people to build on their established skills by studying on their own as an alternative to formal education. However, the data show that those who said that programs helped "not at all" were significantly less likely to engage in self-study than students who answered that programs helped improve their skills "a great deal." Even after we take literacy proficiency into account,[3] there is a positive relationship between self-study and program satisfaction: those students who have also self-studied report that formal programs assisted them more in improving their skills. To understand what this relationship is about, we need to examine data from subsequent years, in which we will have additional information about changing patterns of self-study, program participation, and assessed literacy proficiencies.

Implications

Data from the LSAL may encourage new ideas about adult education students and new models of programs to serve them. Increasing our knowledge about the extent to which individuals who never attend formal programs undertake self-study to improve basic skills and prepare for the GED is part of what we have to learn. These results bring to mind learners who are already engaged and might be served by programs through distance technologies and new media, even though they may not be able or interested in attending programs. As the LSAL continues to document changes in individuals' literacy proficiency and practices over time, the contributions of program participation and self-study to literacy development should become clearer. By measuring development over time, it will be possible to determine whether individuals with higher literacy proficiency choose different methods of skill development than those with lower scores and which strategies for development are more effective than others. Feedback from Focus on Basics readers about your interpretation of these findings is welcome, as we continue to design and analyze future waves of data.

[1]This particular analysis excludes periods of participation current at the time of the first interview, since such periods by definition would not yet be complete.

[2]The TALS Document Literacy proficiency is plotted in the proficiency ranges typically reported, with level 1 the lowest and level 5 the highest. On a 500 point scale, level 1 is 0-225, level 2 is 226-276, level 3 is 276 to 325, level 4 is 326 to 375 and level 5 is 376 to 500. See Kirsh et al., 1993, for a description of these proficiency levels.

[3]Statistical models were used to examine the three-way relationship among literacy proficiency, self-study, and program participation.

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Handout

Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

by Alisa Belzer
Focus on Basics, Vol. 2, Issue A, March 1998, pp. 15-17

Students and teachers may perceive withdrawing from a program differently

To plan this issue, I read many research studies, some quantitative, some qualitative, some teacher research, others done by academics. Alisa Belzer's examination of the process that learners go through in deciding to stay or leave a program and the many factors that influence them presented many findings worthy of discussion, but one in particular intrigued me. She found that some students who were defined as "drop outs" by their literacy programs did not consider themselves as such. This difference in perception can have strong implications for the services we deliver. I asked Alisa to share this aspect of her research with us. — Barbara Garner

When I was teaching and students stopped coming to class or to tutoring sessions, I never really knew quite what to think. Sometimes I blamed myself: "If only I were a better teacher." Sometimes I felt angry at the student, "If only she could get her life together." And sometimes I offered myself a structural interpretation related to the challenges that learners face: "No wonder she can't keep coming, look at what she is contending with...." In fact, I really couldn't explain it.

In 1991, I had the opportunity to lead a systematic exploration of the issue.[1] Although I did not conduct the study in my own classroom, the questions I asked and methods I used grew out of my experiences as a teacher and coordinator as well as those of my colleagues in a large, urban literacy program.

It seemed unlikely to me that a learner left or stayed in a program based on any one factor. It seemed more likely that a feeling or attitude about leaving the program developed and a decision got made over time. I designed a study aimed at understanding this complex process better. I was particularly interested in the interaction between the expectations learners brought to a program, their life experiences, and what the program had to offer. I gathered data on the expectations the learners brought, obstacles they and their teachers and tutors encountered, ways in which learners and teachers perceived staying in or leaving a program, and the strategies teachers and tutors employed to promote retention in the program.

One of the assumptions I had, which this article will focus on, was that if students feel badly about leaving a program, it may be difficult for them to return at a later date. This raised the question: How do students feel about leaving? In gathering and analyzing data, I focused in on this issue.

Sample

To carry out the study, I used qualitative research methods to gain multiple perspectives on the process of participation in an adult literacy program from the point of view of learners, staff, and tutors over time. Four educators -- two teachers and two volunteer tutor coordinators -- randomly recruited two to three learners each to participate in the study. The only criteria for selection that they used were that the learners have phones and be willing to be interviewed. The group of students consisted of five individuals participating in three different classes and five individuals receiving tutoring in two different areas of the city. Beyond stratifying for type of learning context, the sample was one of convenience.

Process

The study followed ten students from entry into the program for up to four months or until they dropped out. A former staff member and I gathered the data. We planned periodic contact in the form of face-to-face or telephone interviews with students, as well as with their teachers for those in classes, and with the tutors and coordinators of those receiving tutoring, conducting a total of 102 interviews. The ten students were interviewed 47 times, the four volunteer tutors -- one tutor became inactive almost immediately after the study began -- were interviewed 19 times, and teachers and coordinators were interviewed 36 times. One tutor remained active in the program only briefly and did not make himself available for an interview. Of the ten adult learners who participated in the study, five of them were still participating regularly in the program at the end of the study.

Perceptions of Stopping

When students stop coming to a program, how do they perceive this action? This was one of the questions in which I was interested. We were surprised to find that the students who left the program did not seem to consider themselves “drop outs.” No one would go so far as to say that she had quit the program. Each of those who left planned to return in the future. While they had stopped coming, their intentions to participate had not ended. Although they did not necessarily know when they would be able to return, they all believed it would be possible and desirable to do so. Of perhaps even greater importance to me was that no one expressed a sense of personal failure because of leaving the

program. Rather, each simply felt that it was no longer possible for them to continue at that time. They attributed this to factors beyond their control a job, health problems, financial problems, legal problems, or other personal and family problems that would have to solve themselves.

This raises questions for educators who work hard to help learners avoid a feeling of failure. For the most part, the learners we interviewed who stopped coming neither felt they had failed, nor did they feel the program had failed. Instead, they communicated a feeling that the circumstances of their lives had made it impossible to continue.

The learners' sense that they have little or no control over circumstances seems in some ways destructive. It implies to me a certain sense of powerlessness and suggests that these learners, at least, may feel unable to get around obstacles not necessarily insurmountable to others. It is also, however, a protective stance. It means that students can leave a program without feeling bad about themselves for being "drop-outs." This, in turn, seems to leave the door open for a return to the program in the future. The fact that nine out of the ten adults in the study had participated in some kind of adult education at least once before and chosen to begin anew seems to bear this assumption out.

Students expressed the belief that they have not "completed" the program until they reached their goals. Yet, stopping periodically was not viewed as quitting. Most focused on what they had been able to accomplish during their time in the program, however brief. For example, one student, who had stopped for health reasons, reported that after her time in the program, she was doing more reading and comprehending better. "I feel good about myself...I'm accomplishing something," she said. Another student who remained in the program throughout the study stated that had she been forced to drop out, she would not have felt like a failure. Rather, she would feel good about the fact that she had made the effort and "I would just go to class the next year or to some other class." A student who was re-entering the program for the third time when the study began explained that she had never felt like a failure when she left in the past because she always knew that she would return. She believed that this in-and-out pattern of participation would serve her until she is able to reach her goals. Two students did admit that if they quit, they would feel unhappy. One said, "If I quit, I wouldn't like myself. This time I'd rather finish all the way." The other said that if she dropped out she "would feel blue for a while." Fortunately both of these students persisted despite severe obstacles."

Implications

If one agrees with the study participants' perceptions that departure from a program should not necessarily be viewed as a failure, but rather as a temporary hiatus, the question then arises: what implications does this have for programs? Teachers and tutors could make sure that students have materials they can work on outside of class or tutoring; they should also ensure that learners know how to use those materials. Program staff could emphasize life-long learning skills, such as encouraging the habit of reading and writing every day, so that students continue practicing their literacy skills when they are unable to attend. In addition, programs might want to consider printing and distributing class lists for students to encourage contact between students outside of class. On a broader scale, teachers and program managers should plan their program structures, curricula, and assessment procedures on the assumption that even under the best of circumstances, students will come and go, and, hopefully, come again.

Many of the other findings from this study, not detailed here, a firm the notion that attempts to increase retention based on a cause and effect explanation, to frame the issue in terms of single differentiated obstacles, or to assume that decisions around dropping out come at a single point in time, are missing out on much of the complexity of the issue. The question of how to improve student retention cannot be solved with simple or single answers. The same obstacles or supports can create different outcomes for different students. Since often many complicated and interrelated factors are involved in the decision to continue participation in a program, a simple or single solution may make no difference. It is, however, still useful to try to identify potential obstacles, whether they arise during the recruitment and enrollment phase or as a student participates in a program, and to seek strategies that can help retention.

The sample size of this study was small and the time for data collection was relatively short. As with all qualitative studies, the findings here are not necessarily generalizable to an entire population. Rather, they are meant to be suggestive and provocative. I am hoping that this study can help practitioners reconsider a familiar problem in a new way and that it can help clarify understandings of a complex issue through learning about the perspectives of a small group of students and the literacy practitioners with whom they worked. It can neither provide the field with definitive answers of how to cure retention problems nor suggest how to motivate all students. It can help us to think hard about how we formulate programs, curricula, and learning contexts that best respond to the realities of adult learners' lives.

Other Questions

Many retention questions remain to be investigated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Although this study has strongly suggested that no single answers to improving retention exist, data on various program factors would certainly aid programs in their efforts. Here are some of the questions in which I am interested. Is there a relationship between tutor or teacher retention and student retention? Do students participating in classes, on average, have retention rates different than those who participate in one-to-one tutoring? What happens to students when they leave the program? Do they go to other programs? How often do they return? How long do they stay away? How do the retention rates of open-entry open-exit programs compare with programs that use semester systems, and what does that suggest?

Programs might develop their own questions about retention and use their investigations as a way to help them develop retention strategies and set policy. They should also think about how to best structure themselves to address reality: some students will always be coming and going.

Endnote

[1]The study was funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education, with funds from the U.S. Department of Education.

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Handout

Sponsors and Sponsorship: Initial Findings from the Second Phase of the NCSALL Persistence Study

by John Comings and Sondra Cuban
Focus on Basics, Vol. 6, Issue A, October 2002, pp. 1, 3-6

When new students walk into your class, they may appear to be alone, but research now underway at NCSALL indicates that, in most cases, they are not. They arrive in a program with the help and support of a specific person or a few people in their social network. The researchers in the second phase of NCSALL's Persistence Study are calling these people "sponsors" and the help they provide "sponsorship" (Brandt, 2001). Sponsors appear to be an important support to persistence. You may be able to help these sponsors support your students, and your class and program may be able to play the sponsorship role. We hope the research findings presented here help you take advantage of this overlooked resource.

The report of the first phase of NCSALL's Persistence Study (Comings et al., 1999) identified the support of family, friends, teachers, and fellow students as important to students' persistence, but it did not describe the nature of this support. The second phase of the study is providing in-depth, descriptive information about how personal relationships help and hinder student persistence, and is building a more complex picture of these relationships. Most students in the present phase of the study identify a specific person or a few specific people in their social networks who provide support to their persistence. Although we found no evidence that the literacy programs officially recognize these sponsors, we do find that program staff and volunteer tutors sometimes play the sponsorship role.

We did not interview the sponsors in this study; the students indicated their importance as a support to persistence. Sometimes a sponsor steps forward without being asked, or the relationship begins when an adult asks for help with reading or writing. The sponsors in this study usually have more education and familiarity with educational institutions than do the learners they support, and they act as a guide into the world of education, often identifying programs or setting up initial visits. Sponsors are also personal counselors who advise about education, assist with literacy tasks, and encourage students to achieve their goals. Sponsors sometimes provide money, transportation, child care, and housing. Some sponsors are altruistic, but others want something in return for their help. Sponsors can be a help and a hindrance at the same time.

Some sponsors provided a type of symbolic support: a legacy of support. For example, several students mention the memory of a parent, not necessarily well educated, who valued education and who transmitted this value to them, as a support to their persistence. The parent is no longer providing direct support, but the values the parent instilled in the child are still having an effect. One student in the study, who is from Barbados, remembers the importance his mother gave to his education and learning. He says, "Every day she told me you have got to go to school."

Three Types of Sponsor

Students in the study mentioned different types of sponsor, which we have categorized as: 1) personal, 2) official, and 3) intermediate. These categories reflect the relationships between the student and the sponsor, as well as the type of support provided. Personal sponsors are part of a student's everyday life and include relatives, godmothers, children, spouses and partners, neighbors, friends, and co-workers. Official sponsors are professionals who are paid to provide specific support to students. They include social workers, parole officers, welfare-to-work counselors, professional literacy staff, librarians, and teachers. The third type is a person who is in an intermediate position between official and personal. They are not part of a student's everyday life or a professional paid to provide this support to them. They include pastors, fellow 12-step recovery program members (especially 12-step sponsors), volunteer tutors, and other students. The sponsorship categories are useful to our thinking about sponsors, but individual sponsors may be described by more than one category. Readers should think of these categories as "roles" that define different ways to support students.

Personal Sponsorship

A personal sponsor, such as a relative who gives emotional, literacy, and informational support, can offer pervasive, comprehensive supports. Susan, a co-worker in Mark's family business, plays the role of a personal sponsor. Mark revealed his problem with reading to Susan, who was the first person to talk with him about it. She offered both to help with literacy tasks and to tutor him, and she found a program for him, calling the local library literacy program and setting up the initial contact for Mark. Susan is part of Mark's life and has shown that she is willing and able to support him in his efforts to persist at learning.

Sometimes, personal sponsors place demands on students that are not supportive to persistence. For example, one student's mother gives her a place to live during periods of homelessness and encourages her to attend class. The mother provides positive reinforcement such as applauding her

daughter when she reads. However, this student's mother sometimes calls the program and requests that her daughter come home and help take care of problems related to her mother's illness.

Official Sponsorship

An official sponsor, such as a caseworker who provides a referral to a program and follows up to see how the student's participation works out, gives intermittent, targeted support within a limited time frame. An example of an official sponsor is Sally, a professional General Educational Development (GED) teacher in a drug treatment program. One of her students, Cory, was able to complete some of the math preparation for the GED, but her reading skills were too low to enable her to pass the test. Sally located a basic literacy program and helped Cory to enroll. The GED teacher and the other professional staff in the drug treatment program are supporting Cory's persistence in learning. The GED teacher is in contact with Cory's drug treatment counselor, who keeps track of her participation in the program and can provide referrals to services she might need so that she can persist in her learning.

Official sponsors have limitations. They may not be available to the student on a personal level or outside of normal office hours, and their institutions have official objectives that might interfere with an individual's sponsorship role.

Intermediate Sponsorship

Intermediate sponsors are in the middle of these two ends of a continuum. They are involved with students for a longer period of time than official sponsors but are not integrated into a student's life in the way that personal sponsors are. Bill, Rod's sponsor in a 12-step recovery program, is an intermediate sponsor. Rod started in a literacy program after he began the recovery process, and then dropped out of the literacy program after a relapse into drinking. Bill gave Rod advice on the timing of when he should rejoin the literacy program. Bill felt that Rod should not take on anything stressful until he was back in recovery, and he was worried that participation in the program was stressful and might lead to another relapse. When Rod did re-enter the program, he did so with more confidence.

A student's connection to an intermediate sponsor is usually not encumbered by the kinds of demands that friends and relatives make on each other, nor is it constrained by the rules and objectives of official sponsors. Intermediate sponsors may be particularly beneficial to student persistence and may be a model for how a program can play the sponsorship role for students.

We have observed volunteer tutors and students playing the intermediate sponsorship role. Tutors provide transportation and daycare assistance to their students. Tutors and fellow students provide encouragement, discuss barriers to persistence, and connect students to community services that can provide transportation, daycare, and counseling. The programs in this phase of NCSALL's Persistence Study are connected to libraries, which have a traditional role of support to reading and self-study. Libraries and the volunteers they recruit might be ideal community institutions to play the intermediate sponsorship role. They could play that role for students both in library literacy programs and in the programs of other institutions.

Learning About Sponsors

The programs in this study sometimes learn about sponsors when students casually mention them during intake, in class, or during informal conversations, but we have not observed a systematic intervention that sought to identify or involve sponsors. If programs formally query new students about sponsors in their lives, staff could help students to develop strategies for engaging sponsors to help them persist in the program. Programs could also involve sponsors directly in literacy efforts and provide training and other services to help sponsors to continue and expand their support of students. Professional counselors or support groups among students could discuss the sponsorship role, identify sponsors, and develop strategies to benefit from this type of support.

Identifying sponsorship as critical, defining different types of sponsors, exploring the ways in which sponsors support persistence, and developing approaches to build sponsorship for students could lead to insights into how to increase persistence by better utilizing and expanding a student's network of sponsorship. Since a student may come to a literacy program without sponsors, programs might find ways to connect them to people and institutions that can play this role. Programs can help students to identify sponsors in their personal social networks and in the institutions that provide them with professional help. Sponsors can be found in recovery or substance abuse groups, churches, housing groups, and local neighborhood organizations. A partnership among the sponsor, student, tutor or teacher, and staff might bring the program experience more directly into the student's life, which could help support persistence.

Research into how children learn to read has identified the support of family and community (the social network of the child) as critical to helping children become good readers (Snow et al., 1998). An individual teacher cannot connect to a child's entire social network and, therefore, focuses on the child's primary caregivers, usually the parents. Adult students, too, need a supportive social

network that helps them to succeed at learning, whether that learning is focused on reading, writing, math, language, or passing the GED tests. Programs cannot connect to their students' entire social networks, but they can identify a sponsor or a few sponsors in each student's life and connect to them. The co-worker, recovery process advisor, and GED teacher in the examples above could be powerful allies in a program's attempt to help those students persist in their learning. If sponsorship is critical to student persistence, community organizations (such as libraries) might be encouraged to take on this role, even if they are not providing direct instruction. We hope our research will eventually provide programs with tools that will allow them to build a network of sponsors for their students that is consistent and long lasting.

An interim report of this research will be available at http://www.mdrc.org in late 2002 and a final report in mid-2003.

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Handout

Action Plan

Idea for Enhancing Supports or Reducing Barriers:

Name:

Date:

Action Steps	By Whom	By When	Resources Needed
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

Information About NCSALL

The Mission of NCSALL. NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort among the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

NCSALL's Research Projects. The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education (ABE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) student motivation, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) staff development, and (4) assessment.

Dissemination Initiative. NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge, and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly magazine for practitioners*; Focus on Policy*, a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports* and *Occasional Papers*, periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs. For more information about NCSALL's publications and activities, please visit our Web site at:

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