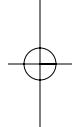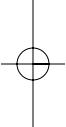# 2

Persistence: Helping Adult Education Students Reach Their Goals

John P. Comings

Unlike children, who participate in schooling because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces, most adult students choose to participate in educational programs. Adults must make an active decision to participate in each class or tutoring session and often must overcome significant barriers to participate in educational services. Although some adults come to adult education[10] programs with specific or short-term goals, most come with goals that require hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of instruction to achieve (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Reder, 2000). Every adult education program, therefore, should provide its students with services that help them persist in learning long enough to reach their educational goals. This chapter defines persistence, sets out the evidence for why we should pay attention to this issue, and reviews the

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[10]The term *adult education* includes English for speakers of other language, adult literacy, high school equivalence, and basic skills programs for adults.

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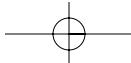
persistence research. The chapter concludes by suggesting changes in policy and practice that might support higher levels of persistence, and new research that would provide evidence that these suggestions are useful.

DEFINITION OF PERSISTENCE

Persistence can be seen as being comprised of two parts: intensity (the hours of instruction per month) and duration (the months of engagement in instruction). Persistence rates are reported as hours of instruction during a specific period of months, usually in increments of 1 year. Adult education programs often refer to persistence as *retention*[11] and measure it by recording participation in formal classes or tutoring sessions. Comings and colleagues (1999) proposed the term persistence because adults can persist in learning through self-study or distance education when they stop attending program services, and sometimes return to a program (although not necessarily the same one they dropped out of) after a lapse in attendance. The term retention defines this phenomenon from a program's point of view; the program wants to retain its students. Comings and colleagues (1999) preferred the term persistence because it defines this phenomenon from the point of view of students who persist in learning—inside and outside of a program—until they have achieved their goals. This chapter defines persistence:

> *As adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services, and returning to program services as soon as the demands of their lives allow.*

Persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until an adult student meets his or her educational goals, and persistence could start through self-study before the first episode of participation in a program. Persistence ends when the student decides to stop learning.

WHY PERSISTENCE MATTERS

The relationship between persistence and learning is supported by several studies. Sticht (1982) and Darkenwald (1986) identified approximately

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[11]Keeping students engaged in a particular program.

100 hours of instruction as the minimum needed by adults to achieve an increase of one grade-level equivalent on a standardized test of reading comprehension. Comings, Sum, and Uvin (2000) found that, at 150 hours of instruction, adult students in Massachusetts had a 75% probability of making a one (or greater) grade-level equivalent increase in reading comprehension or English language fluency. Porter, Cuban, and Comings (2005) found that 58 hours of instruction led to a .40 grade-level equivalent increase in reading comprehension. Rose and Wright (2006) examined the national reporting system (NRS) data of three states and found that at 100 to 110 hours of participation, 50% of students were likely to show a one NRS level[12] increase or pass the general equivalency diploma (GED) test.

Fitzgerald and Young (1997) analyzed data on the 614 students (out of 22,000) in a Development Associates (1993) study who had both a pretest and a posttest reading score. They found a relationship between hours of instruction and learning gains for immigrants learning English, but not for adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) students. With a sample of less than 1% of the total students in the study, these results are not conclusive. However, it suggests, as do the studies cited earlier, that adult students might demonstrate gains at specific intervals, 100 hours for example, but the interval may differ depending on such factors as initial test score.

These studies point to 100 hours of instruction as the point at which a majority of adult education students are likely to show measurable progress, and, therefore, it serves as a benchmark that identifies an effective program. That is, if a majority of students are persisting for 100 hours or more, the program is probably having a measurable impact on at least half of its students. The U.S. Department of Education (2003) reported the average time that an adult spends in a program as 113 hours[13] in a 12-month period. However, this figure does not include adults who drop out before they complete 12 hours of instruction, which would lower the

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[12]A one NRS level increase represents an improvement in a score on a standardized test from one defined level to another. Each NRS level is a range of approximately two grade-level equivalents so an increase could be as little as a single scale score point (a small segment of a grade-level equivalent) to two grade-level equivalents.

[13]134 hours for adults learning English, 103 hours for adults who are improving their literacy and math skills, and 87 hours for adults pursuing a high school equivalency.

average significantly. In addition, these data were influenced by one state (Florida) that reported a mean persistence rate of 258 hours and enrollment at more than 400,000 students, which is more than 15% of the national total. Only three other states reported a mean persistence rate of more than 100 hours: California (138 hours), Massachusetts (121 hours), and North Carolina (102 hours). Seven states reported an average persistence rate of less than 50 hours, and 36 states reported less than 80 hours. A large portion of the student population who stay at least 12 hours do not persist in their studies for 100 hours.

Even 113 hours of instruction is only about one tenth of the time that a K–12 student spends in class during a year. A one grade-level increase, therefore, is a significant gain within this short period of time. However, few adult students enter programs with goals that can be achieved with only a few hours of instruction. Most adult students express the desire to improve their language, literacy, and math skills; acquire high school credentials; and move on to postsecondary education or skilled job training (Comings et al., 1999; Reder, 2000). Program participation of 100 hours or even 150 hours, therefore, is probably inadequate for most adult students to reach their learning goals. Changes in policies and practices that support increased persistence could lead to more adult education students spending sufficient hours engaged in learning and therefore reaching their learning goals. The research presented here provides the best available evidence on what those changes might be.

RESEARCH ON PERSISTENCE

Some of the literature in this chapter draws on research with adults who have good literacy skills, speak English, have high school diplomas, and participate in short-term courses with defined, limited goals, such as job skill development classes in government employment programs and certificate programs in postsecondary education institutions. Although this research is informative, it may not be directly applicable to ABE students who have low literacy and math skills, do not speak English, or do not have a high school diploma. ABE students usually face a long-term commitment that may involve many different goals that change over time. In addition, some studies look at participation (the decision to join a program) rather than persistence (the decision to continue in a program). These decisions are similar but may not be the same. Finally, some studies help define the problem but do not provide

insights into how to help ABE students persist in learning. Even with these limitations, this research is the best available evidence for understanding persistence and identifying ways to improve it. This chapter summarizes the findings of four previous reviews that looked at adult education literature, as well as recent studies that took place after these reviews were published (see Table 2.1 for an overview of the findings). The chapter also describes two connected studies that focused on adults whose goals were improving language, literacy, and math skills, or achieving a high school equivalence degree.

Literature Reviews

Four literature reviews analyze the participation, retention, and persistence literature (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1997; Tracy-Mumford, 1994; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). The authors of these reviews have experience with adult education programs, and this experience helps them translate findings on other populations to ABE students. Although these four reviews draw from a common core of studies, each supplements it with additional studies. All of the studies reviewed by these authors have limitations; as a result, the authors drew on their own experience and came to different conclusions. For a more detailed description and analysis of the four reviews, see Comings and colleagues (1999).

In his literature review, Beder (1991) suggested that motivation is the force that helps adults overcome barriers to participation and then described those barriers. Beder suggested that adult education programs must change their recruitment and instruction practices to be congruent with the motivations and life contexts of adult students; if they do, more adults will enter programs and persist longer. Beder concluded that adults may be weighing the benefits and costs of participation and making decisions based on that analysis. In many cases, a decision to drop out may be justified if the costs outweigh the benefits.

The Beder (1991) review concludes by asserting that the present adult education system only has enough resources to serve those who are eager to enter classes. Beder's review also suggests that the difficulties encountered by adult students could be made more manageable if programs had the resources to fit instruction to the needs and learning styles of adults and if programs looked less like school and more like an activity in which adults would want to participate.

The Wikelund et al. (1992) paper calls for broadening the definition of participation to acknowledge that adults engage in education in many

TABLE 2.1
Summary of Major Scholarly Works Informing Our Current
Understanding of Persistence

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry	Key Findings
Beder (1991)	Literature review	• Suggests that adults' decisions to participate are often based on cost-benefit analysis • Emphasizes need for programs to align their services with learner motivations and life contexts
Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg (1992)	Literature review	• Emphasizes the need to broaden the definition of participation beyond instructional hours • Challenges conventional notions of "nonparticipants"
Tracy-Mumford (1994)	Literature review	• Outlines the key characteristics of a program's persistence plan, one that supports students and informs instruction • Identifies a range of action steps program can take to directly address persistence issues
Quigley (1997)	Literature review and qualitative study	• Provides evidence for the link between adult learner persistence and previous schooling experiences • Underscores the critical importance of the first 3 weeks of participation in a program
Meder (2000)	Quasi-experimental study	• Found that engaging learners in discussion of motivational issues increased persistence
Quigley (2000)	Quasi-experimental study	• Suggests that negative attitudes toward education affect persistence • Found that intake and orientation are critical to persistence • Recommends that intake and orientation should start with goal setting and students matched to classes that meet their needs
Cuban (2003)	Case studies	• Suggests that programs may need to adapt their program curriculum and schedules to the needs and interests of their students

ways that are not limited to participation in formal classes. It also criticizes the concept of "nonparticipant" because such a concept implies that every adult who has low literacy skills needs to enter a program, which might not be true. The review concludes that research and theory, as well as practice, should focus on alternatives to formal schooling. A new definition of participation would acknowledge that learning, even improvements in literacy skills, could take place outside of formal programs. With this new definition, programs could increase persistence by continuing to support learning at times when students cannot attend classes or participate in other formal arrangements.

In her literature review, Tracy-Mumford (1994) summarized suggestions that came from research and from the reports of practitioners who had tried to improve persistence in their programs. Tracy-Mumford called for programs to develop a commitment to, and a plan for, increasing persistence, a plan that should include a strong message to students that the program is there to help them reach their goals. Because student goals can change, the program must be willing to make adjustments to accommodate new goals as they arise. For the commitment to be meaningful, the program should have a set of criteria for measuring persistence and should implement a set of strategies that reduce dropout, increase student hours of attendance, improve achievement, increase personal goal attainment, and improve completion rates.

Tracy-Mumford (1994) defined an effective persistence plan as one that both provides support to students and improves instruction. From the findings of a large number of studies and descriptions of practice, she presented a list of elements of a student persistence plan that weaves persistence strategies into all aspects of the program structure, including these:

- Recruitment methods should provide enough information for potential students to make an informed decision about enrolling.
- Intake and orientation procedures should help students understand the program, set realistic expectations, build a working relationship with program staff, and establish learning goals.
- Initial assessment tools should provide students and teachers with information on both cognitive and affective needs, should be integrated with instruction, and should form the foundation for measuring progress.
- Programs and teachers should establish strategies for formally recognizing student achievement.

- Counseling services should identify students at risk of dropping out early.
- Referral services should coordinate with social service agencies to ensure that all students are connected to the support services they need.
- The program should have a system for contact and follow-up that helps students who drop out return to the program and solicits information on ways to improve program services.
- Noninstructional activities should help form a bond between the program and its students and their families.
- Program evaluation should involve students in assessing and offering advice on each aspect of the program.
- Child care and transportation assistance should be provided.
- Instruction and instructional staff should be of sufficient quality to support effective learning.
- A student persistence team should coordinate dropout prevention activities, collect data on student persistence, and involve students and teachers in addressing this issue.

Tracy-Mumford's list is useful to program staff because it translates theory into practical advice. Unfortunately, most ABE programs lack the funding required to implement all of these elements, but implementing some of them may contribute to increased persistence.

Quigley (1997) added insights from a research study he undertook in Pennsylvania. He viewed persistence as significantly affected by the negative schooling experiences adults had when they were younger and suggested the need to change programs so that they are different from schools. Quigley saw three major constellations of factors that contribute to drop out, which he referred to as *situational* (influences of the adult's life circumstances), *institutional* (influences of systems), and *dispositional* (influences of experience). He suggested that situational influences are largely beyond the control of adult education programs, although they receive most of the attention in the literature on dropouts. Institutional factors are areas that practitioners could affect and should work on continuously. However, he suggested that dispositional factors, such as negative attitudes toward education as a result of previous failures in school, provide a focus for program reform that might affect persistence.

According to Quigley (1997), intake and orientation processes in the first 3 weeks of participation are critical to improving persistence. He suggested that intake should begin with goal setting and planning for success. Students then need to be matched to classes and teachers that can meet

their goals and learning needs. Adult students can take charge of this process, but they may need help in the form of careful questions and useful information for making these decisions.

Recent Studies

A review of journals and online sources identified three studies that were not included in the four reviews already discussed and were focused on adult education as defined in this chapter. Two tested interventions in small-scale quasi-experimental studies and one described and analyzed two case studies.

Meder (2000) found that providing three opportunities for goal setting and discussion of the factors that might support or hinder adults in reaching their goals helped 31 students in her GED-level math course to persist in their studies. She had each student fill out a questionnaire on goals, barriers, and supports to persistence, and then discussed the answers with the students. This was done at 4 weeks and 8 weeks. She compared this treatment group to data available in the previous year's classes (in which these opportunities did not exist). This study suggests that involving students in a process of thinking about their motivation to participate in adult education and ways to sustain that motivation helps them persist in learning.

Quigley (2000) followed 20 students who were judged to be at risk of dropping out in a quasi-experimental study of grouping and classroom size and support that included a control group of 5 students and three treatment groups, each with 5 participants. The control group was placed in a classroom with a total of 15 students (i.e., large-group instruction), and none of this group persisted for 3 months or more. Among the treatment groups, 3 of the 5 adults placed in small-group instruction persisted for 3 months or more, 2 of the 5 adults placed in a learning environment with a teacher and a counselor persisted for 3 months or more, and 1 of the 5 adults who were placed in individual tutoring persisted for 3 months or more. Quigley also administered the Witkin Embedded Figures Test (Witkin, 1971; Witkin, Oltman, Raskin, & Karp, 1971) and the Learning Style Assessment Scale (Flannery, 1993) to all students. He found that they were highly field dependent (needing acceptance by peers) and global learners (who find it difficult to focus on topics that require linear sequencing). He suggested that small-group learning may be more appropriate for adult students who fit this profile.

Cuban (2003) reported on in-depth case studies (i.e., many hours of interviews and observation over many months) of 2 women students in a

library literacy program. The detail of the case study makes clear that adult life affects persistence in complex ways. The 2 women were caregivers for their various family members and put those responsibilities before their needs and desires. The students were interested in reading romance literature but this was not the focus of their classes. The study suggests that an approach to persistence support that is the same for all students might have a positive short-term impact but, for long-term persistence, programs may need to adapt their services to the lives of each student. This might require scheduling that can accommodate changing student schedules and reading content that is of interest to students.

PERSISTENCE STUDY

Because the existing literature base was limited, in 1996 the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) began a multiphase study of the factors that support and inhibit persistence. This study began with a review of the literature cited previously (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1997; Tracy-Mumford, 1994; Wikelund et al., 1992) and then plotted a course that would build on this foundation to develop and test an intervention that might improve persistence. In the first phase of the study, researchers interviewed 150 adults and tracked their persistence in pre-GED classes (Comings et al., 1999). Of the total, 100 students persisted for the 4 months of the study; 50 dropped out. In the second phase, researchers studied the efforts of five library literacy programs as they attempted to increase student persistence over a 3-year period (Porter et al., 2005). The third phase—not yet begun at the time of the writing of this chapter—will undertake an experiment to test whether a model of persistence support developed during the first two phases does, in fact, have an impact on persistence in programs. This section summarizes what has been learned in the first two phases of this research.

First Phase

The first phase of the study employed a force-field analysis as its theoretical model. A force-field analysis places an individual in a field of forces that support or inhibit action along a particular path (Gilbert, Fisk, & Lindzey, 1998; Lewin, 1999). This expands the motivation barriers and cost–benefit models to include a large number of forces on each side of the persistence equation. Understanding the forces, identifying which are

strongest, and deciding which are most amenable to manipulation provides an indication of how to help someone move in a desired direction, such as reaching an educational goal.

This study found that the many ways in which adult students are usually classified (by gender, ethnicity, employment status, number of children, and educational background of parents or guardians) do not have a strong influence on persistence. The findings suggest that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children are more likely to persist than others in the study. The greater likelihood of persistence by immigrant students in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, compared to ABE and ASE students, is well documented (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1994), and the findings of this study suggest that this effect continues as immigrants learn English and move on to pre-GED programs. Adults who are over 30 are more likely to have teenage or grown children than those under 30 and children may encourage their parents to join and persist in a program. These findings suggest that older students persist longer because they benefit from the maturity that comes with age, and they no longer have the responsibilities of caring for small children.

The study also found that previous school experience (among U.S.-schooled students) does not appear to be associated with persistence. Of course, those potential students who are significantly affected by negative school experience may never enter a program or may have dropped out before the research team arrived. However, many of the study's participants did describe negative school experiences, with most of the comments centered on high school. Respondents reported being ridiculed and even struck by teachers, bullied or intimidated by other students, told that they were stupid, and asked by administrators to leave school. Issues of class, race, and sexual orientation contributed to the negative school experience for some. Entering an ABE program may signal that a student has overcome the influences of negative school experiences and is ready to restart his or her education.

Another finding is that prior nonschool learning experiences, particularly self-study focused on improving basic skills or studying for the GED, was related to persistence. Attempts at self-study may be an indication of strong motivation, or some people may need several attempts at learning before they are ready to persist.

Both the students who persisted and those who dropped out talked about the forces supporting and inhibiting persistence in the same way. Students mentioned four types of positive forces: *relationships, goals, teacher and*

fellow students, and *self-determination. Relationships* are the support noted by participants from their families, friends, or colleagues; God or their church community; support groups; community workers; mentors or bosses; and their children. *Goals* included helping one's children, getting a better job, bettering one's self, moving ahead in life, attending college or some other academic institution, proving someone's assessment of the student's abilities wrong, or obtaining citizenship. *Teacher and fellow students* involves the support from the people in their classes, and their *self-determination* is the positive attitude needed to succeed.

Students mentioned three types of negative forces: *life demands, relationships,* and *poor self-determination. Life demands* included child-care needs; work demands; transportation difficulties; the student's own, or his or her family's, health issues; age; lack of time; fatigue; bad weather; rules set by welfare and other social programs; unfavorable conditions at home; moving; and lack of income. *Relationships* included family members, friends, colleagues, and community or welfare workers who did not support persistence, as well as fears about letting other people down by failing in a program. *Poor self-determination* included "thinking negative thoughts," "my own laziness," and statements indicating a lack of confidence in participants' own ability to succeed.

Students' mention of specific positive and negative forces did not predict persistence, but these findings are valuable because they give practitioners input from adult students on what might be important. Adults in this study mentioned many more positive forces than negative forces. All the students mentioned at least three positive forces but some did not mention any negative forces, even when they were encouraged to do so. Because negative school experience was not associated with persistence and students described many positive forces overcoming a limited number of negative forces, building positive supports may be more critical to increasing persistence than removing barriers. If this is so, then understanding which positive forces are most important is essential to a model that supports persistence.

The study team summarized the implications of its findings by identifying four supports to persistence:

- **The first support to persistence is to establish the student's goal.** The process of goal development begins before an adult enters a program. An adult who could be classified as a potential ABE student experiences an event in his or her life that motivates him or her to enter an educational program. That event might be something

dramatic; for example, a well-paid worker might lose his or her job and find that he or she does not have the basic skills needed to qualify for a new job at a similar pay scale. That event might be less dramatic; for example, a parent may decide he or she needs more education when a first child begins school. That event might be subtle; for example, a school dropout might have always felt the desire to study for the GED but not until his or her children are older and need less attention is there finally some free time available for education. Whatever the event, it provides potential adult students with goals they hope to accomplish by entering an ABE program. The staff of the educational program should help the potential adult student articulate his or her goal and understand the many instructional objectives that must be accomplished on the road to meeting that goal. Teachers should then use those student goals as the basis for instruction. The effort to identify goals must be continual as instruction proceeds because goals may change over time.

- **The second support is to increase a sense of self-efficacy.** The self-determination mentioned by students must build on a foundation of self-efficacy, a feeling that they can reach their goals. The term self-confidence is quite often used in adult education literature, but self-efficacy has a different definition. *Self-confidence* is a global feeling of being able to accomplish most tasks. *Self-efficacy* is focused on a specific set of tasks and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that set of tasks. Bandura (1986) suggested four ways to help build self-efficacy. Programs should introduce new students to adults just like them who have already been successful at learning, design their curriculum in such a way that it challenges students but does not overwhelm them, help students address their feelings of anxiety about failure or slow progress, and provide students with encouragement that they can be successful.

- **The third support is to help students manage the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence.** Students must build positive forces, such as people in their lives who support them to succeed, and address negative forces, such as changing work schedules that sometimes conflict with program participation, to persist in their learning. Programs should help students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces, such as support or lack of it by family and friends, changing work schedules, and child care, that affect their persistence. Building on that understanding, each student could then make plans to manage these forces so that

persistence is more likely. The plans that come out of such an exercise should include strategies for persistence when the forces that affect peoples' lives cause them to drop out. These plans must be revised as adults persist in their studies and these forces change.

- **The fourth support is to ensure progress toward reaching a goal.** Assuming the goal is important, adult students must make progress toward reaching that goal, and they must be able to measure and recognize that progress. If a student's goal is to learn enough English to improve his or her income, the program should include content that meets that goal and measures student progress toward mastering that content. Programs should provide services of sufficient quality that students make progress, and programs need assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress.

Second Phase

During the second phase of the project, the research team observed 10 library literacy programs in California, New York, and North Carolina that were attempting to increase student persistence, and interviewed a total of 30 students in depth (and interviewed another 100 informally) about their history of participation, and supports and barriers to their persistence. The study found that most students reported facing barriers to persistence that were personal (related to the student) or environmental (related to the student's life situation). However, the adult education programs did not have the resources to address these personal and environmental barriers. These barriers included a lack of day care or transportation and personal problems that would require professional counseling. The expense and administrative demands of providing these services were beyond the resources of the programs. The programs sometimes overcame this lack of resources by providing referrals to social service agencies that provided the services students needed.

This study also identified five persistence pathways that are determined by these personal and environmental factors and ways that programs might support students on each pathway. Each pathway describes a pattern of persistence. These pathways are useful for planning ways to help students persist. The five pathways are *long-term, mandatory, short-term, try-out,* and *intermittent*.

Long-term students participate regularly over a long period. Long-term students usually do not express specific goals, but, rather, talk of education as an end in itself. Long-term students have managed the personal and

environmental factors that support and inhibit their persistence. Presumably, they will persist in a program that is helping them meet their needs, is convenient for them, and provides an enjoyable experience. In fact, this is the story told to the study team by long-term students. Most long-term students view their program as a comfortable and supportive community and talk about it as a family, a club, or a home base for learning. They refer to the program staff as friends or family members. Long-term students express a strong personal commitment to their programs and to their goal of becoming more educated.

Most of the long-term students identified through interviews were over the age of 30. The long-term persistence of older students may appear to be supported by their emotional maturity, but, in fact, it may be supported by stable personal and environmental factors related to children, partners, and employment. Adults over the age of 30 may no longer have child-care responsibilities and may have a stable income, housing situation, and set of relationships, whereas younger students may not be as stable.

This study found that improving formal instruction (through training of teachers and volunteers, improving curriculum, and other program development inputs) and offering many different types of informal instruction appeared to increase hours of instruction for long-term students. For students on the long-term pathway, a multiplicity of ways to learn (e.g., a class, a tutor, and a computer program) might help increase intensity of instruction and allow these students to reach their goals faster.

Mandatory students must attend a program because they are required to do so by a public assistance or law-enforcement agency. Their participation is usually regular and long term, and their goals are often those of the agency that is mandating their attendance. They look like long-term students while they are under the requirement to participate, but usually leave abruptly once attendance is no longer mandatory and sometimes even when it is still a requirement.

Mandatory students overcome personal and environmental factors that constrain their persistence because they are required to do so. Because factors outside the program support their participation, programmatic improvements may not help these students to stay longer. However, if the program changes its services (making them more convenient, more useful, or more enjoyable), mandatory students might choose to participate for more hours or become long-term students. Counseling—during intake and orientation, and throughout instruction—that focuses on helping mandatory students commit to learning as a way to improve their lives, understand how they learn best, find ways to enjoy learning, and build a

support system to sustain their learning might help mandatory students persist after the mandate has ended. Additional hours of participation and persistence after legal mandates for participation have ended are probably good measures of impact for innovations meant to address the needs of mandatory students.

During intake and orientation, programs must help students who are on the mandatory pathway move past the required goals of attendance and begin to see learning as something they choose to do. Building their motivation probably requires identifying goals that are personal and an instructional process that helps students see that they can learn and that learning can be enjoyable. Literacy learning focused on family, work, personal interests, or even the problems that led to their legal or social service status might be a focus of instruction that supports persistence for adults on this pathway. An instructional process that involves discussions among a group of adults might provide a social network that supports persistence for mandatory students, and referral to support services (e.g., counseling, day care, and employment) might be necessary for these students to persist, even while they are under a mandate.

Short-term students enroll in a program and participate intensively for a short period to accomplish a specific goal, such as passing the GED test or a job certification test. For some of these students, the short-term participation in a library literacy program meets their needs; for some, this participation leads to enrollment in another type of program. Although students on a short-term pathway may leave their programs after only a few weeks of instruction, some may persist in another program that more closely meets their needs. Because personal goals determine their length of participation, programmatic innovations may have little impact on the persistence of students on a short-term pathway. Transition into another program and accomplishment of a specific, limited goal are probably good measures of the impact of innovations meant to address the needs of short-term students.

For students who are on the short-term pathway, programs should be careful to identify their specific goal during intake and orientation. When transfer to another program is appropriate for reaching that goal, the program might be able to provide some learning opportunities that prepare these students to be successful in a more appropriate program. When new students have a specific short-term goal, programs should try to focus on it, possibly with an individual tutor, or make that goal the focus of their instruction in a more general learning environment.

Try-out students have barriers to persistence that are insurmountable and have goals that are not yet clear enough to sustain their motivation. These students end an episode of program participation quickly, with neither goal achievement nor transfer to another program. Students on the try-out pathway are motivated to learn, and their decision to join program services is a positive step. However, they are not ready to make a commitment to program participation.

Program staff members believe that every new student can succeed and are usually opposed to counseling students to defer participation. However, admitting students who are likely to fail, particularly because most of these students have failed in education previously, is probably not helpful to the student. Students on the try-out pathway who leave a program with a plan for how to address the personal and environmental barriers constraining their participation so that they can return some time in the future probably provide a good measure of impact for innovations meant to address their needs.

Helping try-out students make a decision to postpone program participation during intake could improve program persistence rates by both lowering the number of students who drop out after very little participation and by providing more program resources to students who are on a different pathway. To do this, programs would have to design intake processes that help students self-identify as on the try-out pathway, counsel them to delay entry, and help them design a plan that would lead to successful participation some time in the future.

Intermittent students move in and out of program services. During the time that they are not attending program services, intermittent students may stay in contact with their programs, and their episodes of participation and nonparticipation may reoccur several times and take place in more than one program. Programs do not always know that a student is on the intermittent pathway and assume he or she has dropped out. Belzer (1998) found that students identified as dropouts by adult education programs often see themselves as "stopouts" who are still connected to the program but temporarily unable to attend.

These students may have broad goals (e.g., improving language or basic skills ability) or specific goals (e.g., passing a citizenship test); whichever type, their goals require a long period of engagement to achieve. However, personal and environmental factors limit their ability to attend on a regular basis. Programs can probably have only limited impact on the limiting factors, but programs can adapt to them by helping

students link episodes of program participation and self-study into a coherent learning experience. Programs that adapt to the needs of intermittent students would redefine participation as connection to the program, rather than hours of attendance in program services. This connection would have to be meaningful, not just a name in a database. An example of a meaningful connection could be monthly discussions between a program staff member and a student during which they review progress on a self-study plan. Programs would define as participation any form of learning activity that serves the goals of the program and the student. These activities would include classroom instruction or tutoring but might also include guided self-study at home or at the program venue. Length of continuous connection to the program and cumulative hours of engagement in learning might be good measures of impact for innovations meant to address the needs of intermittent students, regardless of whether they are formally participating in program activities.

The intermittent pathway may be the only one open to most students. Personal and environmental factors are always going to present barriers to long-term persistence, and most students have goals that require a good deal of study to achieve. Programs should accept this reality and look at ways to redesign their services to provide connected episodes of participation that use a multiplicity of learning resources. Program staff also need ways to help students maintain contact with the program and to continue to think of themselves as students.

These five pathways provide guidelines for the kinds of program changes that might be useful to different types of students. Practitioners know that a single approach to services will not help all students persist and learn, but programs generally do not have the resources to provide an individual approach for each student. However, programs could provide supports based on the understanding of these five pathways to help students achieve their goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

Although the relationship between persistence and learning gains has not been proven, evidence suggests that students could benefit from longer instruction. How do we accomplish that?

The literature reviewed already provides insights for changes in adult education practice that might lead to higher persistence rates and perhaps

higher learning gains as well. However, these changes in practice will take place only if the policies that govern funding support them. The advice that comes out of the existing literature is untested, but rigorous research could test the efficacy of the recommendations and also lead to better suggestions. This section offers advice on what programs could do to improve persistence, suggests policies that would be supportive of changes based on that advice, and outlines research that could both test and improve these recommendations.

Implications for Practice

This literature suggests two approaches to improving program practice with the aim of increasing persistence. The first approach adds persistence supports to existing programs, whereas the second requires programs to change participation in ways that make it easier for adults to pursue episodes of program participation and self-study to achieve their learning goals. This section describes a set of persistence supports and changes in participation for three chronological phases of program participation: entrance into services, participation in program services, and reengagement in learning.

Entrance into services includes recruitment, intake, and orientation. This is the time when programs prepare students to be successful in learning. If identifying each student's pathway on entrance into a program proves difficult, program staff might assume that all students are intermittent. That is, that students are prepared to participate in an episode of learning that, if it is short, might lead to additional episodes of learning that continue until they reach their goal.

The first step in this phase would be to help students express clear goals that represent their motivation for participation. The second step would be to develop a learning plan that includes both instruction and the support services a student needs to persist in learning to reach those goals. For try-out students, this phase would lead to their postponement of participation, but they would leave the program with a plan for how to prepare to reenter services later. The program would identify this student as successful, because the program provided the student with the best possible outcome, even though he or she demonstrated no learning gains. For other students, intake and orientation would lead to a plan for participation in the program. That plan would assume that students would engage in episodes of participation that lead to accomplishment of a specific goal, transfer to

another program, or departure from the program followed by another episode of participation. Of course, students on a long-term pathway may only have a single long episode of participation.

The plan would be a written document that sets out the goals each student is trying to reach, the skills and knowledge each student needs to learn to meet those goals, and the services each student needs to successfully complete that learning. These services would include instruction, self-study, and support services. The plan would also include a process that would allow the student to judge his or her own progress.

During this period, students would have a chance to meet other adults who are like them in most ways and have been successful in reaching their learning goals. Some of these successful students might be paid employees of the program who can help students build their self-efficacy. Program staff would make clear that an intermittent approach to participation is not only accepted but also the expected pattern of participation.

Participation in program services includes both instruction and support services. General improvements in instruction and expansion of support services probably help support learning and persistence, but most students need more than just good services. They need instruction that fits their pattern of participation and support services that help them address their particular persistence needs.

A multiplicity of instructional modes (e.g., classes, tutoring, peer learning groups, technology or distance education, and print and media materials) provides students with ways to participate that do not always demand adherence to a regular schedule. However, these alternative modes would be more effective if they fit into a plan that is followed by both the student and the tutor or teacher. Helping students and instructional staff follow a plan that uses several modes of instruction and that builds toward the attainment of specific goals is not easy. This chapter can only support this approach, not define it. The development of this approach requires collaboration between practitioners and program development experts.

The individual plan would allow a student who must stop instruction to continue learning (either at home or at the library) through self-study. When that student is ready to return to regular attendance, any tutor or teacher should be able to look at the student's progress on his or her plan and start instruction there. Program services should include regular counseling that helps students meet their own needs for support services and identify the times when they will not be able to meet the instructional schedule and so begin the self-study part of their plan.

During instruction, teachers and tutors can use student goals and their supports and barriers to persistence as the content of learning activities that build language, literacy, and math skills. Out of these activities may come student needs that cannot be met by the program, but students might be able to meet those needs on their own, or the program staff may be able to offer advice or referrals.

Reengagement in learning includes procedures for staying in contact with students who are not attending and encouraging them to return to services. Most students do not tell their program or tutor that they are stopping participation; they just stop attending. During interviews with students, many reported that they believe that once they stop attending they cannot return (Porter et al., 2005). Program staff must help students build an understanding that reengagement is acceptable and encouraged. Former or even current students might be the best people to play this role as they may have addressed the same personal and environmental factors as the students who have dropped out. These new procedures require resources that are now being used to support instruction. However, if these procedures were successful, students who now drop out permanently would make learning gains after they return to continue learning.

Implications for Policy

The literature suggests a number of supports that might lead to increased persistence rates, but programs that add supports to persistence would be more expensive than those that do not, and additional resources are not easy to find. Policymakers must identify persistence supports as an essential part of program design and provide the necessary resources. The first step in policy implementation, therefore, would require programs to limit enrollment as a way to increase per-student spending. Once persistence and achievement rates increase, programs would have to argue for additional funds to expand services.

If funding for supports to persistence is available, policymakers could use persistence rates as a measure of program quality and a surrogate measure of learning gains for students who leave before sitting for a test of progress. However, if funding guidelines do not differentiate among groups of students, programs will find ways to discourage participation of adults who face barriers to persistence or learning gains to meet accountability standards. Policymakers might look at the list of persistence pathways and develop program approaches and accountability criteria that are

different for each group. Then programs can meet their accountability goals while serving a full range of students.

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that supports to persistence within the existing program structure, which requires attendance at a specific time and place, may have value but may have an upper limit on impact. A profitable approach to increasing persistence might be to add some supports to programs and then to help programs develop ways to assist students in continuing their learning when they cannot attend services and then return to the program as soon as possible. These self-study options might involve technology that employs computers and the Internet, or might take a traditional approach that employs written materials. Policymakers could support program experimentation with new ways to deliver services by providing funding and allowing programs to count hours of self-study in their accountability reports.

Implications for Further Research

No research has yet tested with experimental or quasi-experimental methods whether practice and policy recommendations would indeed have an impact on persistence and help more students reach their learning goals. Although further study into the nature of persistence and the forces that support and inhibit it would add valuable knowledge, now may be the time to test program models that incorporate the existing research. If these models prove to be sound, practitioners and policymakers could feel assured in making changes based on them, and further research could begin to build on this foundation.

Three models could be tested. One would add persistence supports that would help students continue to attend existing programs. A second model would redesign services to more closely fit the lives and needs of students that attend intermittently. A third model would combine both.

More research is always valuable, but now is probably the time to accept that, for adults, support to persistence and self-study are essential components of any instructional approach. The existing research provides some good advice on how to design these components. Researchers should now put this advice into an intervention that could be tested. If the intervention proves effective, researchers, practitioners, and adult students could work together to develop improvements on that intervention and test those improvements. This approach would allow the field to move forward quickly, at the same time putting in place a process that would lead to continuous improvement.

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