Focus on Basics

CONNECTING RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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

by John Comings & Sondra Cuban

*W*hen 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

Focus on Basics

NCSALL

National Center for the Study of
Adult Learning and Literacy

WORLD EDUCATION

Welcome!

Perhaps it's just that my Web search skills are poor. In preparing for this issue, I looked and looked for content on the subject of counseling for adult basic education (ABE). I managed to find articles on career and vocational counseling, growing (yet still markedly slim) resources on dealing with domestic violence and trauma, and a newly developing set of resources about how to help ABE learners make the transition to and remain in college. But the day-to-day counseling that is so important to supporting learners' persistence in ABE programs? To my surprise, there was almost nothing. The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) does not sponsor an electronic discussion list, nor does it house a special collection on the topic. I could not find much on this entire subject anywhere.

I surmise, therefore, that this *Focus on Basics*, slim as it may be, may be more useful than any of us imagined when we chose the subject for this issue. We start off with findings from NCSALL's Persistence Research that highlight the role of what authors John Comings and Sondra Cuban call "sponsors": those individuals who help learners get into and stay in programs. The authors encourage programs to look into how learners are being sponsored and consider ways to maximize this crucial resource.

A team of writers — Nikki Merritt, Miriam Spencer, and Lori Withers — from an Independence, Missouri, literacy program, share the process their program went through to document the counseling-related needs of their students. These stark data mobilized the program into hiring a trained social worker. The initial results are positive. Read about them starting on page 7.

Massachusetts' Cathy Coleman took to the phones to find out what kind of training and support programs and states are providing for staff responsible for counseling students. She found out a lot about the challenges that counselors face, and the innovative practices used to address these challenges. Her report starts on page 10.

Stress interferes with learning, so teacher Marjorie Jacobs, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, decided to incorporate stress reduction activities into her classes. She writes about the science of brain waves and how she uses this information. Try some of the exercises she describes in your classes and let us know your results by participating in the *Focus on Basics* electronic discussion list (see page 23 for information on how to subscribe; Marjorie's article starts on page 14).

Counselors are often responsible for recruiting and enrolling learners. Debby D'Amico, Diane Lentz, Robert L. Smith, and Marcia L. Taylor, of a workplace learning program in East Chicago, Indiana, decided to use action research techniques to see if they could understand why eligible learners were not enrolling in their programs. They learned that recruitment materials need to be not just informative but also encouraging. Turn to page 18 for more about their techniques and results.

Students in classes of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) often have immigration problems layered on top of concerns caused by stress, poverty, and poor health. To find out how ESOL programs handled counseling, I talked with Nazneen Rahman, Education Director at the International Institute of Providence, Rhode Island, and Myrna Atkins, CEO and President of the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning in Denver, Colorado. Both programs use a teacher as counselor model, and recommend building strong relationships with complementary departments and agencies to ensure that referrals go smoothly. See page 22 for this article.

This issue's "Blackboard" (page 27) contains a long list of counseling-related articles that have been published in earlier issues of *Focus on Basics*. I'm also very sure that I've missed other resources. If you know of them, please e-mail the information to your colleagues via the *Focus on Basics* electronic discussion list. Thanks!

Sincerely,

Barbara Garner

Barbara Garner
Editor

Sponsors/Sponsorship

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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

> **"*A personal sponsor, such as a relative who gives emotional, literacy, and informational support, can offer pervasive, comprehensive supports.*"**

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,

> **"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."**

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

Learner Persistence Study

NCSALL is involved in a three-phase study of learner persistence. The term "persistence" refers to the length of time that a student remains engaged in learning. Practitioners often use the term "retention" for the same phenomenon, but this study uses persistence because it places the student in a position of control and decision-making. A student persists in learning; a program retains a student. In addition, students may persist in learning after they leave a program through self-study or by joining another program. This research study is interested in learning how to help students persist in their learning.

The project is now in its second phase. The research team is interviewing students and staff and observing the operations of five library literacy programs to gain a better understanding of the supports and barriers to persistence identified in the first phase and to develop a deeper understanding of persistence. The five literacy programs are connected to the Greensboro Public Library in North Carolina, the New York Public Library and the Queens Borough Public Library in New York City, and the Redwood City Public Library and the Oakland Public Library in California. The data for this article come from in-depth interviews with 30 adult students over a two-year period and from informal interviews and observations of students in their programs. The 30 adults include students born in the United States and immigrants, men and women, young and old. They include people who are Hispanic, African-American, Asian, African, Afro-Caribbean, and white. The project is described in *I Did It for Myself* (Comings et al., 2001) and the findings will be presented in two reports to be published later this year and next year.

In the first phase, the research team looked at the literature on persistence in adult education programs and interviewed 150 adult students in pre-GED programs in five New England states (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine). The interview protocol asked students to identify all of the positive and negative forces related to their persistence in learning and then to indicate the three most important positive and negative forces. This phase of the study identified the broad types of supports and barriers to persistence that are now being studied in depth. The first phase of the study was reported in *Focus on Basics* (Comings et al., 2000).

The goal of these first two phases of the research is the development of advice to programs and policy makers on how to increase the persistence of their students. The third phase of the project will test this advice to see if it does, in fact, lead to increased persistence. That test will begin in 2004. Researchers call the first two phases "exploratory" (an exploration of a problem that leads to a proposed solution) and the last phase "confirmatory" (the solution is tested to see how well it works). When the third phase is complete (2006), NCSALL will be able to provide research-tested advice to programs and policy makers on how to help adult students persist in their learning. The Persistence Study researchers are sharing the insights they have gained during the exploratory phase of their research because, although the advice is untested, it is based on evidence acquired through rigorous research. ❖

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.

> **"Intermediate sponsors… 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."**

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.

Acknowledgments

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Beyond the Scope of the Teachers
Deciding to Employ a Social Worker

by Nikki Merritt, Miriam Spencer, & Lori Withers

"Let's Write About You" was an exercise in writing developed by Independence, Missouri, adult literacy instructor Tammy Sturm in the summer of 2001. Tammy found that students complained regularly about not having anything to write about. She therefore began lessons based on students telling their personal stories where they were "the expert."

In "My Bad Day," a student we will call Cindy shared her story of violence, abuse, and her search for answers. She wrote the following:

"I didn't like dealing with him when he was drunk because you couldn't control him and you never knew what he would do. He would get real violent when he was drinking...I got real scared because he was threatening me...I decided to hide in between two mattresses...I could hear him screaming..."

"Even though he had hit me a number of times, I felt I would deserve whatever he gave me."

"It made me realize that I couldn't continue to live like that...I was living dangerously...I had to think about what this was doing for my children...I didn't need this kind of relationship in my life."

Cindy cited keeping her job as the reason for enrolling in the Family Literacy Center Adult Education and Literacy (FLC AEL) program. Upon entry, she said she needed a GED — General Educational Development certificate — quickly; however, her entry scores on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) indicated she would need intensive instruction and time to build her skills. As Cindy participated in the classroom, began to trust staff, and participated in "Let's Write About You," it became evident that she faced the threat of losing her job, financial worries, parenting concerns, and unresolved domestic issues. These problems all accompanied her to class, affecting her initial progress as she attempted to concentrate on learning.

Like Cindy, most adult literacy students bring myriad social challenges and barriers into their programs with them. At the Family Literacy Center, staff documentation revealed that students in adult education and literacy classes were continuously facing a wide range of issues that interfered with their ability to attend class regularly, study, and focus on their personal goals and learning. Parent educators, adult education teachers, and the director spent inordinate amounts of time — teachers estimated it at upwards of 25 percent — listening to students' personal problems and assisting them in finding resources, which, in some cases, involved sources of personal protection. We realized that as professionals we were not educated to meet the social service needs of these students adequately and asked ourselves: Do we need to offer social services as a formal part of our AEL program? In this article, we share the challenges we were facing, what we decided to do, and how our program has changed as a result.

Our Program

Established in 1990, the mission of Family Literacy Center, Inc. (FLC), is to provide comprehensive services that respond to the educational and special needs of children, adults, and their families to Eastern Jackson County families in need of basic education and workplace skills. Of the adults living within a five-mile radius of our location, 77 percent do not have a high school diploma or GED. In 2000-2001, FLC provided 251 children with early childhood education, served 564 adult literacy students (of whom 98 percent were female), and 130 teen parents. The collaborative intergenerational services we offer include adult literacy, early childhood education, parent and child time together, parents as teachers, and teen parenting classes.

> **"**We realized that as professionals we were not educated to meet the social service needs of these students adequately...**"**

Challenges

Cindy and her classmates come to study to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED exam. In most cases, the issues that caused these adults to drop out of school have not been resolved when they enter our program. Nearly all the problems involve difficult circumstances that may include long-term unemployment, abusive relationships, homelessness, lack of resources to meet basic needs, and children or elderly parents with

chronic health problems. As a result, many students are in crisis, causing chronic disruptions to their education. The disequilibrium associated with crisis serves as a powerful motivational force that can heighten the client's susceptibility to intervention (Bergin & Garfield, 1993). On the other hand, people in crisis — our students among them — experience strong feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, powerlessness, and hopelessness. After a crisis period (typically lasting four to six weeks), students will either return to their previous coping skills or develop a new set of responses that may leave them functioning better or worse than prior to the crisis (Parad & Parad, 1990).

Concerned that our educational mission was being undermined by the wide range of stress-producing issues learners brought to class, we requested and received a planning grant from Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning (MAAL). MAAL is a metro-wide initiative operating under the umbrella of the Heart of America United Way in partnership with individuals and organizations from virtually every sector of the Independence, MO, community, including major philanthropists in the Kansas City area. The grant would allow us to document these issues in greater depth and develop a design and grant proposal that would, we hoped, enable us to address these problems so that FLC AEL students could focus on learning.

We contracted with a social worker who conducted classroom observations, 33 student interviews, and eight staff interviews. Students described feeling high levels of stress from many different sources including finances, health problems, interpersonal relationships, and lack of community resources. We learned that many students come from families that had not demonstrated positive parenting skills or positive interpersonal relationships. One student described being locked out of the house all night as a disciplinary measure. The social worker

noticed, during conversations with individual students, with groups, and during support groups, that many students had difficulties concentrating due to a preoccupation with personal issues. This often resulted in what we felt to be excessive time and energy being used to discuss these concerns, leaving diminished time for study in the AEL classroom. The breadth and depth of problems faced are apparent in the following student responses:

- met biological father after having no contact for 18 years;
- has cancer but was not receiving treatment due to demands of parenting and lack of support network;
- kicked out of home at age 15 for smoking;
- moves around between homes of other relatives.

> **"**...stressful events in learners' lives were accompanying them into the classroom and distracting them from learning.**"**

In addition, 44 percent of students reported physical, sexual, or emotional abuse during childhood, 55 percent of students indicated current involvement in abusive relationships, and 92 percent of students experienced insufficient financial resources to meet daily needs.

What to Do?

The planning grant enabled us to document and validate our concerns: stressful events in learners' lives were accompanying them into the classroom and distracting them from learning. As we were then structured, FLC AEL offered minimal intervention and assistance: the three part-time teachers, trained in education, lacked the time,

knowledge, and strategies necessary to deal with case management.

A committee that worked on the planning project decided that the complexity and seriousness of the issues facing our students warranted pursuing funding for a full-time social worker to work with the adult literacy program students. A similar model had been used with the teen parent program at the FLC.

A program grant, also from MAAL, allowed the FLC to contract with Heart of America Family Services (HASF), a counseling and family support agency serving the bistate Kansas City area, for the employment of a master's-level social worker (MSW). This grant was written to provide small group and individual counseling to assist students in removing barriers to their educational goals. Individual intervention was chosen to complement the instructional strategies used in the program. The proposal outlined a seamless system of support in meeting the social service needs of adult learners. By hiring a social worker, we hoped that AEL student attendance and GED attainment would increase, and that students would gain knowledge of community resources and problem-solving skills.

Nikki, the full-time MSW we hired through HAFS, serves students in three separate sites in the Independence community. Nikki uses an empowerment approach, which, in social work practice, is the process of helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to increase their personal, interpersonal, socio-economic, and political strength and to develop influence toward improving their circumstances (Barker, 1995). The techniques Nikki uses include accepting the client's definition of a problem; identifying and building upon existing strengths; teaching specific empowering skills; and providing mediation and advocacy to mobilize community resources

needed in a state of crisis. Nikki believes that the empowerment perspective has become an influential tool for students in the program she serves. Via individual counseling and small group instruction, she assists students in setting educational, career, and personal goals. In the first six months since she joined us, she has assisted 35 GED students in goal-setting. She has also provided short-term counseling, interpersonal relationship-building, academic instruction, and crisis intervention to 37 other students. Visiting individually with 73 students, Nikki has developed rapport with them. This has made the students more likely to depend on Nikki, rather than their classroom teachers, for assistance, thus allowing the teachers to focus on instruction.

Nikki has implemented Survival Skills for Women (http://www.flinthills.com/~ssed), a 10-week course that expands participants' growth and economic potential with sessions focusing on money management, child management, and re-entry to employment. Cindy was one of 10 graduates of the program and provided the inspirational speech at their graduation. Nikki also implemented a Young Men's Support Group for 10 males under the age of 25. This group met for six weeks, building positive relations between the members and strengthening the members' skills in areas chosen by them: making positive choices, job readiness, personal health, parenting, and assertiveness. Nikki has facilitated students' use of outside resources, referring 34 participants to support services such as treatment programs, housing, and vocational/technical services. She has built and maintained relationships with 23 community agencies.

Integration into FLC

As adult education and literacy, early education, and parenting staff interact with adult students, they refer them to Nikki and ask the learners' for permission to give Nikki their names. Nikki participates in weekly staff meetings to provide insight into family dynamics, confidentiality, and ways to address stressful situations. She is also available to staff for personal consultations, which facilitate their ability to be effective in the classroom setting.

Impact

It is an FLC AEL practice to compare attendance data to previous years. Since Nikki joined us, the average contact hours per day has risen from a three year average of 56 to 65.4 hours. The average students per day has risen from a three-year average of 14.2 to 17.7 students. Since July 1, 2001, 14 students have obtained their GED, including Cindy, with seven others scheduled to take the tests over the next two months. The number of GED recipients is slightly higher than in previous years.

The shock felt by the FLC staff when they realized how many students had serious barriers was probably the most unexpected outcome of the project. The initial planning grant enabled us to identify more precisely the barriers faced by our learners; however, the implementation of the project has revealed the magnitude of the issues in their lives:

43%	Youth (ages 16-18) smoking cigarettes
21%	Single-parent households
15%	Youth living on their own without parental/guardian support
12%	Inability to access reliable transportation to AEL site
7%	Criminal behavior and involvement with probation and parole
4%	Homeless 16 to 18 year olds
3%	Suspected use/sale of illegal drugs

Adding a social worker to the AEL sites has been a successful endeavor that FLC's Board of Directors is committed to continuing. A reduced grant amount will be requested through the Alliance for an additional year of implementation. The program will be committing a portion of funding to the project in the upcoming year, along with United Way. During a recent dialogue, four students shared with Nikki their great appreciation for her assistance. They commented that her guidance, words of wisdom, and knowledge kept them coming to class even though they faced many challenges. Cindy and several other students wrote a poem for Nikki and gave her a candle, because she "was their light."

The multitude of services offered is a giant step toward meeting the personal and social needs of AEL students, allowing them to focus more energy on continuing their education. The addition of the student liaison social worker has demonstrated the center's proactive approach to best serve its participants like Cindy, once fearful and lacking hope, now enrolled in college and becoming equipped to achieve her goals and capture a promising future.

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Who Helps the Helpers? Supporting Counselors in Adult Basic Education

by Cathy Coleman

When I was asked to write an article about supporting the role of counselors in adult basic education (ABE) programs, my first thoughts were about my own experiences with school counselors. My most striking memory of a counselor in a guidance position dates from a meeting I had at the end of my time in college. When I sat in my college advisor's office that day, I was looking for more than advice on how to write a resume. I was looking for support in determining my next steps, practical information about my career options, and, perhaps more than anything else, a good "listening to." Professor Jones provided me with what I needed. Her guidance and willingness to listen were valuable and necessary resources for me as a student.

What does this have to do with the field of adult basic education (ABE)? Some adult education programs employ counselors, occasionally called "learning support specialists." They are often the first people adult learners meet in programs. They can set the tone of a new learner's experience of ABE. How are their professional development and support needs met so that they can be as effective with adult learners as Dr.

Jones was with me? What are the challenges inherent in the role of counselors in an ABE program? In what ways can they be supported? These are the questions I hope to address in this article.

Role Definition

One of the first challenges for counselors is defining their role: "What exactly is it that I am supposed to do?" In discussions with eight counselors from around the country, this question stood out as crucial. The role of counselor differs from program to program, as my conversations revealed. "I help students with whatever problems they have that get in the way of their learning," says a counselor from a Massachusetts school system-based evening program. Another counselor, from a community college ABE program, describes her job as giving people the TABE or the BEST [placement tests] when they come in, and letting teachers know who is in which class. Yet another described her work as keeping track of students' goals and maintaining records of what goals they have accomplished. One counselor is responsible for all the aforementioned tasks: "My job as a counselor is to make sure that our program is doing all it can to make coming to class possible for each student. That takes

in a lot of territory from correct placement in the first place to helping them get housing, food stamps, or a job."

Problems arise when the role is not well articulated within a program. A program director explains: "The ideal role of the counselor is to support students, to get into the classroom and find out what the issues are, to find out why people are leaving and follow up with them, to bring in speakers on special topics which are about supporting the students. Unfortunately, that isn't always the way it works. In the past what has happened is the counselor does everything. In a large program like this one, with several smaller sites, the counselor had to do all the administrative work as well as all the counseling. There were so many hats for the person who was the counselor. That role is in transition now and is closer to what we had envisioned as ideal where support of the student is the focus."

Not only do counselors get confused by these myriad hats; students do, too. They aren't always sure what the counselor's main role is or what issues they should talk about with the

> **"Clarifying a counselor's role may be the easiest form of support a program can offer a counselor."**

counselor. This seems especially true for programs in which counselors are also teachers and in programs where the counselor is also doing much of the administrative work. "It's hard to balance it all—being the counselor and the resource person, being the nitty gritty detail person, and being the stern follow-upper person," says a Massachusetts counselor. "It's a real mix of different kinds of skills."

Clarifying a counselor's role may be the easiest form of support a program can offer a counselor. In Massachusetts, attempts have been made to help clarify the role of counselor and to provide support for it. In the early 1990s, focus groups for counselors were formed, facilitated by the System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES). According to Cathy Gannon, facilitator of the Central SABES counselor sharing group, these groups examined the role of counselors in programs, looked at what was initially required in the 1990 mandate for counseling to be included in programs funded by the Massachusetts Department of Education, and sought ways to support counselors in performing their jobs.

A 1994 report entitled "Learner Support Services: Adult Basic Education Counseling Focus Group: Final Report," recommended a change of job title from the vague term "counselor" to the more specific descriptor "Learner Support Specialist." The report defined the purpose of counseling in adult basic education as "providing learners with support services that will assist them in successfully meeting their educational goals" and listed these tasks as part of the job:

• Participating in intake, assessment, and class placement of learners.
• Meeting with students and with classes to explain program services.
• Helping set individual goals, and listening to concerns or issues of students.
• Checking attendance and working with staff to follow up on absences.
• Meeting with teachers, staff, and students to identify problems and needs as they relate to academic performance and educational planning.
• Assessing the need for outside services, researching these services, and making appropriate referrals.
• Assisting in developing strategies to address waiting lists and/or recruitment of students.

This year, a group of counselors in southeastern Massachusetts, facilitated by Southeast SABES, is re-visiting this list. They believe that the National Reporting System requirements for follow-up on student goal attainment and measurement of educational gain that meet validity

and reliability standards have led to an increased emphasis on the role of counselor in programs. By the end of this summer, they hope to have a newly revised definition as well as set of resources for ABE counselors. The Counseling Sharing Group of Southeast MA is also discussing and studying areas such as transitioning General Educational Development

(GED) students into community college settings and increasing student retention. According to Betty Vermette, the facilitator of the group, "These were needs that came up in a survey we did last year. Many of the topics that people listed fell under the counselor role: recruitment, student retention, the intake process, goal setting, placement, transitioning to college, etc. Based on this, we initiated the Southeast Working Group for Educational Counselors." In revisiting the definition of the role of counselor, this group hopes to help counselors deal with the issue of lack of clarity.

Lack of Time

When people are unclear on their role within an organization, they can easily fall into the trap of trying to be all things to all people, leaving little time to do much of anything very well. Lack of time to do adequately all of the various tasks of both a counseling nature and often of a more administrative nature was cited as a challenge by some of the counselors with whom I spoke. One counselor puts it this way, "This year, the director has a person who can help with the data entry and with making calls to people on the waiting list. That has helped a lot. It took some of the pressure off. I used to spend most of my time doing that. It didn't leave much time to do more of the real counseling."

She now feels that she can be more proactive. "Now I can look at next year and set my own goals about how to improve things. I have time for planning." She also comments on role definition: "I know what I have to do; I know what I want to do, and I know how to do it." She talked to me at length about her ideas for developing an orientation for new students, developing resources on transitions from the GED program to college, and increasing her own

information about what resources are available in the community for adult learners.

Following up with students on attendance takes time. Record keeping takes time. Giving intake and scoring assessment tests is time consuming as well. Counselors can devote all or most of their time to keeping up with this work. When program directors are able to shift some of the more administrative aspects of the job away from counselors, they feel less pressure in terms of time. One counselor I spoke with describes herself as "so relieved" when some of the administrative duties of her job were shifted to other staff. "It leaves me more time to get to know the students, to make sure I'm available to help them, to do more of the counseling I think I should be doing."

EFF as a Support

One support that many counselors may not initially consider comes from Equipped for the Future (EFF), a project of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) that is a standards-based reform initiative. It aims to improve the quality of the adult literacy system and build the capacity of the system to assist adults more effectively in accomplishing their goals in life. It looks at what adults need to know and to be able to do in order to function in their roles as community members, family members, and workers.

Carolyn Beirs, GED program manager at Family Learning in the school district of Greenville County, South Carolina, explains: "As with most educational programs, [in ours,] lack of time, funds and staff offer major challenges. Most of the family literacy programs I've visited don't have trained counselors

on site, but collaborate with the local Mental Health Department for referrals and, in some cases, bimonthly classroom visits centered around issues of concern: stress, time

> "*When program directors are able to shift some of the more administrative aspects of the job away from counselors, they feel less pressure in terms of time.*"

management, domestic violence, to name a few." Using EFF as a guide, her program's staff developed a new intake process that provides counselors and teachers with increased opportunities for conversation with new students. They talk with students about their goals and the people in their lives who provide them with supports, both emotional and practical, such as transportation and child care. They developed an interview form, she says, "to slow down the enrollment process and take time to have dialogue with individual parents and talk about goals, support, obstacles, etc. before they enroll.

Teachers were encouraged to use the EFF standard 'Take Responsibility for Learning' during orientation." Prior to this, intakes were done over the phone or in brief face-to-face meetings, with placement testing and enrollment happening on the same day. Carolyn stated, "EFF is for all adults, which I feel is a concept that is often understated. Consequently, I feel counselors might consider looking at the Framework tools to enhance

the work they do with adult learners. The standards 'Listen Actively' and 'Observe Critically' along with the four 'Interpersonal Skills' seem the most likely support."

Building Relationships

One of the most interesting challenges that counselors in ABE settings face is how to build relationships with learners. Learners spend most of their time with their teachers. They tend to go to their teachers first with questions, issues, and problems. Counselors need to be proactive in "marketing" their services. They need to let learners know that they are available for them. Two counselors talked about this. "It can be hard as the students sometimes see you as the lady who does the testing but they don't necessarily think that you are there to talk to about problems you are having in class or problems you have getting to class consistently, for example. You have to make sure you're visible." One counselor told me that she tries to be available informally at break times, before classes start, and after classes start. This gives her the opportunity to know the students a little better and to let them know she is there.

Mentors can support counselors as they develop strategies for building relationships with learners. Central Massachusetts has had a counseling sharing group since 1992. The composition of the group has changed over time, but its focus has remained the same: to give counselors in ABE programs the opportunity to meet and learn from each other, to provide resources to counselors in their work, and to explore ways to improve counseling services to adult learners. This group has explored many methods of support, including:
- creating a directory of ABE counselors with contact information and descriptions of that person's

program role;

- bringing in speakers on topics of special interest to counselors such as stress reduction or grief counseling;
- creating a mentoring process through which new counselors are mentored by more experienced colleagues.

The mentoring program has been one of the most valuable support services this group has offered. A frequent comment was: "I was feeling lost, but as I started to see how others were dealing with these issues, it helped a lot. Just having one other person who was doing the same job was so helpful!" Several of the counselors I spoke with mentioned the mentoring process as being helpful to them. Mentors considered that it was helpful, stating that it encouraged them to seek out new information and stretch themselves in response to the questions they might get from those they were mentoring.

Referrals

When do problems go beyond the scope of what should be handled by part-time, non-licensed counselors in an ABE setting is a difficult question to answer. "It is hard to know sometimes when to refer [people out to other service providers]." This seems especially true when the learners have built a strong and positive relationship with the learning support specialist. It also can become problematic when social services in the community have been cut due to budget cuts or other constraints, leading to long waiting lists for services. One person I spoke with said it would be "so helpful if we had someone who we could run things by a psychologist, whom we could talk to about how to help a student while they are waiting

to be assigned a counselor at an agency in the community." Most counselors say that knowing when to refer becomes easier with experience, but the support and advice of other learning support specialists, as is the case in the various sharing groups, were helpful in determining the best approach. Another means of support is to bring in outside speakers from various regional social service providers. This has been a strategy all the Massachusetts counselor sharing groups have used that seems to have been helpful.

In the northeast region of Massachusetts as well as in the Boston area, Michelle Forlizzi has been working with a "Counselor Roundtable." Participants have examined goal setting, assessment, and follow-up with learners (issues driven, in part, by policies of the Massachusetts Department of Education). The roundtable also tries to address professional growth issues. In her role as coordinator, Forlizzi

> **"...knowing when to refer becomes easier with experience, but the support and advice of other learning support specialists, as is the case in the various sharing groups, was helpful in determining the best approach."**

hears about the many barriers faced by counselors. Chief among them are lack of counseling models, lack of counseling hours, supervisory support,

and technical assistance. Another is a general lack of knowledge about the systems with which some students interact: Supplemental Security Income, the Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Education and Training, among others. Because they see having a clear model of the counseling role as being a key factor in providing quality counseling services to students, the Northeast Counseling Roundtable is currently embarking on a research project to look at one model of counseling and its impact on students in programs. They will look at programs that have a person on staff whose job is only being the counselor and compare these with programs without a staff person whose job is counseling, but who instead follows the "teacher as counselor" model.

Michelle believes that models in which the counselor's duties are divided among teachers create a situation in which counseling roles and responsibilities lack clear definition. The research her group is undertaking may shed some light on the ways in which we need to support the counseling role within the ABE setting.

Wish List

Some supports do exist for counselors in ABE programs, but how can we as a system improve upon them? I asked the counselors with whom I spoke for their wish lists of supports. Many say they wish to be less isolated in their jobs. Counselors in large programs gain a great deal from connecting with their counterpart, "the night counselor" or "the day counselor." Some say it would be very helpful to have available a manual that delineates procedures. Others would love to have a trained therapist they could call on to run things by when they feel overtaxed. Some would like to see more workshops offered on topics of interest to counselors. Most wanted more opportunities

to connect and share with their peers in other programs.

Conclusion

Some exciting approaches to counselor support and development are in place around the country, but more needs to be done. And what happens if we are not able to provide the support that counselors in ABE programs need? In this time of budget cuts, is supporting the role of counselor so important? What would have happened if I had not had a Dr. Jones in my experience in college? It's hard to say. Would I have had the support and the resources I needed to leave the relative safety of academia and move forward into a career? Maybe. I was lucky. I had a lot of other things in my favor: strong family support, a new college degree under my belt, and, perhaps more importantly, underneath the fear I had the confidence to ask questions, explore, and believe that I could succeed. If there had been no Dr. Jones, I might still have fared well. I wonder, without the other supports in place, how some of my GED students would have done. For many of us, there is a time when a person in our lives whose support, encouragement, and provision of practical information enable us to achieve our goals. The counselor in an adult learner's life could be that person. As a field we owe counselors the support they need to continue their important role of supporting our learners. 📖

About the Author

Cathy Coleman is the Curriculum & Assessment Coordinator for Central SABES in Massachusetts. She undertakes staff development with teachers and programs on issues of curriculum development, assessment, and the use of the Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Frameworks. She has been teaching GED and pre-GED for 14 years, and was previously a counselor in a transitional living program for adolescent girls and at a program for developmentally delayed adults. ❖

A Mind/Body/Learning Approach To Counseling
Helping Students Handle Stress

by Marjorie Jacobs

Going back to school while working as an adult education teacher and counselor at the Community Learning Center (CLC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, brought me face-to-face with my old test and school anxieties. They were heightened by limited time, raising teenagers of my own at home, caring for my spouse and an aging parent, and having responsibility for housekeeping chores. To ease my own tension, I started practicing Tai Chi, Qi Gong, yoga, and meditation on a regular basis.

In discussions with my students, I learned that they had no outlets for their stress, usually considerably more tension-provoking than mine. Despite a mandatory study skills workshop designed to empower them, many students were still missing classes because of health and motivational problems, weakening of commitment, poor time management skills, interference from job schedules, and family conflicts. I started to think that the best way to address the students' counseling and academic

needs would be in an ongoing classroom setting.

At the same time, the CLC started to use the Massachusetts Department of Education's new student registration form. The form listed personal health goals dealing with stress reduction, nutrition, and improved self-confidence and self-esteem. Students could now potentially meet academic and health goals in one class. I realized that the opportunity had arrived for me to apply the knowledge, skills, and convictions I had acquired over the past 10 years in studying mind/body medicine and psychology.

Initial Skepticism

At first my colleagues at the CLC were skeptical about the idea of my teaching a counseling class instead of one of our traditional adult basic education (ABE) or General Educational Development (GED) preparation classes. It represented a big change in both what and how we were teaching. I was suggesting teaching basic academic skills and providing group counseling through a health content format. Eventually, my co-workers supported my initial idea to offer a weekly, 1.5-hour, mixed-level, health education and counseling

class for morning ABE and adult secondary education (ASE) students.

We began offering this class in September, 1999. It was so popular with the students that in September, 2000, a second counseling class, also

> **"***During relaxation, our blood pressure decreases, heart beats slower, metabolism slows down, breathing deepens, and muscles loosen.***"**

meeting once a week for 1.5 hours, was added at the CLC for morning English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) advanced students. I call both the classes "health education" to remove any stigma associated with counseling and therefore attract more students. I incorporate reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and study skills with health science content in both. We do not only vocabulary building, highlighting main ideas of paragraphs, and writing activities together but also aerobic exercise, stretching, yoga, meditation, and cognitive restructuring: learning to view things more optimistically and with a sense of humor. In the supportive atmosphere of the group, we openly discuss problems that students are having.

Stress Management and Creative Arts

Teaching health education has given me the freedom and flexibility to respond to students' interests and needs. At the beginning of each semester, students tell me what they want to explore and learn. To facilitate this process, I have them complete a questionnaire to find out

which health-related topics and activities interest them.

This past school year, my students and I have worked on some stress management and expressive arts techniques. We practiced focusing the mind in the present moment to facilitate learning and counter the negative cognitive effects of stress (forgetfulness, distractibility, negativity, pessimism, anger, anxiety). I taught them how to do the simple exercises I do, as well as yoga stretches, sitting, walking, and standing meditation.

Based on the research of psychologist James Pennebaker (1997), who studied the power of writing in emotional and physical healing, I have promoted at-home journal writing in both health classes. My students experience the healing process and I get regular feedback on their interests, needs, likes, dislikes, and progress. In class, my students and I have taken writing a step further by experimenting with guided imagery and drawing to stimulate creative writing. I have used these expressive arts, which I was learning in a course at Lesley University, as a way for students to understand themselves better and gain self-confidence. Tapping into the creative process has improved students' writing and captivated their interest.

I first taught my students how to turn off the stress response and bring about the relaxation response, a state in which the mind/body is brought back to balance (relaxed state) and is no longer fighting or running away to protect itself from a perceived danger. During relaxation, our blood pressure decreases, heart beats slower, metabolism slows down, breathing deepens, and muscles loosen. We become more open and receptive to new ideas and ways of being in the world around us. Electroencephalographs, which record brain waves, provide evidence that our brains also slow down.

Brain Waves

Researchers Elmer and Alyce Green (1984) of the Menninger Foundation have described four types of brain waves or electrical rhythms that correspond to the stages of our mind or consciousness: beta, alpha, theta, and delta. Beta waves are rapid (13 to 26 cycles per second) and occur during stressful, everyday life

Mindfulness Exercise: "I am a Cranberry"

When I put the small cranberry on my palm, closing my eyes and softly breathing, I felt the cranberry was not only a piece of fruit but also a natural and living thing combining the rain, the soil, the seed and the season. I slowly put the acid cranberry into my mouth. When it melted in my mouth, I felt it integrate into my body, my soul, and even my mind. When I absorbed this cranberry, I also absorbed the essence of nature. I felt that I was also a member of our natural world, just like the cranberry absorbing the nutrition of the world and contributing to the world in return.

Finally, I felt I was becoming a cranberry, although only a small part of our organic world which, however, is important. This whole inner experience is somehow magical and significant to my mind. I think this special process of thinking is also a helpful psychological meditation for my mind's health.

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situations when we are dealing with the outside world or are involved in "active thinking." Our negative, fearful, or angry thoughts and detail-oriented thinking are associated with beta rhythms. The slower alpha brain

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Walking Meditation Exercise:
"I Am The Tree of Knowledge"

I can see people walking around me. They feel good being next to me. They are looking for a place to rest. It seems to me that they know how easy it is to find peace under a tree. I feel the wind that brings the birds; they fly around and come to me. I spread my arms for them. I feel strong.

While the birds are singing, I'm laughing. I'm happy. I see men, women, and children playing in the playground. They are happy too. Happiness is in the air. I feel strong. It touches my soul.

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waves (eight to 13 cycles per second) characterize the relaxed mind, where our focus is more inward, such as when we daydream or meditate. During this state, we are wide awake, but creative ideas or images arise from the unconscious mind. In other words, when we are relaxed, creative ideas just come to us. Instead of the mind going blank when we feel stressed about writing, ideas and images flow. Theta rhythms (four to eight cycles per second) bring us almost to the point of sleep. They produce a dream-like state filled with unconscious images, and we feel drowsy. Delta waves, the slowest brain waves (zero to four cycles per minute), occur during deep sleep.

The Greens conducted many studies on the relationship among the mind, creativity, health, and healing. They found that as participants' brain waves slowed down in alpha and theta states, they experience healing

of physical disorders (i.e., high blood pressure) and the expression of creativity. These results happened naturally as soon as the body and mind calmed down and were free of stress and active or worried thinking.

The students participating in their studies were taught how to slow down their own brain waves to bring about body/mind relaxation. Once relaxed in alpha or theta consciousness, participants reported having more images, increased energy, improved concentration, and creative thinking, all of which helped them in writing papers and taking tests. They even noted an increase in positive thoughts, a sense of empowerment, and openness to the possibility for change and growth.

Preparing for Creative Expression

Expressing our creativity, therefore, not only is beneficial for our health and learning but also makes us feel happy. We get a rush of energy and produce something that makes us feel good about ourselves. By setting favorable conditions in the classroom, we adult educators can help our students to reduce stress and express their creativity, leading to broader and more optimistic thinking.

First, however, we need to prepare the mind of the learner. I use movement and mindfulness meditation, starting with a five to 10 minute exercise to calm the body and stimulate creativity. When the blood is circulating,

oxygen is feeding all the cells of the body, particularly those of the brain. With increased oxygen, the brain has more energy, and we feel alert. In the classroom, we dance, sing, chant, do some simple sitting/standing stretches or yoga postures, march in place, or even walk around the classroom.

Mindfulness Activities

After exercising, we turn the focus inward with a 10-minute mindfulness activity that slows down brain waves and stimulates creative expression. I remind students not to worry about how they look or whether they we are doing an activity correctly or not. We concentrate on doing only one thing very slowly, gently, and silently. Breathing can be a mindfulness activity if we observe the rhythm and sensations of each in-breath and out-breath. Or, we practice progressive muscle relaxation, starting with the face and working down to the feet, tightening and then relaxing different muscles. Sometimes we do a guided imagery activity, free writing, or draw pictures to practice mindfulness.

Almost any activity can be performed mindfully. One of my favorites is to eat a dried cranberry mindfully. I have students select one berry and hold it in their left hand. They examine its texture and shape, notice how it feels in their hand, and then smell it. I ask them to think about how that piece of fruit grew and became what it is and how it got to them. Then, I tell them to put it in their mouth and let it rest on their tongue, noticing any changes in their mouth. Next, they bite into it so that

they have two pieces of fruit in their mouth. Lastly, I instruct them to eat the fruit as slowly as they can with the thought that it could be the only food they will eat all day.

After eating a dried cranberry mindfully, I ask the students to write as much as they can, in the present tense, beginning with "I am a cranberry." At the end of the class, students share their writings, thoughts, and feelings about the creative process. They report feeling happy, proud of themselves, energized, and relaxed. The boxed text provides some examples of ABE and ESOL students' writings from such a class on mindfully eating a cranberry.

Student Feedback

The student feedback from the health education classes has been overwhelmingly positive. In classroom discussions, specific writing assignments, and journal entries, students share their joy, energy, feelings of peacefulness, self-explorations, and heightened self-esteem. They report a decrease in negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and frustration. Their enthusiasm has spread to other classmates who have not yet enrolled in health education, and we now have a growing waiting list for September classes.

Conclusion

In the three years that the CLC has been offering health education/counseling classes for morning students, all

the GED students who have taken it have passed their GED exams and received their high school equivalency certificate. They even continued attending their other classes until the last week of school, unlike most of their classmates, whose attendance trailed off after registering for their tests. The GED graduates, almost all of them young adults, said they would not have stuck with the program if it had not been for their health class. It kept them motivated despite stress outside of the class and learning difficulties in the areas of writing and math. During the school year, none of the ABE students who attended the health class for at least three months dropped out of school.

I hope this approach to counseling will become part of the core program at the CLC and be seriously considered by other learning centers whose students could benefit from health education classes. As Derren Lewis-Peters, a 17-year-old student who completed his GED in June, 2002, writes,

Attending this class [ABE/ASE Health Education] has been an eye-opening journey filled with positivity and excitement. As I write this, on the eve of my last class, I can feel a sliver of sadness come over me, but I can rejoice in the fact that I've come away from this a smarter, wiser young

man with a better understanding of myself and the people around me, all because of this one, fantastic class.

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About the Author

Marjorie Jacobs has been an adult educator at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the past 30 years. She is also a stress management consultant and health educator. She gives workshops on the mind/body/learning connection, stress reduction, meditation, and the External Elixir of Kung Fu. She can be contacted at *mlmljacobs@yahoo.com*. ❖

Mindfulness Exercise: "I am a Cranberry"

I am a cranberry, and I enjoy that I grew up under sun light with a nice view. I remember the people taking care of me and how proud I was. I felt like a VIP. I'm used to enjoying myself, and I never think about the future even though one day I heard people talking that my time was coming up to be taken away.

But what has happened here? Hey! It's so hot! I can't breathe. I am suffocating. Why am I drying up? Oh, I'm getting smaller and smaller, and that's not right. What is this box, and it's so dark here! It changed everything for me!

Now I'm another thing. I'm a dried cranberry, and I'm trying to enjoy my challenges. Now I like to be eaten from a nice person, to feel his soft tongue on my body, to feel his pleasure eating me. It will be a new feeling, and like every new experience, it's so exciting for me.

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Building Participation in Workplace Learning Programs

by Debby D'Amico, Diane Lentz, Robert L. Smith, & Marcia L. Taylor

*T**he small staff at the Bernard Kleiman JobLink Learning Center, East Chicago, Indiana, serves a population of 5,700 unionized steel mill workers, 20 to 25 percent of whom take classes each year. This percentage roughly matches that of most workforce education programs, including those which, unlike JobLink, pay workers who attend (Kim & Creighton, 1999). JobLink knew it could be serving more and sought to increase participation among those who had never taken a JobLink class, and those with basic skills needs. Our team decided to undertake some action research to find out how to increase participation.*

JobLink, like other Institute for Career Development (ICD) affiliates, is based on a collaboration between labor (United Steelworkers of America, Local 1010) and management (ISPAT Inland Inc., in this case). ICD programs like JobLink present opportunities to workers by using collectively bargained funds to create on-site classes that respond to steelworkers' interests, schedules, and needs to build portable skills.

Prior to conducting the research project, JobLink employed a range of recruitment strategies to draw workers to the program: informational presentations at meetings, marketing give-aways, open houses, flyers posted and mailed home, newsletter and registration booklets sent to homes, articles in local newspapers, and community projects. In addition, JobLink recruits and trains learning advocates, called Friends of JobLink, from among participating workers. These advocates then encourage their peers in the plant to participate in programs. Other recruitment strategies include offering "Bridge" classes (high-interest courses), and classes to spouses of workers who have taken one class in the past year. JobLink also has a Web site and is featured at the orientation for new employees.

The Action Research Process

Action research in adult literacy places value upon people's knowledge, assuming that participants in research can analyze their own situations and design their own solutions (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Rather than claiming a dispassionate stance toward research findings, action research is by definition, practical; the findings of the research will be put into use. Methodologies vary. In this project, three research methodologies were used: focus groups, telephone surveys, and plant-wide surveys.

A workplace learning center, JobLink has a well-defined population and the means to contact potential participants. We consciously influenced the study population by selecting departments with high numbers of workers in low skill jobs, such as Janitorial, Labor, and Sequence Support. By cross-checking enrollment data with lists of employed workers in these departments, JobLink instructor Taylor and coordinator Lentz were able to identify those workers who had never taken a JobLink class. By subtracting new hires, they generated a list of 158 workers. While it is an over-generalization to assume that all of these workers needed basic skills instruction, narrowing the target group seemed a reasonable way to identify perceived barriers experienced by non-participants and to gain the information necessary to strengthen marketing strategies for that population.

> **"We wanted people, rather than feeling defensive about non-participation, to know that their opinions were valuable."**

We formulated this set of questions to guide our action research:
- What are barriers to participation?
- How can we improve marketing efforts?
- Can focus groups and/or telephone surveys improve outreach?
- What course content will attract non-participants?
- What expectations and goals would non-participants bring?

Contacting about 150 steelworkers from the sample, Lentz and Taylor used a telephone script that was non-threatening, upbeat, and positive. For example, they began by asking, "Have you ever taken a class at JobLink?" When the respondent said no, they said, "You are exactly the kind of person we need to talk with. We'd like you to help us learn how to bring in

more members to JobLink." We wanted people, rather than feeling defensive about non-participation, to know that their opinions were valuable.

The research team learned that it takes many calls to convene a successful focus group, especially when no incentives are available. For example, a random sample of names from our pool of 150 was used to make 22 telephone contacts. Of these, only nine workers expressed willingness to participate in a group. Only five actually participated.

Once convened, focus group members were asked these questions:

1. How did you feel about our phone call?
2. How and when did you first hear about JobLink?
3. Have you ever read any of our fliers? Where did you see them?
4. Tell us a couple of good things and a couple of bad things you've heard about JobLink.
5. Were you ever interested in a particular class?
6. What has kept you from taking classes?
7. What would it take for you to take a class with us?
8. Are you making plans for your retirement? What kinds of classes could help you prepare for it?
9. What advice do you have for us regarding how to market our classes?
10. Is there anything we didn't touch on that you'd like to add?

The focus group provided informative group interactions and good information. Many of the people contacted by phone were not going to participate in focus groups, however, so the team decided that the phone calls themselves should also be used for data

gathering. Lentz and Taylor used a flow chart approach. They asked respondents in phone interviews questions two, three, four, and six from the focus group protocol (the numbered list above). Those who indicated they would not attend a focus group were then asked questions five and seven through 10. Lentz and Taylor were always open to exploring valuable new topics or directions introduced by workers. Altogether, three focus groups with a combined total of 10 participants and 28 additional phone interviews were conducted from March to August 2001, for a total of 38 steelworkers contacted. Although the information gleaned was rich, we decided to conduct a survey that broadened the scope to all departments.
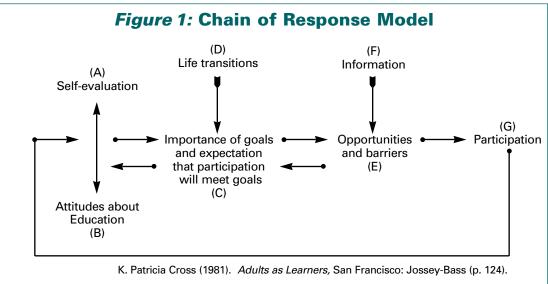
A Plant-wide Survey

JobLink staff has administered plant-wide surveys every two years since 1990, usually mailing them to all potential participants. Average response rate tends to be about 15 percent with or without incentives. The 2001 survey was tailored for non-participants as informed by other research methods described above. We asked the same questions as those posed in the focus groups and via the telephone. In addition, non-partic-

ipants were given a list of courses and asked to identify ones they might be interested in taking. To ensure a better response rate, the Friends of JobLink distributed and conducted the survey. We trained the advocates in how to approach non-participants. It was critical that non-participants did not sense that advocates would lecture them for not attending; instead, we presented an opportunity to improve the program with their suggestions. Our response rate was 57 percent (of 170 surveys given to the advocates, 97 were returned).

Overall Findings

The research process itself constituted a form of recruitment. As a result of the calls, workers had more information about the program, and were reminded of its value. Five of the 10 individuals who participated in focus groups and four of the 28 interviewed by phone registered for their first classes after contact. This represents nearly one-quarter of those contacted. JobLink has decided to incorporate calls as a regular part of outreach.

While few respondents had heard negative feedback about JobLink classes, fears about learning still held these workers back from classes. We used the framework proposed by adult education theorist Patricia Cross (1981) to look

Figure 1: Chain of Response Model

K. Patricia Cross (1981). *Adults as Learners,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (p. 124).

analytically at the issues raised in both focus groups and telephone conversations with workers. Cross's model (See Figure 1) was designed to show the interactions among the forces leading adult learners towards and away from participation in adult education. The research team mapped the responses of workers in focus groups and phone interviews along the model's dimensions, separating out the responses of participants in JobLink programs from those of non-participants.

Self-Evaluation and Attitudes About Education

Responses about self-evaluation and attitudes toward education fall under points A and B of Cross's model. These responses included the following:

- I just need a broom and a mop. . . I'm too old for school.
- If it's a question of having to read books or communicate in English, I think that would be really difficult.
- Learning is slow for me . . . I worry about reading.
- There are so many people that want to come, but are afraid. Lot of people figure that you have to know something before you start.

Sometimes negative feelings about oneself, and perceptions of school-like environments as threatening, occur even within a context of steady unionized work with good pay. Steel mills now require a high school education, a policy that undoubtedly increases the reluctance of workers who did not complete high school to come forward, especially in times when jobs are threatened due to recession and industry downsizing. This is a good example of how a motivating factor, such as the need to acquire new skills before one is laid off, can collide with the stigma of having low skills to prevent workers from taking advantage of these opportunities. At the same time, for steelworkers, having a good job

removes what is a critical incentive for many adults who seek education.

Goals and Expectations

In Cross's model, strong goals and the expectation that education will help learners meet these goals (point C) can push adults to participate in education. For steelworkers, doing something interesting and taking control of their own careers are strong motivating goals. Classes that show them how to "do more with less," by shoring up family finances or doing their own repair work, accomplish other kinds of goals. Uneasy economics affect steelworker expectations that the industry can and will continue to provide secure employment, and thus increase the motivation for taking classes. Finally, steelworkers cite making a community contribution as an important goal. This is accomplished through JobLink classes that participate in Habitat for Humanity or assist other community organizations.

The focus group and phone research also provided information about what kinds of classes might attract previously unreached workers into JobLink. The largest set of responses (36 percent) suggested career- or skill-specific classes, such as commercial drivers license preparation. Computer courses were second, accounting for 27 percent of responses. The next most popular response was for pre-technical courses, such as auto mechanics or electricity. Personal development topics, such as stained glass making and financial planning, drew interest from 18 percent, and the smallest group, 12 percent, indicated interest in basic skills, such as writing and algebra. In general, those wanting classes that supported alternative careers were split evenly between newcomers (those in the mill less than five years) and old timers.

The survey results echoed these responses: 68 percent showed interest in home improvement classes, 65

percent in computer courses, and 63 percent were interested in courses for certification such as heating and air conditioning or small engine repair. In contrast, only 33 percent expressed interest in basic skills courses.

The focus group and phone research generated a sense among the interviewers that courses leading to certification and more career-specific approaches might respond more closely to the goals and expectations of both participating and non-participating workers. This would include building sequences or a continuum of courses in particular areas of interest, such as computers. The research indicates that courses perceived as taking people somewhere, because they offer a credential or a tangible career outcome, might create a stronger pull in the area of goals and expectations. JobLink has modified its offerings with this finding in mind.

Life Transitions

Life transitions, D in Cross's model, did not emerge as significant in the focus groups, phone interviews and, surveys.

Opportunities and Barriers

Opportunities and barriers (point E) refer to institutional factors that influence participation in adult education, such as creating programs that serve working adults at convenient times, thereby overcoming barriers of scheduling that conventional hours might present.

In the 2001 survey of JobLink participants, 97.3 percent rated the classes good to excellent. The workers have often favorably noted and now come to expect the convenient location, scheduling that accommodates shift work, and the hands-on approach to learning that JobLink provides. Still, barriers are commonly cited among those who have yet to participate. Focus group participants and phone interviewees complained of too little

free time, often due to overtime hours worked; family obligations; health reasons; and fear or procrastination. Ten percent said they had no excuse for not participating, while another seven percent said the classes they wanted were full. No reason was cited by 12 percent, while others said they were too old, lazy, or worried about language issues or skills. Despite flexible scheduling around shifts, 10 percent gave shift work as a reason for not taking classes. Also identified as barriers are poor hearing (a common result of working around heavy machinery), and the length of time it takes to reach goals such as acquiring a GED or college education while working full-time.

Our survey data mirrored the verbal reports' emphasis on lack of time. As Cross points out, the major issue that adults cite, time or lack thereof, really represents a sense that participation in educational activities is not as high a priority as other things. Steelworkers who do participate, for example, see lack of time as a less potent barrier than it was in the past, when people had fewer opportunities for leisure learning. They see working a lot of overtime as "greedy," and say that for them, taking classes is more important than big paychecks (Smith et al., 2001).

Information

As Cross (1981) notes, access to information is a critical component (F). The 2001 non-participant survey indicates a fairly high level of common knowledge about JobLink, as do the focus group and interview data. Survey results show that 79 percent of workers know where JobLink is, while 53 percent understand that classes do not have to be job related. Almost half knew that identical classes are offered twice each day to accommodate shift workers, and 42 percent realized they did not need to take a test to take a class. However, only 25 percent

knew about their annual $1,800 tuition assistance benefit and 13 percent about online classes.

Despite an admirable range of past outreach efforts, research among workers added some important nuances to existing recruitment efforts. Out of the first focus group, researchers learned that JobLink fliers were perceived as informational, but needed to include motivational messages as well. Focus group participants expressed fears of "keeping up" in the class, indicating that

> **"***Out of the first focus group, researchers learned that JobLink fliers were perceived as informational, but needed to include motivational messages as well.***"**

workers may need more explicit information about what is required in a class. Those who wanted to upgrade their skills, for example, had considerable trepidation about enrolling. Focus group participants also suggested finding prominent places in the plant for JobLink fliers. Responses showed that course content was very important to workers' decisions to participate.

Conclusions

The focus groups, telephone interviews, and surveys generated two kinds of new knowledge regarding participation in JobLink classes by steelworkers who had previously not taken classes. The first of these was procedural: the process of research itself resulted in higher enrollments among this group. Information delivered through this personal contact appeared to reframe the self-evaluation of individuals regarding their participation in education, such that nearly a quarter (nine of the 38 individuals) of those contacted signed

up for classes. The contact seems to provide a context for reconsidering one's relationship to educational opportunity. Hand delivering the survey resulted in an unprecedented return rate, another example of procedural realization from the study.

The second kind of knowledge resulting from the research is greater understanding of our constituents, particularly those steelworkers who have not participated in past offerings. Together, workers and researchers created new understanding about factors that encourage and discourage participation. This will be used to generate changes in course offerings and marketing.

Taken together, these two kinds of knowledge allow us to affect the interconnected factors influencing non-participating workers at several points of Cross's model. The procedural knowledge has an impact on points A (self-evaluation) and B (attitudes toward education). The research strongly suggests that this kind of intervention, in the form of personal phone calls and focus groups, can affect participation.

The knowledge of workers and their goals emerging from the findings is prompting ICD and JobLink staff to re-think the content, sequencing, and outcomes of courses, affecting the model at C (goals and expectations). In addition, work on assessment can strengthen the link between goals and expectations by better structuring a conversation between worker and staff person that helps each design a better fit between programs and needs. The development of new tools, such as on-line courses, can also ensure a better match between worker goals and participation. Finally, suggestions from workers about what to communicate about programs (point F on the model) have been incorporated.

Where personal contact with non-participants is possible, our work suggests that it is worth the time and effort to make phone calls and set up

focus groups. Talking with those whom the program hopes to serve is a good way to convince them that their fears about participating may be unfounded, to learn from them about the particular barriers they experience, and to create programs that speak clearly to their interests and needs. 📖

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About the Authors

Debby D'Amico was research associate and liaison for career development at the Adult Literacy Media Alliance (ALMA) during the time the research was conducted. ALMA is the creator of TV411.

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A Conversation with FOB…

Counseling in ESOL Programs

Focus on Basics spoke with two English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) professionals, Myrna Atkins, CEO and president of the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning in Denver, Colorado, and Nazneen Rahman, Education Director at the International Institute of Providence, Rhode Island, about the role counseling plays in ESOL programs. Both the Spring Institute and the International Institute serve large numbers of learners in a variety of ESOL programs. Neither ESOL program has specialized counseling staff, but both recognize the role of advocacy and referrals as important in lowering students' stress levels. The teachers in both programs take on the counseling role.

The Spring Institute's Atkins explains, "The ESOL teacher is in a key role. The contents of ESOL lessons take on the role that a counselor might play. If the teachers see themselves in that role [of counselor], although they might be teaching survival skills, housing, shopping, parenting, they think and teach and listen to students differently." Dialogue journals, in which the learner and teacher write back and forth to each other, are one example of an ESOL activity that can be slanted to deal with issues traditionally considered counseling. "You look at what you get from your students [via journals] differently if you're thinking of it as a mental health activity," she points out.

Teachers as Counselors, Advocates

Atkins finds that most of the mental health work with refugees and immigrants is being done by ESOL teachers. "They have more face time, are seeing students longer than mental health teachers; the teachers have relationships and trust and use methods that involve talking about issues that are key factors which need to be handled when promoting mental health. The goal is not to turn teachers into mental health workers." She is careful to differentiate between mental health and mental illness, and what the teacher's role is and is not. In mental health, she explains, you are "looking at behavior and psychological factors that lead to someone being healthy." Coping, being in positive employment, and having good physical health are all elements of positive mental health. These are issues that can be addressed in ESOL curricula. For example, the Spring Institute's pre-employment ESOL program includes an activity called Steps to Success, which helps learners see that, while they are currently ESOL students, they are

on the road to other things. It's an ESOL activity and also a mental health activity.

The teachers — indeed, all the staff — at the International Institute of Rhode Island, explains Rahman, are counselors. But they define their role as being advocates for the students. "It works in several ways. For example, a student wanted to attend our morning class. Her child was in Head Start and needed to be able to attend [Head Start] an extra hour if the mother was to attend ESOL class. It took 10 telephone calls, but we finally got that approved. Other learners might ask for help with writing letters, or making phone calls. I've gone to children's schools with parents, because the parent's don't understand what the teacher said." This approach, being advocates for learners, is not a formalized aspect of the program, yet all the teachers adopt it.

Both programs find referrals important. "As teachers," explains Rahman, "we don't handle domestic violence." They had a workshop on it, and have a relationship with a domestic violence program in their community, so they can make referrals when they are needed. "We are not equipped to do a lot of mental health or other counseling. We do as much as possible and then do referrals. We have an informal list; most teachers have their own contact people."

Rahman emphasizes building relationships with the other services offered by her organization, as well as with outside service providers. "Many refugees and immigrants have immigration and naturalization problems. We have immigration and naturalization services here. We have a lawyer and caseworker; they give workshops and handle cases for our students. We also have interpreting and translating, helping with documents. We have a refugee resettlement division. We work very closely with them. When we start our school year, we give an

orientation, and then departments are invited to give an orientation to students. Minority health is giving information and referrals. Whenever they hold something, all the students are invited."

Spring Institute's Atkins stresses the need to form relationships with outside agencies before referrals are needed. "In our program," she says, "we have close relationships with the Rocky Mountain Center for the survivors of torture. I changed what I was doing to partner with one of those staff so the students would get to know them. The referrals go both ways. That's an important partnership. There are not enough of those partnerships. The time to form those relationships are not when you need them, but before."

Target Needs

To improve the counseling available at the International Institute of Rhode Island's ESOL program, Rahman would like to see more training for teachers on specific counseling issues. A separate counselor, too, is a possibility. ESOL programs considering counseling "should look at their student body first to see what the needs are. Is it mental health? Is it job search and employment? Then get counselors in those areas. Our population has huge needs in immigration and naturalization and our institution has that. You have to start with who is coming in and what their needs are," she reminds us.

Atkins counsels ESOL programs to focus on staff needs: "Teachers have to be aware of how stressful working with people who have so many needs can be. We have to make sure of our own mental health. Some teachers get overwhelmed with the enormity of the tasks both timewise and stresswise. They start taking on a lot of their students' concerns. They have a responsibility to take care of their own mental health. Who takes care of the care givers?"

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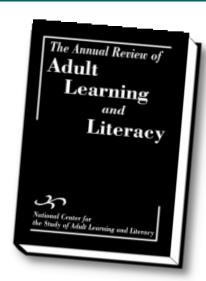
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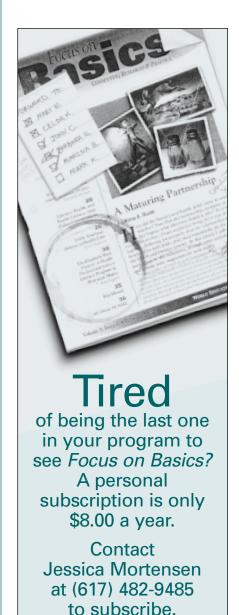
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Correction

In the February 2002 issue
(Volume 5, Issue C) of *Focus
on Basics,* an article by Rima
E. Rudd entitled "A Maturing
Partnership" included an
incorrect citation. It should
read: Hudson River Center
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by Cristine Smith, Mary Beth Bingman, Judy Hofer, Patsy Medina and Practitioner Leaders

This report *(NCSALL Reports #22, $10)* details how the NCSALL Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network (PDRN) set out to create and support systematic partnerships between practitioner and university researchers to better connect research and practice, with the ultimate outcome of improved practice, policy, and services for adult learners. Both the full report and the shorter report summary *(NCSALL Reports #22a, $2.50)* highlight significant lessons learned from the PDRN and offer specific policy, practice and research recommendations for connecting researchers and practitioners in the field of adult learning and literacy.

Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education
by Hal Beder and Patsy Medina

The full research report *(NCSALL Reports #18, $10)* and the abbreviated report summary *(NCSALL Reports #18a, $5)* are available. These reports present findings from NCSALL's observational study, that investigated what happens in adult literacy classrooms. Researchers in this qualitative study looked at the content of instruction and how it is delivered, the processes that underlie teaching and learning, and the forces external to the classroom that shape classroom behavior.

Patterns of Word Recognition Errors Among Adult Basic Education Native and Nonnative Speakers of English
by Rosalind Kasle Davidson and John Strucker
The full research article from which this *Research Brief* is taken was published in *Scientific Studies of Reading,* Volume 6, No. 3, 2002.

NCSALL Researchers Davidson and Strucker, using the NCSALL Adult Reading Components Study (ARCs) data, compared nonnative and native speakers of English in ABE classes on their development of skills needed to make smooth progress toward higher levels of reading.

Resources Available

Are you planning a professional development activity?
NCSALL resources are available to you for your state conferences, local workshops, and other events.
- Back issues of *Focus on Basics.* Great for topic specific events.
- *The Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy* books. Ideal for raffles and drawings. (Or purchase multiple copies at a considerable discount.) "No practitioner in the field of adult learning should be without this indispensable resource."
- *NCSALL Research Briefs.* Quick, easy-to-read summaries of NCSALL research findings.
- *NCSALL Teaching and Training Materials.* Great for professional development activities: explore research topics in depth.

For more information on additional materials available from NCSALL or to inquire about getting a packet of materials customized for your event, please e-mail us at ncsall@worlded.org, or contact NCSALL's Jessica Mortensen at (617) 482-9485.

NCSALL Web Site
http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu

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