Program Administrators' Sourcebook

A Resource on NCSALL's Research for Adult Education Program Administrators

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Introduction

If you administer an adult education program, you face a wide variety of challenges:

- How can you help students make "level" gains?
- How can you help students gain the skills they need to reach their goals?
- How can you help students stay in programs long enough to meet their goals?
- How can you prepare and retain good teachers?
- How can you document the successes of your program?

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) has conducted research relevant to these questions. This Sourcebook is designed to give you, as a program administrator, direct access to research that may help you address the challenges you face in your job.

Why this Sourcebook? Where did it come from?

This Sourcebook is a resource for people who serve as administrators of adult basic, adult secondary, and/or adult English-for-speakers-of-other-languages (ESOL) programs, whether those programs are school-based, community-based, or community-college-based.

NCSALL's Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research initiative has developed a variety of tools to help adult education practitioners access, understand, judge, and use research. As part of this initiative, we developed a tool for the unique needs of program administrators. There is growing emphasis on "evidence-based practice" throughout the education field, and administrators need resources to help them use research to make decisions about the structure and services offered in their programs.

The first objective of this Sourcebook is to present all of NCSALL's **research findings** (as of 2004) in short sections related to key challenges that program administrators face in their work as managers of adult education programs. The second objective is to present the **implications** of these research findings for program structure and services, as well as some **strategies** for implementing change based on these implications.

NCSALL worked with administrators in the field to develop this book, drawing on their professional wisdom and putting it together with the research findings. During the development of this Sourcebook, we:

- brought together a group of five program administrators (the Program Administrator Work Group) and asked them to read NCSALL's research;
- asked them to list implications for policy or practice (either implications already listed by the researchers in their reports or implications the program administrators themselves thought were appropriate, based on their understanding of the research); and
- asked them to generate specific program strategies that followed from those implications.

We then took the research findings, implications, and strategies and formatted them into short, easy-to-digest sections. The Program Administrator Work Group reviewed the findings again and suggested changes and additions. Then, we sent it out to be reviewed by three additional program administrators around the country, for a fresh look. They made suggestions and revisions. Finally, we asked a small group of national, state, and program-level policymakers to add their final comments.

We envision this Sourcebook as an easy reference book for you as program administrators; however, it does not provide in-depth information about any one area of research or research study. For that, you should check out the full reports or other resources provided on NCSALL's Web site: **www.ncsall.net**.

Who is NCSALL?

NCSALL (the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy) is the only research center funded by the U.S. Department of Education that focuses specifically on adult learning. The goal of NCSALL is to improve the quality of practice in adult education programs through research. Since 1996, we have been conducting and disseminating research related to adult learning and literacy. We aim to serve students, teachers, program administrators, policymakers, and scholars in our field.

NCSALL is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University.

How is this Sourcebook organized?

Each section has findings from the NCSALL studies. The findings are meant to be short and to the point, without emphasis on data or statistics. Then, a number of implications for adult education program structure and services follow the findings. These implications were generated both by the researchers in their reports, and by groups of adult education program administrators who read the research and applied it to their own work. For each implication, we then present several strategies for implementing change; program administrators who worked on our team generated these strategies. Finally, we include suggestions for additional resources (the NCSALL research report, related resources, etc.).

The Sourcebook is organized into five sections, which you will see in the headings of each page. The five sections include:

- Section 1: Teaching and Learning
- Section 2: Adult Student Persistence
- Section 3: Professional Development
- Section 4: Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education
- Section 5: Advocacy for Program Improvement

Within each section, you will recognize a common layout with the following features:

- Every section (except Section 5) starts with *The Issues You Face*, a set of bullets that presents the challenges with which program administrators grapple.
- Following *The Issues You Face*, you'll see *Findings from Research*. Every set of findings from a particular study will also include a box *About the Study*, which gives you some facts about the study, its design, and who conducted it.

> **About the NCSALL Professional Development Study**
>
> This study, conducted by ...

- Following the findings from a particular study, you'll then see *Specific Implications of the (NAME OF STUDY) Study*. Each implication includes a statement that looks like this:
  What the research says:
  Therefore, you should ...
  This statement explains why the implication is supported by the findings of the research studies.

- Following the implication, you will find *Strategies*. These are specific suggestions for ways you might address the implication at a program level.
- In some sections, you'll see *Overall Implications for Program Change*, which includes implications and strategies common to all of the studies presented in that section.

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- Finally, in each section, there will be a box that lists *Additional Resources* on the NCSALL Web site where you can access further information, see the full research report or other publications, or find teaching and training materials developed by NCSALL that you may find useful for your program.

> **NCSALL Adult Development Study**
>
> To download the full report #, NAME, go to: URL
> To download articles…

The Sourcebook concludes with a section (Section 5) on advocacy that discusses how policy changes supported by research play a role in program improvement. This section also provides some advocacy tools.

How can I use this Sourcebook?

You may want to look at the Table of Contents and choose from those broad topics (Teaching and Learning, Adult Student Persistence, Professional Development, Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education) that interest you, and read that section in its entirety. You could skim the book and look at the boxes that describe the research and then read more about the findings from the research studies that relate to problems you face. You could skip to *The Issues You Face* in each section to see which sections address problems you have encountered in your program or work. You could look at the *Implications* and *Strategies* for ideas related to the issues you face.

The Sourcebook is *not* a handbook that tells you how to organize or run your program. It is, rather, a resource that gives you current information about research and suggests strategies for applying the research in your program.

There are potentially unlimited strategies for improving program structure and services based on the implications of research. We have not tried in this Sourcebook to be exhaustive; rather, we have included here the implications and strategies suggested by the researchers and by a group of program administrators. It is just a start at listing some ideas for practice and policy; we make no claim that it is, or ever could be, comprehensive enough for all program administrators across all types of adult education programs. The strategies themselves are *not* research-tested interventions; rather, they are *ideas* that program administrators, who have significant experience in the field, have generated based on the implications of the research that is presented.

What research is covered in this Sourcebook?

The following research studies are covered:

Study	Principal Investigator
Adult Development Study	Robert Kegan, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Adult Multiple Intelligences Study	Silja Kallenbach, World Education, and Julie Viens, Harvard
Adult Reading Components Study	John Strucker, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Classroom Dynamics Study	Hal Beder, Rutgers University
Pair Work Study	Stephen Reder, Portland State University
Sustained Silent Reading Study	Stephen Reder, Portland State University
Adult Student Persistence Study	John Comings, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study	Victoria Purcell-Gates, Harvard/Michigan State University
Professional Development Study	Cristine Smith, World Education
GED Impact Studies	John Tyler, Brown University
The Outcomes Studies	Beth Bingman, The University of Tennessee

How can research support program improvement?

As a program administrator, you are looking for better results. You are asked by funders to use research to justify your program. You are also being asked to promote evidence-based practice. In adult education, it is not possible to base every program decision on research, because enough research just does not exist to answer all questions. However, it is possible to provide evidence-based practice, defined as

> *The integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about how to deliver instruction.[1]*
>
> —Grover Whitehurst, Director of Institute of Education Sciences

This definition calls for the use of empirical evidence from scientifically based research, defined by the No Child Left Behind legislation as

> *[T]he application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs … uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs … with a preference for random assignment experiments … and has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts … .[2]*

The definition of evidence-based practice recognizes that educators need to draw on their own experience and the experiences of others by using professional wisdom, defined by Whitehurst as

- *The judgment that individuals acquire through experience*

- *Consensus views*

- *[I]ncluding the effective identification and incorporation of local circumstances into instruction[3]*

Research findings are one source of information for making decisions about how to structure a program and how to provide services to adult students. You may have identified a program area that you need to change and then look for research about possible changes that will address your need. Or you may learn of research that suggests changes you then want to make. To use research, you will need to:

- **Access** research that addresses questions that are of concern to you, your staff, and students.
- **Understand** how the research was conducted—the method used, the ways data were collected, the population being studied, the questions asked and how the data was used to answer these questions.
- **Judge** the relevance of this research to your situation. Does the population and context of the research have similarities to yours? Does the research give you information that you can use?
- **Use** the research to determine what changes to make in your program that will help students learn.

As a program administrator, you make a change because you believe that it will lead to improvements in your program and to better outcomes for students. Basing a change on research should increase the chances that you get the outcomes you want. You need to be ready to implement change. To effectively implement a research-based change, you will need:

- A *program improvement process* that starts with a problem identified by and discussed by you and the staff, preferably based on the data and experiences you have in your program.

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[1] Currently at http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/eb/edlite-slide003.html

[2] http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg107.html

[3] http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/eb/edlite-slide004.html

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- An integrated *plan of implementation*, one that considers and allows for the time it takes for change to happen, since change takes time.
- *Professional development* for teachers and possibly other staff about how to implement the change.
- *Resources* to support the increased preparation time teachers may need to implement the change.
- A *way to evaluate results*, so that you have information about whether you achieved the results you wanted and whether there were unintended results, since making one change can have implications for other parts of your program.

For additional resources on implementing program change, see the Program Leadership and Improvement Special Collection at http://pli.cls.utk.edu/