

# Section 2: Adult Student Persistence

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## The Issues You Face

As a program administrator, you know that:

- ◆ Many students don't stay in a program long enough to make level gains or to reach the goals they set for themselves.
- ◆ Student attendance is sometimes irregular, making it difficult for teachers to plan lessons that help all students progress.
- ◆ Classes become turbulent, with students entering, exiting, and attending at different times.
- ◆ It is difficult to count and to post-test students who stop out or drop out.

NCSALL's **Adult Student Persistence Study** gives you information to address these issues, specifically, information about:

- What students say supports and hinders their persistence;
- Persistence “pathways” found among adult students; and
- Lessons learned from programs that tried different strategies, which may help you decide how to address persistence in your own program.

# The Adult Student Persistence Study

## Findings from Research

*Adult students needed supports to persist.* Building supports may be more critical to increasing persistence than removing barriers. Adult students in this study had much more to say about supports to persistence than barriers to it. The most often-mentioned supports fell into four categories: goal orientation, personal relationships, teachers and other students, and self-efficacy.

- **Goal Orientation**—Findings show a significant relationship between persistence and having specific goals as a reason for entering adult basic education (ABE) programs. Theories of motivation also suggest that students weigh the benefit of reaching their goals with the cost of participation. Thus, defining, understanding, and focusing on their goals for participation may help adult students persist.
- **Personal Relationships**—The most frequently mentioned support among students was having the support of their families, friends, colleagues, God/church, support groups, community workers, mentors, and bosses. Helping students identify the people in their lives who can support their persistence and suggesting they ask for that support may help persistence.
- **Teachers and Other Students**—While this support is also a personal relationship, it is located inside of the classroom and may be something that programs can affect. Adult students said their teachers and their classmates were important supports to their persistence. Teachers should be helped to support their students' persistence, and students should be helped to support each other's persistence.
- **Self-efficacy**—Students said that their own determination and self-efficacy (believing they can achieve their goals) was important to persistence. Helping students build their self-efficacy could lead to greater persistence.

### About the Adult Student Persistence Study

John Comings and a team of researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education conducted a study on student persistence, in two phases:

#### Phase One

Researchers conducted adult student interviews and tracked student persistence over time to develop advice for practitioners on how to help adults persist in their studies:

- Researchers interviewed 150 adult students from 19 pre-GED classes in 15 ABE programs in five New England states to address which of the supports and barriers were critical for programs to address.
- Adult students participated in two 30-minute interviews approximately four months apart. Researchers compiled data from the notes and coded for themes that emerged, which became the study's findings for Phase One.
- Information about each student was correlated with their persistence to identify relationships.

#### Phase Two

Researchers then studied the efforts of five programs as they attempted to increase student persistence over a three-year period:

- The programs conducted action research to identify strategies that were effective for them in supporting student persistence.
- The programs addressed persistence implementation strategies in four different categories:
  - Information gathering—to learn more about students and developments in the field
  - Instructional improvements—to make instructional techniques more engaging
  - Operational changes—to reform program processes and make services more accessible
  - Support services—to help students overcome personal and social barriers to persistence

Different “pathways to persistence” emerged. Some students stopped participating after the first few months. Others participated only intermittently because of barriers to participation. A minority of students were long-term participants. The five “pathways” identified included:

1. **Short-term students** enroll in a program and participate intensively for a short period in order to accomplish a specific goal. For some of these students, the short-term participation in a program meets their needs, but for some this participation leads to enrolment in a more suitable program.
2. **Tryout students** have barriers to persistence that are insurmountable and have goals that are not yet clear enough to sustain their motivation. These students end an episode of program participation quickly, with neither goal achievement nor transfer to another program. Students on the tryout pathway are motivated to learn, and their decision to join program services is a positive step. However, they are not ready to make a commitment to program participation.
3. **Intermittent students** move in and out of program services. During the time that they are not attending program services, intermittent students may stay in contact with their programs, and their episodes of participation and nonparticipation may reoccur several times and take place in more than one program. These students may have broad goals (such as improving language or basic skills ability) or specific goals (such as passing a citizenship test), but their goals require a long period of engagement to achieve. However, personal and environmental factors limit their ability to attend on a regular basis.
4. **Long-term students** participate regularly over a long period. Long-term students usually do not express instrumental goals, but rather talk of education as an end in itself. Long-term students have managed the personal and environmental factors that support and inhibit their persistence.
5. **Mandatory students** must attend a program because they are required to do so; for example, by a public-assistance or law-enforcement agency. Their participation is usually regular and long term, and their goals are often those of the agency that is mandating their attendance. Mandatory students overcome personal and environmental factors that constrain their persistence because they are required to do so.

## Challenges in Implementation

In Phase Two of the study, researchers identified several findings regarding programs’ efforts to improve persistence.

*The strategies closest to a program’s core mission of improving literacy—such as expanded computer-assisted instruction and improved tutor training—were implemented with little difficulty.* Rather than breaking with past practice, these changes were incremental.

*Programs found it difficult to develop a social-service capacity.* Social services were restricted to on-site child care or transportation vouchers, were implemented slowly, and did not fully address students’ needs.

*The emphasis on programmatic over social-service strategies limited programs’ potential to improve persistence,* because many students had barriers to participation, such as unstable work hours, child care or transportation needs, or health problems.

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## Specific Implications of the Adult Student Persistence Study

*Implication: Establish a program philosophy of persistence.*

*What the research says:* Interviews with students revealed that many students believed that once they stopped attending they could not return.

*Therefore, you should ...*

... adopt policies that make clear your program's philosophy of persistence.

### Strategies

#### ◆ Meet with staff, board members, and students to consider the following tenets of a program-persistence philosophy:

- Students can stay connected to the program even with a lapse in attendance.
- Success and participation are not contingent on attendance but rather on connection to the program and continued work toward goals.
- If students need to stop participating, they are welcome to return.
- Students have the responsibility to notify the program of plans to drop out, and the program has the responsibility to make clear to students the various ways in which they might notify the instructor of these plans.
- Learning occurs at home as well as at the program.
- Students should be helped to continue learning at home if life demands interrupt program participation.
- Students have access to tutoring or materials they can work on outside of class, and teachers and tutors show students how to use those materials.
- Staff emphasize life-long learning skills, such as encouraging the habit of reading and writing every day, so that students continue practicing their literacy skills when they are unable to attend.

#### ◆ Recognize the five pathways to persistence and establish ways to help students in each pathway:

- **Design an intake process that identifies tryout students.** Counsel them to delay entry and help them design plans to address barriers that constrain their participation so that they can return when the demands of their lives allow. Ask tryout students if you may follow up with them at a later date and then be sure that someone from the program does follow up.
- **Treat all enrolled students as intermittent students.** Challenge your staff to find ways to redefine participation as connection to the program, rather than hours of attendance in program services.

Make this connection meaningful, such that adult students have scheduled monthly discussions with program staff identifying progress on a self-study plan.

- **For long-term students,** clearly define steps (with measurable objectives) at orientation to provide them with extra help.
- **For mandatory students,** develop program strategies that help keep them motivated. Help them to recognize how they learn, how they are smart, and how learning can be enjoyable. Show them how learning can help them in their families, at work, with personal interests, or with barriers to improving their life situation.
- **For short-term students,** help them be specific in identifying their goals. If they need to transfer to another program, help them to be successful in a more appropriate program. Examples might include ESOL students transitioning to GED classes or pre-GED students transitioning to career counseling.

◆ **Develop mechanisms for receiving input from students about what helps them**

**persist.** Interview students who persist in your program to find out what they find best supports them in persisting. Ask teachers to conduct a force-field analysis activity in each class once or twice during the semester in which students identify forces that hinder them from persisting, forces that help them to persist, and strategies for reducing barriers and increasing support. Conduct focus groups of six to eight students periodically (a “student listening tour”) to help them identify their questions or concerns or answer questions you and your staff have about how to improve the program.

◆ **Partner with students to develop retention strategies and provide supports to**

**persistence.** Support student leadership in your program. Develop a student council or other leadership group. Help the group define its purpose and mission, and provide them opportunities to develop leadership, work, and academic skills.

◆ **Make persistence a program improvement priority.** Use the data/input from students to discuss with staff, at least yearly, how to continually improve persistence. Make changes in program structures or services based upon students’ feedback, and communicate to them clearly that you have done so based on their input.

**Implication: Help students to define and make progress toward goals and see themselves as successful at learning.**

**What the research says:** Adult students who had a specific goal as a reason for entering ABE programs were more likely to persist.

**Therefore, you should ...**

... help students set and see progress toward goals, and understand the forces that affect their participation.

## Strategies

### Setting Goals

- ◆ **Find out about students' purposes for attending during intake or orientation, and connect these purposes to their specific and broad goals.** Help students recognize how achieving their goals is a step toward succeeding at their broader purposes for participating in the ABE program.
- ◆ **Use a variety of assessments for determining students' skills and needs,** and provide students with information about their skills and needs. Reassess students on a regular basis and communicate the results to students.
- ◆ **Help students clearly identify their goals and develop an action plan to achieve those goals.** Take the opportunity to discuss the student's goals, skill assessment, and timeline to reach those goals. Provide a number of ways for students to set goals, such as (1) have students participate in one-on-one goal setting with a teacher, intake counselor, or student mentor; (2) make goal setting part of a classroom activity; or (3) conduct goal setting in small groups as students go through a student orientation. Encourage teachers to discuss with students their reasons for participating in ABE programs, perhaps using the "five whys" questioning strategy, asking students why they have set a particular goal up to five times in order to get at the underlying goal, e.g., getting a GED.

### Seeing Progress Toward Goals

- ◆ **Revisit goals individually or as a classroom activity.** Revisit goals and action plans to track progress and revise as necessary, either one-on-one with a counselor or teacher, as part of classroom activities, or as part of student-support-group meetings.
- ◆ **Ask students to identify benchmarks for success.** During the intake process, student orientation, or the first weeks of class, establish ways for students to determine how they will know that they are successful and how they will document their progress.
- ◆ **Find ways, inside and outside the classroom, to celebrate progress.** Teachers may wish to award certificates, publish a classroom newsletter, or provide other visible forms of recognition that adult students are accomplishing their goals.
- ◆ **Provide ways for students to see success early in program participation.** During the first three weeks (the most critical for persistence), focus on one area in instruction where students are most in need of improvement. Then retest the student after three weeks, to show gains and allow them to experience an immediate success.

## Understanding the Forces that Affect Participation

◆ **At intake, help potential adult students consider goals and life demands that might stand in the way of reaching their goals.** Discuss plans they feel they need to make in order to participate. If some feel their life demands are too great for participation, discuss what may need to happen before they feel they will be able to enroll in the program. Help students rethink goals to make them more realistic or to secure the support services they believe they will need before they can attend. Set up mechanisms for classes or cohorts of students to establish group goals and action plans, like securing better transportation to and from the program.

◆ **Include a force-field analysis as a formal part of orientation.** Help new students identify positive and negative forces affecting their ability to persist, and create strategies for managing those forces, such as contingency strategies should child care or transportation matters present barriers to participation, and strategies to continue learning if they need to stop out of the program.

*Implication: Help students build self-efficacy and use supports inside and outside the program to increase persistence.*

*What the research says:* Adult students who expressed self-efficacy (“within myself, wanting to accomplish it, willingness to try,” etc.) were more likely to persist. Adult students who identified the support of people in their lives or in the program were more likely to persist.

*Therefore, you should ...*

... help students build their self-efficacy and use supports inside (teachers and other students) and outside (sponsors) the program to help them persist.

## Strategies

### Build Self-Efficacy

◆ **Arrange for students to have contact with role models who have succeeded in ABE, ESOL, or GED class.** Bring these former students in as guest speakers at intake and orientation activities. Recruit past students to be counselors, teachers, administrators, or fill other leadership roles in the program.

### Use Supports Inside the Program

◆ **Develop a culture of acceptance and support in the program.** Express the program’s philosophy of persistence in the student orientation, intake, or first week of classes. Create an informal, noncompetitive learning environment in which students feel comfortable working at their own pace. Support teachers’ efforts to care about and respect students.

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## Strategies *(continued)*

◆ **Improve “first encounter” experiences with programs.** Make sure program staff answering the telephone always have clear answers to commonly asked questions, can give specific instructions on what students are to do next, and know what students need to bring with them to enroll in the program. Provide everyone with access to accurate program information in easy-to-read, pictorial, and verbal formats. Develop a sensitive interviewing process for new students at initial contact and right after intake. Use the same personnel to follow up with students as needed.

◆ **Establish a student orientation for all new students.** Make clear the program’s philosophy of persistence. Have the new students spend time with experienced students during orientation so that they have the opportunity to get advice and ask questions. Encourage them to think through what they feel they need in order to succeed. Provide orientation for those who are on a waiting list.

◆ **Promote sponsorship inside the program.** Print and distribute class lists with the names of students to encourage contact between students outside of class. Identify program staff or others within the program who will take responsibility for connecting personally with specific adult students. Match the adult student with a mentor to help them get through the first few months, to identify their goals, and to serve as an in-program support person. To do this, first identify volunteer mentors who are strong persisters and are interested in being a coach to new adult students; look for characteristics such as positive attitude, willingness to learn, and ability to serve as a role model; then explain to new students how the learning process will work and the student’s role in the process. Develop a connection between each student and a team (teachers, counselors, and other support staff) designated to touch base with that student.

### Use Supports Outside of the Program

◆ **Promote sponsorship.** Identify people in the students’ lives who can be sponsors for students, and support sponsors’ efforts.

***Implication: Offer direct social supports, such as child care (within the program when this is realistic) and develop a system for referring students to social services that are better equipped to help students cope with barriers to persistence.***

***What the research says:*** Personal and environmental factors matter to persistence.

***Therefore, you should ...***

... provide supports on site where possible and provide referrals to agencies and providers outside the program when necessary.



## Strategies

- ◆ **Develop collaborations with social-service agencies** and build a large network of service providers to help students in your program persist.
- ◆ **Hire a program counselor to provide counseling services to adult students.**
- ◆ **If possible, provide direct services**, such as child care or transportation subsidies.

*Implication: Adapt and add programmatic features, such as off-site instruction, individualized support, and learning plans, to make literacy services accessible to students on all pathways.*

*What the research says:* Students have multiple pathways into adult education, and these pathways lead to different patterns of persistence.

*Therefore, you should ...*

... design your program so that it has multiple mechanisms for supporting persistence, including adding features that allow students to continue learning outside of the program.

## Strategies

- ◆ **Provide enough information so that potential students can make an informed decision about enrolling.** Communicate what students might expect to gain by participation with what kind of time requirements and level of commitment.
- ◆ **Give potential students the opportunity to participate in sample activities before enrolling in the program**, providing them the chance to reflect on an ABE learning experience before committing to attend.
- ◆ **Establish program structures that allow students as many ways to participate as possible.** Reduce class size, provide opportunities for one-on-one tutoring, and extend hours of operation.
- ◆ **Establish managed enrollment in your program.** Managed enrollment provides students clear timeframes within which they can expect to achieve a certain amount of progress or have the opportunity to enroll again. Develop an attendance policy that encourages students to attend for as many hours as possible and provides clear guidelines for what happens when they do not attend for a minimum number of hours.

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## Strategies *(continued)*

◆ **Establish a system of supports for students who are absent.** Make contact with the student and show them that staff at the program care. Send personal notes or letters home. Contact those who miss class through another student who calls or drops by with some “homework.” Enlist adult student volunteers to join a team of persistence support that coordinates dropout prevention strategies, like following up with students who stop out.

◆ **Provide alternatives for students who begin attending intermittently.** Provide ways students can reinforce what they have learned by providing “practice” materials or videotapes so they can learn at home. Send books home with students; don’t require them to keep them at the program.

◆ **Track students who dropped out by hiring current students to interview students who have left.** One-to-two months after they drop out, contact students who have departed to ask them what impact participation in the program had on their lives, what they did and did not like, why they left, and what might help them come back to the program if they feel they need to do so. Use this data to change your program’s instructional approach or the program’s structure to better support student success.

◆ **Provide ways for students to access and use computer technology.** Upgrade computer labs and encourage teachers to use computer technology in the classroom. Set up open computer lab hours for students to study on their own and connect students to free computer resources at libraries or other community institutions.

◆ **Pay teachers to support students in learning at a distance and provide materials for students to take home.** Give students videos, books, software, and other materials that they can use to study at home.

◆ **Develop student “cohorts”—groups of students who see themselves as a community.** Provide professional development for teachers on organizing and monitoring group instruction, particularly if individualized instruction is the norm in your program. Provide physical space for teachers so that they may offer various types of group instruction. Provide “small group” tutoring, which is more individualized but also fosters group interaction and builds community.

◆ **Address the specific needs of students with learning disabilities (LD).** Network with other programs and obtain materials from those that have systems in place for supporting students with LD. Pay a consultant to develop an instructional system to help and train tutors to teach adults who have learning disabilities. Ensure that teachers participate in professional development to increase awareness of LD among adult students. Have a process for screening and referral. Provide staff training in screening and referral processes for disabilities for your state or program. Provide training for program staff in inexpensive modifications that have been shown to benefit students with LD. Help students to understand what learning disabilities are, know their strengths and weaknesses, and create action plans to address them.

## Additional Resources

To learn more about the Adult Student Persistence Study, go to: [www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net)

### NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study:

◆ To read the full report on Phase One, ***Persistence Among Adult Education Students in Pre-GED Classes***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report12.pdf>

◆ To read reports on Phase Two, go to:

***“One Day I Will Make It”—A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs***: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/401/full.pdf>

***“As Long As It Takes”— Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs***: [http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2003/lilaa/lilaa\\_full.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2003/lilaa/lilaa_full.pdf)

***“I Did It for Myself”— Studying Efforts to Increase Adult Learner Persistence In Library Literacy Programs***:  
<http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2001/LibraryLiteracy/IDiditforMyself.pdf>

◆ To download a study circle guide on adult student persistence, go to:  
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/lp.pdf>

◆ To see a complete listing of all NCSALL materials and research on the topic of adult student persistence, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=791>

