Steps for Facilitating the Study Circle: Adult Student Persistence

TO DO BEFORE SESSION ONE

Send out the Pre-Meeting Packet to confirmed participants two weeks before the first session. It's also a good idea to call participants one week before the first session to confirm that they received the packet.

The Pre-Meeting Packet for the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle should include the seven items listed below, all of which follow and are ready for photocopying.

We suggest that you organize the handouts and readings for participants in two-sided pocket folders and distribute a folder of materials to each participant.

A reminder about the cover letter: You will need to write in the place, date, and time of the first meeting and your telephone number and e-mail address into the letter and sign it before you make copies.

Contents of Pre-Meeting Packet

- Information about the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle (cover letter)

- What Is a Study Circle?

- What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison

- The Role of the Participant

- Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students

- Supports and Hindrances: A Force-Field Analysis

- Participants' To-Do Form

Information about the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle

Date:

Dear Participant:

Thank you for registering to participate in the Adult Student Persistence Study Circle. I really look forward to meeting with you. This study circle was developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL).

We will meet three times, and each meeting will be 3½ hours in length for a total of 10½ hours. The first meeting is at **[*insert* location]** on **[*insert* month, day, year]** at **[*insert* time]**.

At each session, we will be discussing readings about research on adult student persistence. Some of these have been produced by NCSALL and some are from other sources. I will be providing you with copies of all the readings.

Before the first meeting, please look at the Participants' To-Do Form and read all the materials before the first session as suggested. We will be discussing these handouts and readings at the first meeting.

I have enclosed a folder for you to keep all of the materials for this study circle. Please bring this folder and all the materials with you to each of our meetings.

If you have any questions about the study circle in general or about what to do before our first meeting, please call me at **[*insert* facilitator's telephone number]** or send me an e-mail at **[*insert* facilitator's e-mail address]**.

I'm looking forward to some great discussions with all of you.

Sincerely,

[*Insert* facilitator's name and title]

What is a study circle?*

A study circle:

- is a process for small-group deliberation that is voluntary and participatory;

- is a small group, usually 8 to 12 participants;

- is led by a facilitator who is impartial, who helps manage the deliberation process, but is not an "expert" or "teacher" in the traditional sense;

- considers many perspectives, rather than advocating a particular point of view;

- uses ground rules to set the tone for a respectful, productive discussion;

- is rooted in dialogue and deliberation, not debate;

- has multiple sessions which move from personal experience of the issue, to considering multiple viewpoints, to strategies for action;

- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concern;

- provides an opportunity for citizens to work together to improve their community.

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◈ What study circles are, and are not: A comparison*

A study circle IS:

- **a small-group discussion** involving deliberation and problem solving, in which an issue is examined from many perspectives; it is enriched by the members' knowledge and experience, and often informed by expert information and discussion materials; it is aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

A study circle is NOT the same as:

- **conflict resolution,** a set of principles and techniques used in resolving conflict between individuals or groups. (Study circle facilitators and participants sometimes use these techniques in study circles.)

- **mediation,** a process used to settle disputes that relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement. (Mediators often make excellent study circle facilitators, and have many skills in common.)

- **a focus group,** a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Respondents (who are sometimes paid) are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.

- **traditional education with teachers and pupils,** where the teacher or an expert imparts knowledge to the students.

- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome,** such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. A study circle begins with a shared interest among its members, and unfolds as the process progresses.

- **a town meeting,** a large-group meeting which is held to get public input on an issue, or to make a decision on a community policy.

- **a public hearing,** a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

The role of the participant

The following points are intended to help you, the participant, make the most of your study circle experience, and to suggest ways in which you can help the group.

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.

- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.

- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.

- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.

- Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion. Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.

- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he or she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students

Comings, J. & Cuban, S. (2003) DRAFT—NOT FOR CITATION.

ABSTRACT

Teachers in adult basic education programs hope that their students will persist in learning until they reach their educational goals. However, most students drop out after less than 100 hours of instruction. Unlike children, who persist in learning because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces that identify schooling as the proper work of childhood, adults must make an active decision to participate in each learning session and often must overcome significant barriers in order to attend program services. If adult students are to achieve their goals, adult basic education programs must help them persist much longer in their studies.

This chapter describes persistence and reviews the research and practice literature about ways to support it. The chapter also draws on research that the authors have just completed with a team from Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The chapter concludes by suggesting that a quality program must have a persistence support component and describing a set of persistence interventions that have research evidence to support the contention that they would have an impact.

INTRODUCTION

A key difference in learning between adults and children is that adults choose to participate in educational programs while children participate because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces. Adults must make an active decision to participate in each class or tutoring session and often must overcome significant barriers in order to participate in educational services. Although some adults come to adult basic education[3] programs with very limited goals, most come with goals that require hundreds if not thousands of hours of instruction to achieve. Every adult basic education program, therefore, should help its students persist in their learning so that they can reach their educational goals.

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

Adult basic education programs usually refer to persistence as retention and measure it by recording participation in formal classes or tutoring sessions. Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999) proposed the term persistence after they found that adults often persist in learning through self-study or distance education after they stop attending adult education program services and sometimes return to a program (not necessarily the one they dropped out of) after a lapse in attendance. The term retention defines this phenomenon from a program's point of view; the program wants to retain its students. Comings, et al. (1999) preferred the term persistence because it defines this phenomenon from the point of view of students who persist in learning inside and outside of a program until they have achieved their goals. This chapter will define persistence as:

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

Persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until an adult student meets his or her educational goals.

RESEARCH ON PERSISTENCE

Much of the literature on adult student persistence draws on research with adults who have sufficient literacy skills, speak English, and have high school diplomas. Though this research is informative, it may not be directly applicable to adult basic education students, who have low literacy and math skills, do not speak English, or do not have a high school diploma. In addition, most adult education persistence research takes place in short-term courses with defined, limited goals, such as vocational classes and certificate programs. In contrast, adult basic education students usually face a long-term commitment that may involve many different goals that change over time. Finally, most studies look at participation, the decision to join a program, rather than persistence, the decision to continue in a program. These two decisions are similar, and so the participation literature is useful to understanding persistence. In addition, most studies help define the problem but do not necessarily provide insights into how to help adult basic education students persist in learning.

This chapter will first summarize the findings of four literature reviews and then describe the lessons learned in two connected studies. These sources serve as evidence that supports a set of program interventions set forward in the conclusion. The

implications section suggests ways that policy, practice and research could build on this foundation

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Four literature reviews analyze the participation, retention, and persistence literature from different perspectives (Beder, 1991; Wikelund, et al., 1992; Tracy-Mumford, 1994; and Quigley, 1997). All of these reviews have authors who have experience with adult basic education programs, and this experience helps them adapt research on other populations to adult basic education students.

Beder (1991) first explores motivation as the force that helps adults overcome barriers to participation and then focuses more closely on those barriers. Beder suggests that adult education programs must change their recruitment and instruction practices to be congruent with the motivations and life contexts of adult students. If they did, more adults would enter programs, and they would persist longer.

Beder then builds on two studies that look at the barriers to participation from the point of view of actual and potential participants. He notes that Hayes (1988) identified five factors that discourage participation: Low self-confidence, social disapproval by friends and family, negative attitudes towards adult literacy, and low personal priority. He also notes that Beder (1990) identified four factors: low perception of need, perceived effort, dislike for school, and situational barriers. Together, these studies point to perceptions by some adults that they may not benefit from participation, may not be able to learn, do not like participating in formal learning programs, and are unwilling to overcome the many barriers to participation that exist in their lives. Finally, Beder suggests that adults are weighing the perceived benefits and costs of participation and making decisions based on that analysis. In many cases a decision to drop out may be justified if the costs outweigh the benefits.

The Beder review concludes by making suggestions for dealing with nonparticipation and dropout. He opens by acknowledging that the system, at this time, probably only has enough resources to serve those who are eager to enter classes. This position, he notes, does not pay attention to the social costs of an undereducated population and the socialization process that leads many of these adults to be uninterested in further education. Though education can never be easy, this review suggests that the effort could be more manageable for students if programs had the resources to fit instruction to the needs and learning

styles of adults and if programs looked less like school and more like an activity in which adults would want to participate.

Wikelund, et al. (1992) draw from the same sources as Beder, but they critique the reductionist tendencies of research and suggest that a useful theory of participation would incorporate the complexity of this phenomenon. The paper calls for broadening the definition of participation to acknowledge that adults engage in education in many ways that are not limited to participation in formal classes.

The Wikelund, et al. review criticizes the concept of "non-participant" because it implies that every adult who has low literacy skills needs to enter a program, a situation that might not be true. After reviewing several of the studies quoted in Beder (1991), the review ends with a later Beder (1992) article that identifies three categories of non-participants. The first group is the demand population, who are motivated to participate and who have no significant barriers to that participation. The second group is motivated but constrained and includes people who are motivated but who have external barriers, such as a lack of childcare, keeping them from attendance. The third group is resisters who are not motivated to attend.

The review ends with the conclusion that research and theory, as well as practice, should break out of the framework of schooling. A new definition of participation would acknowledge that learning, even improvements in literacy skills, could take place outside of formal programs. With this new definition, programs could increase persistence by continuing to support learning at times when students cannot attend classes or participate in other formal arrangements.

Tracy-Mumford (1994) calls for programs to develop a commitment to and a plan for increasing persistence, which she suggests would send a strong message to students that the program is there to help them reach their goals. Since student goals can change, the program must be willing to make changes to accommodate new goals as they arise. For the commitment to be meaningful, the program should have a set of criteria for measuring persistence and a set of strategies that reduce dropout, increase student hours of attendance, improve achievement, increase personal goal attainment, and improve completion rates.

Tracy-Mumford defines an effective persistence plan as one that both provides support to students and improves instruction. The review summarizes the findings of a large number of studies and descriptions of practice to provide a list of the elements of a student persistence plan that

weaves persistence strategies into all aspects of the program structure. This advice is:

- Recruitment should provide enough information so that potential students can make an informed decision about enrolling.

- Intake and orientation should help students understand the program, set realistic expectations, build a working relationship with program staff, and establish learning goals.

- Initial assessment should provide students and teachers with information on both cognitive and affective needs, should be integrated with instruction, and should form the foundation for measuring progress.

- Programs and teachers should recognize student achievement.

- Counseling should identify students at risk of dropping out early.

- Referral services should coordinate with social service agencies to ensure that all students are connected to the support services they need.

- A system for contact and follow up with students who drop out that helps them return to the program and provides information on ways to improve program services.

- Non-instructional activities should help form a bond between the program and its students and their families.

- Program evaluation should involve students in assessing, and offering advice on, each aspect of the program.

- Childcare and transportation assistance should be provided.

- Instruction and instructional staff should be of sufficient quality to support effective learning.

- A student persistence team should coordinate dropout prevention activities, collect data on student persistence, and involve students and teachers in addressing this issue.

Tracy-Mumford's list is comprehensive, and it is useful to program staff because it translates theory into practical advice. Unfortunately, most adult basic education programs lack the funding required to follow all of this advice, but following some of the advice would probably contribute to increased persistence.

Quigley (1997) views persistence as significantly affected by the negative schooling experiences adult students had when they were younger and suggests the need to change programs to be different from those schools. Quigley sees three major constellations of factors that contribute to dropout, which he refers to as situational (influences of the adult's circumstances), institutional (influences of systems), and dispositional (influences of experience). He suggests that situational influences are largely beyond the control of adult education programs, though they receive most of the attention in the literature on dropouts. Institutional factors are areas that practitioners could affect and should work on continuously. However, he suggests that dispositional factors provide a focus for program reform that might affect persistence.

Quigley focuses his attention on adults who drop out in the first few weeks of a program and to the dispositional factors that he believes cause such early dropout. He suggests that adults have overcome situational barriers before they arrive at a program, and though those arrangements may fall apart, they have little effect in the first few weeks. Institutional barriers, too, have been overcome and, if they still exist, will have an effect later as they cause problems that build up over time.

Concluding that at least one-third of incoming students are at risk of dropping out in the first three weeks of instruction, Quigley reports findings from two studies of incoming students he undertook. In these studies, Quigley tried three interventions: intensive support by a team of teachers and counselors, smaller classes, and one-on-one tutoring. The small class approach produced the highest persistence, followed by the team approach, and then one-on-one tutoring. All three had higher persistence than the comparison group, which attended the regular large class program. This may indicate that one of these three approaches might be supportive for some students while another approach would be supportive of others.

Quigley suggests that the intake and orientation processes in the first three weeks are critical to improving persistence. He suggests that intake should begin with goal setting and planning for success. Students then need to be matched to classes and teachers that can meet their goals and learning needs. Since students are adults, they can take charge of this process, but they may need help in the form of careful questions and the provision of useful information for making these decisions. Quigley concludes by reiterating his belief that the prior history of negative experiences with school is an important factor that needs to be addressed during this critical first three weeks of instruction.

PERSISTENCE STUDY

In 1996, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) began a three-phase study of the factors that support and inhibit persistence. The first phase interviewed and tracked the persistence of 150 adults in Pre-GED classes (Comings, Parella, and Soricone, 1999). The Second phase studied the efforts of five library literacy programs as they attempted to increase student persistence over a three-year period (Comings, et al., 2004). The third phase will undertake an experiment to test whether a model of persistence support developed during the first two phases does, in fact, have an impact on persistence in programs. This section summarizes what has been learned in the first two phases of this research.

First Phase. The first phase of the study employed a force-field analysis, which places an individual in a field of forces that are supporting or inhibiting action along a particular path (Gilbert, Fisk, & Lindzey, 1998; Lewin, 1999), as its theoretical model. This model expands the motivation/barriers and cost/benefit models to include a large number of forces on each side of the persistence equation. Understanding the forces, identifying which are strongest, and deciding which are most amenable to manipulation provides an indication of how to help someone move in a desired direction, such as reaching an educational goal.

In the case of adult students, positive forces, such as the desire for a higher income, help support persistence in an adult education program. Negative forces, such as a lack of free time to study, push adults to drop out. From the time adults enter programs to the time when they either achieve their goals or drop out, both positive and negative forces are acting on them. When adult students are passive, the forces push them in one direction, which might be away from their goal. If adult students were aware of the forces, they could take action to manage them so that these forces helped to propel them toward their goal. Any intervention by an adult basic education program meant to increase persistence must help adults strengthen the positive forces and lessen the negative forces.

The terms positive and negative do not indicate a value for individual forces; they indicate the direction towards or away from the student's goal. Positive forces are those that are supportive of persistence, while negative forces are those pushing an adult toward dropping out. The individual forces may be viewed differently or even as benign outside of this context. For example, the demands of parenthood may be a negative force working against persistence in a literacy program, but parenthood and its demands are, for most people, positive experiences.

The force-field analysis looks at barriers and supports as existing at many levels of importance, from those that have a weak influence on persistence to those that have a strong influence on persistence. The force-field analysis suggests that strengthening or weakening a force that can be influenced might offset the effects of another force that cannot be influenced. Thus, an adult with a strong need for education to gain better employment might overcome a transportation barrier, while transportation assistance might help a less strongly motivated student to persist in an adult basic education program.

This study found that the many ways in which we can classify adult students (by gender, ethnicity, employment status, number of children, and educational background of parents or guardians) do not have a strong influence on persistence. The study does suggest that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children are more likely to persist than others in the study. The greater likelihood of persistence by immigrant students in ESOL classes is well documented (Young et al., 1994a), and the findings of this study suggest that this effect continues as immigrants learn English and move on to pre-GED programs. Grown children might encourage their parents to join and persist in a program. On the other hand, adults who are over 30 are more likely to have teenage or grown children than those under 30. These findings might point to older students persisting longer because they benefit from the maturity that comes with age, and they no longer have the responsibilities of caring for small children.

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

Prior non-school learning experiences, particularly self-study focused on improving basic skills or studying for the GED may be related to persistence. Prior attempts at self-study may be an indication of strong motivation, or some people may need several attempts at

learning before they are ready to persist. Research that explores these attempts might uncover factors that lead to later persistence or to permanent non-participation. Another line of inquiry might look at making self-study outside of class a part of instruction so that adult dropouts are ready to continue their learning when they do leave class. This self-study might make a return to classes more likely and the development of ways to document that self-study could provide a more realistic account of persistence.

Students mentioned four types of positive forces: relationships, goals, teacher and students, and self-determination. Relationships incorporate the support noted by subjects derived from their families, friends or colleagues, God or their church community, support groups, community workers, mentors or bosses, and their children. Goals included helping one's children, getting a better job, bettering one's self, moving ahead in life, attending college or some other academic goal, proving someone wrong, or obtaining citizenship. Teacher and students indicated the support provided by the people involved in their class. Self-determination included comments such as "it's me," "myself," or "my determination."

Students mentioned three types of negative forces: life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination. Life demands comprised conditions at home, special child care needs, work demands, transportation, the student's own or his or her family's health, age, lack of time, fatigue, weather, welfare and other official rules, unfavorable conditions at home, moving, and lack of income. Relationships included family members, friends, colleagues, community or welfare workers, and religious beliefs that were not supportive to persistence, as well as fears about letting other people down by failing in a program. Poor self-determination included comments such as "thinking negative thoughts," "my own laziness," and statements indicating a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed.

How adults describe the positive and negative forces that affect them did not predict persistence, but this information is still valuable in that it gives practitioners input from adult students on what might be important. Adults in this study had much more to say about positive forces than about negative forces. Adding this information to the finding that negative school experience was not associated with persistence points to a conclusion that building positive supports may be more critical to increasing persistence than is the removal of barriers. If this is so, then understanding which positive forces are most important is essential to a model that supports persistence.

The study team summarized its findings as advice that suggested four supports to persistence:

- *The first support to persistence is the establishment of a goal by the student.* The process of goal development begins before an adult enters a program. An adult who could be classified as a potential ABE student experiences an event in his or her life that causes him or her to enter an educational program. That event might be something dramatic; for example, a well-paid worker might lose his or her job and find that he or she does not have the basic skills needed to qualify for a new job at a similar pay scale. That event might be less dramatic; for example, a parent may decide he or she needs more education when a first child begins school. That event might be subtle; for example, a school dropout might have always felt the desire to study for the GED but when his or her children are older and need less attention, there is finally some free time available for education. This event provides potential adult students with goals they hope to accomplish by entering an ABE program. The staff of the educational program should help the potential adult student articulate his or her goal and understand the many instructional objectives that must be accomplished on the road to meeting that goal. Teachers should then use those student goals as the context for instruction. This effort must continue as instruction proceeds because goals may change.

- *The second support is self-efficacy.* The self-determination mentioned by students must build on a foundation of self-efficacy, a feeling that they can reach their goals. The term self-confidence is quite often used in adult education literature, but self-efficacy has a different definition. Self-confidence is a global feeling of being able to accomplish most tasks. Self-efficacy is focused on a specific set of tasks and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that set of tasks.

- *The third support is management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence.* Programs should help students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence. Building on that understanding, each student could make plans to manage these forces so that persistence is more likely. The plans that come out of such an exercise should include strategies for persistence when the forces that affect peoples' lives cause them to drop out. These plans must be revised as adults persist in their studies and these forces change.

- *The fourth support is progress toward reaching a goal.* If the goal is important, then adult students must make progress toward reaching that goal, and they must be able to measure that progress. Programs should provide services of sufficient quality that students make progress, and programs need assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress.

Phase 2. The second phase of the project observed ten library literacy programs in California, New York, and North Carolina that were attempting to increase student persistence and interviewed thirty of their students in depth about their history of participation and supports and barriers to persistence. The study found that the persistence of most students was affected by factors that were personal (related to the student) or environmental (related to the student's life situation). Adult basic education programs do not have the resources to address these personal and environmental factors. This study identified five pathways for program participation that are determined by these personal and environmental factors and ways that programs might support students on each pathway. The five pathways are: Long-term, Mandatory, Short-term, Try-out, and Intermittent.

Long-term students participate regularly over a long period. Long-term students usually do not express specific goals, but, rather, talk of education as an end in itself. Long-term students have managed the personal and environmental factors that support and inhibit their persistence. Presumably, they will persist in a program that is helping them meet their needs, is convenient for them, and that provides an enjoyable experience. In fact, this is the story told to the study team by long-term students. Most long-term students viewed their program as a comfortable and supportive community and talked about it as a family, a club, or a home base for learning. They referred to the program staff as friends or family members. Long-term students expressed a strong personal commitment to their programs and to their goal of becoming more educated.

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

For students who are able to travel the long-term pathway, an intake and orientation process that clearly sets out steps, with measurable objectives, along the path to reaching their, often ambitious, goals might help support their persistence. This study found that improving formal instruction (classes and tutoring) and offering many different types of informal instruction appeared to increase hours of instruction for these students. The students on the other four pathways may need changes in program design, and even in the definition of persistence, in addition to these programmatic improvements.

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

Mandatory students overcome personal and environmental factors that constrain their persistence because they are required to do so. Since, factors outside the program support their participation, programmatic improvements may not help these students to stay longer. However, if the program changes its services (making them more convenient, more useful, or more enjoyable), mandatory students might choose to participate for more hours. Counseling, during intake and orientation and throughout instruction that focuses on helping mandatory students commit to learning as a way to improve their lives, understand how they learn best, find ways to enjoy learning, and build a support system to sustain their learning might help mandatory students persist after the mandate has ended. Additional hours of participation and persistence after legal mandates for participation have ended are probably good measures of impact for innovations meant to address the needs of mandatory students.

For students who are on the mandatory pathway, program intake and orientation must help students move past the required goals of attendance and begin to see learning as something they choose to do. This building of motivation probably requires goals that are personal and an instructional process that helps students see that they can learn and that learning can be enjoyable. Literacy learning focused on family, work, personal interests, or even the problems that led to their legal or social service status might be a focus of instruction that supports persistence for adults on this pathway. An instructional process that involves discussions among a group of adults might provide a social network that supports

persistence for mandatory students, and referral to support services (such as counseling, daycare, and employment) might be necessary for these students to persist, even while they are under a mandate.

Short-term students enroll in a program and participate intensively for a short period in order to accomplish a specific goal. For some of these students, the short-term participation in a library literacy program meets their needs, but for some this participation leads to enrolment in a more suitable program. Though students on a short-term pathway may leave their programs after only a few weeks of instruction, some may persist in another program that more closely meets their needs. Since personal goals determine their length of participation, programmatic innovations may have little impact on the persistence of students on a short-term pathway. Transition into another program and accomplishment of a specific, limited goal are probably good measures of the impact of innovations meant to address the needs of short-term students.

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

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

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

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

Intermittent students move in and out of program services. During the time that they are not attending program services, intermittent students may stay in contact with their programs, and their episodes of participation and nonparticipation may reoccur several times and take place in more than one program. Belzer (1998) found that students identified as dropouts in adult education programs often see themselves as still connected but temporarily unable to attend.

These students may have broad goals (such as improving language or basic skills ability) or specific (such as passing a citizenship test), but their goals require a long period of engagement to achieve. However, personal and environmental factors are limiting their ability to attend on a regular basis. Programmatic changes probably cannot have an impact on the persistence of these students unless program services change to fit a pattern of episodes of participation over a long period.

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

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

Program staff also need ways to help students maintain contact with the program and to continue to think of themselves as students.

These five pathways provide a way to think about the kinds of program changes that might be useful to different types of students. However, any one student might begin a program on one pathway and change to another. In addition, these pathways might be arbitrary points on a continuum. These pathways, therefore, are guidelines that can help programs broaden the ways they help students persist rather than student types that could allow programs to identify the specific needs of an individual student. Program staff knows that a single pathway will not work for all students, but they do not have the resources to provide an individual pathway for each student. Programs can provide five pathways and help students identify which is the path to success for them.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature reviews defined persistence as supported by motivation and constrained by barriers. The NCSALL persistence study broadened this equation to include a wide range of supports and barriers, but it also identified the limits on how much programs could do to address the barriers that students bring to programs. Programs can make their services more convenient, enjoyable, and useful, but they do not have sufficient resources to directly address the personal and environmental factors that constrain persistence. Even with this limitation, programs should be able to help students persist in learning.

The reviews and the NCSALL persistence study offer suggestions on how programs could help students address their barriers to persistence, even with limited resources. All of these suggestions depend on some form of counseling, which could be formal or informal and individual or in a group. This counseling should help students identify the supports and barriers to their persistence and seek help from local social service agencies, as well as from friends and family.

The reviews and the research also suggest that the schooling model, in which students and teachers meet in one place at scheduled times to pursue a single curriculum, is not sufficient. Programs must offer a range of learning opportunities and help students mange their learning experiences in a way that builds on what they have learned before and moves them toward achievement of a personal goal. The first step in this process is acknowledging that students follow at least five different pathways through program services.

Once this is acknowledged, funding agencies would have to change their accountability standards to allow five different positive outcomes. Practitioners would then feel supported to develop and implement services that helped adults reach those outcomes. The second phase of the NCSALL study makes suggestions for three chronological phases of program participation: Entrance into Services, Participation in Services, and Reengagement in Learning.

Entrance into Services includes recruitment, intake and orientation. This is the time when programs prepare students to be successful in learning. Rather than trying to identify a student's pathway when he or she enters a program, program staff might just assume that all students are intermittent. That is, that students are prepared to participate in an episode of learning that, if it is short, might lead to additional episodes of learning that continue until they reach their goal.

The first step in this process might be to help students express a clear goal or a limited set of goals that represent their motivation for participation. The second step would be to develop a learning plan that includes both instruction and the support services a student needs to persist in learning to reach those goals. For try-out students, this process would lead to their postponement of participation, but they would leave the program with a plan on how to prepare to enter services later. The program would identify this student as successful, since the program provided the student with the best possible outcome. For other students, intake and orientation would lead to a plan for participation in the program. That plan should assume that students would engage in episodes of participation that lead to accomplishment of a specific goal, transfer to another program, or departure from the program followed by another episode of participation. Of course, students on a long-term pathway may only have a single long episode of participation.

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

A multiplicity of instructional modes (such as classes, tutoring, peer learning groups, technology, and print and media materials) provides students with ways to participate that do not always demand adherence to a regular schedule. However, these different modes would be more effective if they fit into a plan that is followed by both the

student and the tutor or teacher. Helping students and instructional staff follow a plan that uses several modes of instruction and that builds toward the attainment of specific goals is not easy. This chapter can only point out this problem, not provide a solution.

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

Reengagement in Learning. Most students do not tell their program or tutor that they are stopping participation. Most just stop attending. Interviews with students uncovered that many of them believe that once they stop attending they cannot return (Comings, et al. 2003). Programs should have a procedure for staying in contact with students who are not attending and for reengaging them in services, and this procedure should be explained during orientation. Former or even current students might be the best people to play this role, since they have addressed the same personal and environmental factors as the students who have dropped out. These new procedures require resources that are now being used to support instruction. However, if these procedures were successful, program services would improve as students who have had a single episode of instruction return to continue learning.

Building on this Foundation. The literature reviewed in this chapter sets out a course for programs to support the persistence of their students. Though the course set out here is based on empirical studies, no research has tested whether or not this advice would have an impact on persistence and help more students reach their learning goals. Further study into the nature of persistence and the forces that support and inhibit it would add valuable knowledge, now may be the time to test program models that incorporate the existing research. If these models prove to be sound, practitioners and policy makers could feel comfortable following this advice and further research could begin to build on this foundation.

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Supports and Hindrances: A Force–Field Analysis

Hager, A. (2000) Supports and hindrances: A force-field analysis. *Focus on Basics*, 4(A), 19

The following activity guides a group of students in thinking about the forces that hinder and help them to achieve their goals. For beginning English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students, you might need to explain or demonstrate vocabulary.

Step 1:   Ask the students to think about what it takes for them to continue to pursue their educational goals.

Step 2:   Write "Pursuing Educational Goals" at the top of a large sheet of paper on the wall. Then, draw a vertical line down the middle of the paper, and write "+" (plus sign) over the left-hand column and "-" (minus sign) over the right-hand column.

Step 3:   Ask the students to brainstorm all of the things that make it hard for them to stay in the program and continue to pursue their educational goals. As they brainstorm forces, write them, one by one, on the right side of the paper, under the minus sign. Use the question: Who or what gets in the way of (hinders you from) continuing to come to this program?

Step 4:   Ask the students to brainstorm the things that help them to attend class or to continue to pursue their education goals. Write these on the left side of the paper, under the plus sign. Use the question: Who or what helps you (supports you) to continue to stay in this program?

Step 5:   Ask the students to look at the lists and talk about what they see. Are there more negative than positive forces? Where do the forces come from (the class, family, work, etc.)?

Step 6:   Give each student an index card or a blank piece of paper and ask each to write down the answer to this question: What two forces from the list do you most want us to work on in class? Point out that they can take their forces either from the positive "+" force list (forces they would want to work on strengthening), from the negative "-" force list (forces they would want to work on weakening), or from a combination of the two.

Step 7: Have the students get into pairs and discuss the forces they have written down. They must reduce the number of forces from four (two each) to the two they feel are most important to work on in class. One person in each pair should write the new list of two forces on a piece of paper.

Step 8: Have sets of pairs join to form small groups of four. Each pair shares its list of two items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two forces on which all four agree. They write their new list of two forces, which represents their "consensus," on a large piece of paper.

Step 9: Ask a member from each group to post the paper with their two forces written on it, reading the forces aloud as they do so. Then ask the whole class to look at the papers for similarities: Are there any forces that appear on all the lists? If so, write them on a fresh sheet of paper. These represent the consensus of the class.

Step 10: Continue looking for forces that appear on more than one list until all the forces listed on more than one sheet are on the "consensus" list. Ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original lists are important enough to include on the fresh list. The fresh list represents the forces that the class wants to work on in the coming term.

Step 11: If only two forces are listed on the "consensus" sheet, skip to step 12. If there are more than two forces, have the students vote for the two forces they see as the highest priority.

Step 12: The class has now determined the two forces that they most want to work on. The next step is to brainstorm the various ways in which you can work together as a class to address these forces by strengthening the positive and weakening the negative.

Continuing the Process: This is just one way you can help students understand what is helping them achieve their goals and what is hindering them from doing so. You, of course, will be learning at the same time. Try to set aside some time each week to work, as a class, on strengthening the supporting forces and weakening the hindering forces. You and the students can assess what effect these activities are having. The forces that the students want to work on may change over time. To capture these changes, repeat the force-field activity with the class or with individuals throughout the semester.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Parrella worked for two years on the NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study.

Participants' To–Do Form

Session	Date	What to Do Before Session
One		Read the documents and articles you received in the Pre-Meeting Packet. • Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students – Read pages 29-39. • Supports and Hindrances: A Force-Field Analysis – Read the entire two-page article. Highlight interesting points and jot down any questions that come to mind.
Two		*You will receive these readings during Session One.* Readings Assigned for Session Two: • **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students** – This article was in the Pre-Meeting Packet. Read the rest of the article, pp. 39-45. • **Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out** – Read the entire five-page article. • "One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief – Read the entire 11-page article. Think about how the concepts presented in each reading might apply to the adult students with whom you work.

Participants' To–Do Form (continued)

Session	Date	What to Do Before Session
Three		*You will receive readings on a selected topic during Session Two.*
		Reading Assigned for Session Three – Read all four articles on the selected topic:
		Goals
		Building the Desire, Building the Ability
		ODWIN: A Program Rooted in History
		Look Before You Leap: Helping Prospective Learners Make Informed Educational Choices
		The Effects of Continuing Goal-Setting on Persistence in a Math Classroom
		Sponsors
		Sponsors and Sponsorship
		Reflections on the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project
		The Power of a Cohort and of Collaborative Groups
		Powerful Motivation: The Long-time Tutor is Motivated by Helping Learners
		Instruction
		Differentiated Instruction: Adjusting to the Needs of All Learners
		A Conversation with FOB…The Best of Both Worlds: Using Individualized and Group Instruction
		The Community High School of Vermont: An Uncommon High School in an Uncommon Setting
		Separate Yet Happy

Session	Date	What to Do Before Session
		Counseling and Referrals
		Beyond the Scope of the Teachers: Deciding to Employ a Social Worker
		Who Helps the Helpers? Supporting Counselors in Adult Basic Education
		A Mind/Body/Learning Approach to Counseling: Helping Students Handle Stress
		Retention and the GED
		Instructional Modes
		Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills
		Solving Problems with Computer-Assisted Instruction at the East Texas Literacy Council
		Will Cooperative Learning Affect GED Retention?
		Getting into Groups
		Student Involvement
		Power, Literacy, and Motivation
		Build Motivation by Building Learner Motivation
		Staying in a Literacy Program
		Peer Tutors/Mentors: Effect on Motivation and Persistence in GED Classroom
		Jot down your impressions and questions as you read these sections.
		Review any notes you have (or have been typed up from group discussions) from the previous sessions.
		Spend time reflecting on the specific strategies suggested by the research, and begin to think of what you might like to do next in your classroom or program to implement what you have learned.