

**NCSALL Seminar Guide:**

# Helping Adults Persist

**October 2005**



National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

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# Helping Adults Persist

This seminar guide was created by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) to introduce adult education practitioners to the research on adult student persistence and its implications for practice. Programs or professional developers may want to use this seminar in place of a regularly scheduled meeting, such as a statewide training or a local program staff meeting.

## Objectives:

By the end of the seminar, participants will be able to:

- Define persistence as used in the Adult Student Persistence study
- List the four supports to persistence identified by the study
- Explain the positive and negative forces that help and hinder adult student persistence
- Recommend instructional and programmatic strategies for improving student persistence

**Participants:** 8 to 12 practitioners who work in adult education—teachers, tutors, counselors, program administrators, and others

**Time:** 3½ hours



## Agenda:

- 20 minutes* 1. Welcome and Introductions
- 5 minutes* 2. Objectives and Agenda
- 45 minutes* 3. A Student Perspective
- 40 minutes* 4. Negative and Positive Forces
- 15 minutes* **Break**
- 45 minutes* 5. Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers
- 30 minutes* 6. Planning Next Steps for the Group
- 10 minutes* 7. Evaluation of the Seminar

## Session Preparation:

This guide includes the information and materials needed to conduct the seminar—step-by-step instructions for the activities, approximate time for each activity, and notes and other ideas for conducting the activities. The handouts and readings, ready for photocopying, are at the end of the guide.

**Participants should receive the following reading at least 10 days before the seminar. Ask participants to read both articles before the seminar.**

-  **Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports** by John Comings, Andrea Parrella, and Lisa Soricone (*Focus on Basics*, Volume 4, Issue A, March 2000)
-  **The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation** by B. Allan Quigley (*Focus on Basics*, Volume 2, Issue A, March 1998)

The facilitator should read the articles, study the seminar steps, and prepare the materials on the following list.



**Newsprints** (Prepare ahead of time.)

- \_\_\_ Objectives and Agenda (p. 6)
- \_\_\_ Definition of Persistence (p. 8)
- \_\_\_ Four Supports to Persistence (p. 8)
- \_\_\_ Situational (p. 9)
- \_\_\_ Institutional (p. 10)
- \_\_\_ Dispositional (p. 10)
- \_\_\_ Next Steps (p. 11)
- \_\_\_ Useful/How to Improve (p. 12)



**Handouts** (Make copies for each participant.)

- \_\_\_ *Staying in a Literacy Program*
- \_\_\_ *Table 1: Negative Forces*
- \_\_\_ *Table 2: Positive Forces*



**Readings** (Have two or three extra copies available for participants who forget to bring theirs.)

- \_\_\_ **Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports**
- \_\_\_ **The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation**

**Materials**

- \_\_\_ Newsprint easel and blank sheets of newsprint
- \_\_\_ Markers, pens, tape
- \_\_\_ Sticky dots

**Steps:**

**1. Welcome and Introductions**

(20 minutes)


- **Welcome participants** to the seminar. **Introduce yourself** and state your role as facilitator. Explain how you came to facilitate this seminar and who is sponsoring it.
- **Ask participants to introduce themselves** (name, program, and role) and briefly describe what they do to encourage students to stay in their programs.
- **Make sure that participants know** where bathrooms are located, when the session will end, when the break will be, and any other housekeeping information.

**Note to Facilitator**

Since time is very tight, it's important to move participants along gently but firmly if they are exceeding their time limit for introductions.

**2. Objectives and Agenda**

(5 minutes)

-  **Post the newsprint Objectives and Agenda** and review the objectives and steps with the participants.

**Objectives**

By the end of the seminar, you will be able to:


- Define persistence as used in the Adult Student Persistence study
- List the four supports to persistence identified by the study
- Explain the positive and negative forces that help and hinder adult student persistence
- Recommend instructional and programmatic strategies for improving student persistence

**Agenda**

1. Welcome and Introductions (Done!)
2. Objectives and Agenda (Doing)
3. A Student Perspective
4. Negative and Positive Forces
5. Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers
6. Planning Next Steps for the Group
7. Evaluation of the Seminar


### 3. A Student Perspective

(45 minutes)

-  **Explain that in this activity participants will reflect on a student's account of his experiences in an adult education program.** An adult learner details his motivation for entering an ABE program and the factors that helped him to persist. **Distribute the handout *Staying in a Literacy Program*.**
- **Ask participants to take five minutes to read the article. Then ask them to underline a sentence or phrase in the article that stands out for them or that they find powerful. Next ask them to underline a word from the article that stands out. Finally ask them to write down a word or phrase that they think represents what the article is about.**
- **Explain that the participants will share what they have underlined and written, without comment from listeners. First ask participants to read the sentences or phrases they underlined. Then, ask them to read the words they underlined, and lastly ask them to share the words they wrote that summarized the article.**
- **After this exercise, ask the group to reflect on the experience and discuss what stood out for them in terms of adult student persistence. Discuss what the participants think motivated the author to enter the adult basic education program and what forces helped him to persist.**

### 4. Negative and Positive Forces

(40 minutes)

-  **Explain that in the next activity participants will focus on the first reading for today's meeting, *Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports*.**



[Note to facilitator: This article provides a summary of NCSALL's Adult Student Persistence Study in which researchers interviewed 150 Pre-GED students in New England at the beginning of their participation in ABE programs and again after four months of study. In this study, persistence is defined as adults staying in programs as long as possible, engaging in self-directed study when they are not able to attend class, and returning to the program when possible. Researchers identify four supports to persistence—awareness of and management of positive or negative forces that help or hinder persistence, self-

efficacy, establishment of goals by students, and progress toward reaching a goal. The authors argue that it is necessary to reconceptualize adult learners as long-term clients who use a wide range of services including, but not limited to, ABE programs.]

-  **Post the newsprint Definition of Persistence.**


#### Definition of Persistence

Adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow.

-  **Review the Adult Student Persistence Study's definition of persistence. Ask participants to comment on the ways this definition of persistence is similar to or different from the ones they use. Also, discuss the implication of this definition for their practice and/or program design.**
-  **Post the newsprint Four Supports to Persistence.** These supports were identified in the Adult Student Persistence Study.

#### Four Supports to Persistence

- Awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence
- Self-efficacy
- Establishment of a goal by the student
- Progress toward reaching a goal

- **Explain that the group will be focusing on the first support, awareness and management of positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence, during this session.**
-  **Distribute the handouts *Table 1: Negative Forces* and *Table 2: Positive Forces* and ask participants to review the negative forces that hinder student persistence and the positive forces that support student persistence as identified by the Adult Student Persistence Study.**




- **Ask participants to form small groups and assign each small group one positive force and one negative force to discuss.** Ask the groups to list strategies they might use to help students manage the negative force and draw on the positive force for persistence. Encourage participants to include strategies that they have used successfully in their own programs or instruction. Pass out blank sheets of newsprint and ask the groups to record their ideas on them. Give participants 20 minutes to work.
- **Ask groups to post the newsprints. Then ask participants to walk around and read the newsprints.** [Note: Save the newsprints for other seminars on adult student persistence, if applicable.]


Break (15 minutes)

## 5. Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers


(45 minutes)

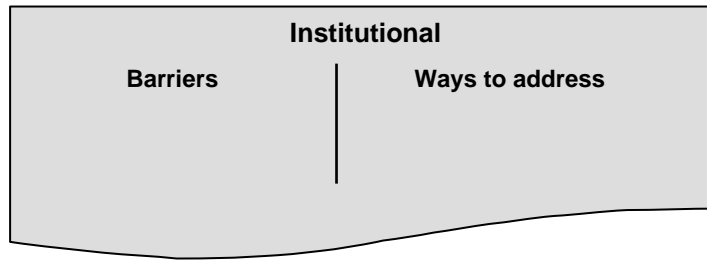
-  **Explain that in this next activity participants will reflect on the second reading for today's meeting, *The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation*.**


[Note to facilitator: This article identifies situational, institutional, and dispositional factors as three types of barriers to learner enrollment and persistence. Quigley considers how learners' expectations and perceptions of the value of the program interact with dispositional barriers and argues that it is important to identify those students most at risk for dropping out in the first weeks of participation. The author argues that research supports groupings within classes or small classes, mentoring, and the use of volunteer tutors as promising strategies for promoting the retention of at-risk students.]

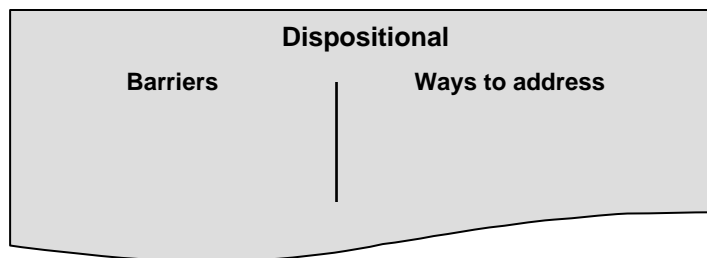
-  **Post the newsprint Situational.** Ask the participants to brainstorm possible situational barriers that could negatively affect student persistence and record these ideas on the left hand column of the newsprint. Then ask participants to think of ways to address these barriers and record them on the right column.

Situational	
Barriers	Ways to address

- 
**Post the newsprint Institutional.** Ask the participants to brainstorm possible institutional barriers that could negatively affect student persistence and record these ideas on the left hand column of the newsprint. Then ask participants to think of ways to address these barriers and record them on the right column.




- 
**Post the newsprint Dispositional.** Ask the participants to brainstorm possible situational barriers that could negatively affect student persistence and record these ideas on the left hand column of the newsprint. Then ask participants to think of ways to address these barriers and record them on the right column.



[Note: Save the newsprints for other seminars on adult student persistence, if applicable.]

## 6. Planning Next Steps for the Group

(30 minutes)

- Ask participants to take 10 minutes review the ideas** generated during the session for addressing barriers to student participation and how to help students manage the negative forces and draw on the positive forces for persistence. Then ask the participants to choose one or two to try in their programs or classrooms and briefly write down a plan for how they will implement the idea and what evidence or data they will collect to determine if the idea works.
- 
**Post the newsprint Next Steps.** Explain that now that the individual participants have plans to try out in their programs and/or classrooms, the group should make a plan about the group's next steps.

### Next Steps

- How might you share with each other how your plans worked, or how might you ask each other questions?

- **Write up potential next steps** on the newsprint as the participants mention them. After five minutes of brainstorming, ask participants to silently look at the options and individually decide on two ways for the group to continue the discussions.
- **Hand out two sticky dots to each participant** and ask the group to put their dots next to the one or two ideas that they would most like the group to do. If they don't want to do any of the activities, they should not put their dots on the newsprint.
- **Lead the group in organizing its choice. For example:**
  - If they choose to schedule a follow-up meeting, set the date, time, and place for the meeting, and brainstorm an agenda for the meeting. Determine who will definitely be coming, and who will take the responsibility to cancel the meeting in case of bad weather.
  - If they choose to organize an e-mail list, pass around a sheet for everyone to write their e-mail addresses. Decide who is going to start the first posting, and discuss what types of discussion or postings people would like to see (e.g., questions about how to try out something in their classroom, descriptions of what happened after they tried it, sharing of other resources about adult student persistence, etc.).

## 7. Evaluation of the Seminar

(10 minutes)

- **Explain to participants that, in the time left, you would like to get feedback from them about this seminar.** You will use this feedback in shaping future seminars.

-  **Post the newsprint Useful/How to Improve.**

<u>Useful</u>	<u>How to Improve</u>

- Ask participants first to tell you what was useful or helpful to them about the design and content of this seminar. Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under “Useful.”
- **Then ask participants for suggestions on how to improve this design and content.** Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under “How to Improve.” If anyone makes a negative comment that’s not in the form of a suggestion, ask the person to rephrase it as a suggestion for improvement, and then write the suggestion on the newsprint.
  - **Do not make any response to participants’ comments during this evaluation.** It is very important for you not to defend or justify anything you have done in the seminar or anything about the design or content, as this will discourage further suggestions. If anyone makes a suggestion you don’t agree with, just nod your head. If you feel some response is needed, rephrase their concern: “So you feel that what we should do instead of the small group discussion is . . . ? Is that right?”
  - **Refer participants to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy’s Web site ([www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net)) for further information.** Point out that most NSCALL publications may be downloaded for free from the Web site. Print versions can be ordered by contacting NSCALL at World Education: [ncsall@worlded.org](mailto:ncsall@worlded.org).
  - **Thank everyone** for coming and participating in the seminar.

Reading 

(To be read by participants *before* the session.)

**Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports**

by John Comings, Andrea Parrella, and Lisa Soricone

*Focus on Basics*, Vol. 4, Issue A, March 2000, pp. 1, 3-7

***NCSALL's Adult Persistence Study suggests that managing positive and negative forces, self-efficacy, setting goals, and making measurable progress help learners stay in programs***

*Adults choose to participate in educational programs while children participate because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces that identify schooling as the proper “work” of childhood. In fact, most school-aged students probably never seriously consider dropping out. An adult, on the other hand, must make an active decision to participate in each class session and often must overcome significant barriers to attend classes. Most adults come to adult basic education (ABE), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), or adult secondary education (ASE) programs with goals that require hundreds if not thousands of hours of learning to achieve. Every adult education program should help adult students persist in their learning until they reach their educational goals.*

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) is conducting a study on learner persistence. The first phase of NCSALL's study used research as a tool to develop advice for practitioners on how to help adults persist in their studies. In addition, the study developed advice for policymakers on how to structure funding and accountability systems in ways that will support persistence. The next phase of the study will test and refine this advice in programs. In the first phase of this research, the study team read previous studies and related literature, and talked with practitioners about how they have tried to help adult students persist longer in their studies. The team also interviewed 150 pre-general educational development (GED) students in New England to gain their insights into the supports and barriers to persistence. Most of the students were native speakers of English, but a few were immigrants whose English was sufficient or them to be in a pre-GED class.

## Defining Persistence

The staff of the Persistence Study spent time working on their definition of persistence so as to be clear about what they were trying to measure. They found persistence to be a complicated concept. Most of the literature on adult education defines persistence as the length of time an adult attends a class or tutoring sessions (Beder, 1991; Comings, 1995; Quigley, 1997; Tracy-Mumford, 1994; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992; Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1994), but learning may extend beyond attendance in a specific program. The definition of persistence used in this study is: *adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow.* The study team interviewed learners near the beginning of their participation in a program and again four months later. A persistent learner was one who, at the second interview, was still in class, was no longer in class but was involved in organized self-study, or who had transferred to another class.

## Advice

We classify adult students in many ways: by gender, ethnicity, age, employment status, number and age of children, previous school experience, and educational background of other adults in their lives. The first phase of the Persistence Study revealed that these categories do not tell us much about how to help adults persist in their education. The only significant findings were that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children were more likely to persist than others in the study. The greater likelihood of persistence by immigrant students in ESOL classes is well documented (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1994). The findings of this study suggest that this effect continues as immigrants learn English and move on to ABE and 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.

Two aspects of educational experience were also associated with persistence. Adults who had been involved in previous efforts at basic skills education, self-study, or vocational skill training were more likely to persist than those who had not. The strongest relationship was with those who had undertaken self-study. Adults who mentioned a specific goal, such as “help my children” or “get a better job” when asked why they had entered a program, were more likely to persist than those who either mentioned no goal

or said they were doing it for themselves. These findings suggest that experience with education may increase an adult's self-confidence about learning. These relationships also suggest that motivation, especially as demonstrated by undertaking self-study or by being clear about the goal for attendance, supports persistence.

The pre-GED students identified a range of supports and barriers to their persistence; clear trends were evident when the study team analyzed their responses. The team recorded these trends, reviewed the research literature and the data from interviews with practitioners, and developed the following advice, which describes four supports to persistence.

***The first support is awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence.***

In searching for a framework for analyzing data, the study team sought a theoretical model that would both place the adult learner in a central position and be useful to program managers seeking practical advice on how to increase persistence. The study team chose to employ a force-field analysis as developed by the sociologist Kurt Lewin. Lewin's theory places an individual in a field of forces that support or inhibit action along a particular path (Gilbert, Fisk, & Lindzey, 1998; Lewin, 1999). Understanding the forces, identifying which are strongest, and deciding which are most amenable to manipulation provide 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 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 upon them. Any intervention by an ABE program meant to increase persistence must help adults to strengthen the positive forces and lessen the negative forces.

The force-field analysis looks at barriers and supports as existing at many levels of importance, from those that have no real effect on persistence to those that have a very strong influence on persistence. The force-field analysis also 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 very strong need for education to gain better employment might put aside his or her embarrassment, while very strong embarrassment might keep a less strongly motivated student from coming to class.

Programs must help students to develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence. Building on that understanding, each student must 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 a person's life cause them to drop out, and these plans must be revised as adults persist in their studies and these forces change.

Adult students in this study emphasized positive forces. The strongest positive force mentioned by adult students was the support of people, particularly their families, friends, teacher, and fellow students, followed by self-efficacy and personal goals. Most learners mentioned at least three positive forces, while some mentioned many more. At the same time, many learners mentioned no negative forces or just one. Of the negative forces mentioned, no single force was common.

The force-field theory itself offers a tool for understanding and planning to manage these forces. Students can be encouraged to discuss their persistence in terms of the force-field and to build their plan from that discussion. A classroom force-field activity can begin with students identifying all of the supports and barriers to their persistence. They can then categorize them into those that are most likely to help or hinder their persistence.

Once the crucial forces are identified, students can plan to build their supports and reduce their barriers. As happens in some programs, staff must be open to having the outcome of this activity be early dropout for students who, for any reason, are not ready to persist in their studies. If this is the outcome, adults should be helped to make a plan to prepare to return and be successful later. The management of these forces may be an individual responsibility, one that a group of students takes on together, or one that engages a whole community. For example, students might have transportation needs. A group activity might lead to ride sharing or a request to a public agency for transportation support.

***The second support is self-efficacy.***

The educational program must help adult students build self-efficacy about reaching their goals. The term *self-confidence* is used more often in adult education literature, but self-efficacy is a more useful term to describe this support. Self-confidence is a global feeling of being able to accomplish most tasks. Self-efficacy is focused on a specific task and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that task, which in this context is successful learning in ABE, ESOL, or ASE programs. The study drew from the theory of a social



scientist, Albert Bandura, for advice on building self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Adult education programs should provide the following experiences to their participants as a means to build self-efficacy.

*Mastery experiences* allow an adult to be successful in learning and to have authentic evidence of that success. This does not mean that instruction should be designed to produce only easy and constant success. Adults must also experience overcoming failure and eventually achieving success through a sustained effort. Instruction should help them develop this insight. Some programs take care to provide regular recognition of progress and celebrations of achievement. Others make sure that instruction provides opportunities for success early in program participation. These efforts provide learners with opportunities to experience success.

*Vicarious experiences* are those provided by social models. Adult learners should come in contact with adults who are just like them and have succeeded in an ABE, ESOL, or GED class. These role models, both through the knowledge they share directly and the indirect teaching of their behavior, help adult students to acquire the skills to manage the many demands of learning. Some programs employ successful present or former students as speakers during intake and orientation activities, while others recruit past learners as counselors, teachers, and directors. These past students provide models of success.

*Social persuasion* is support from teachers, staff, counselors, fellow students, family, and friends that reinforces self-efficacy. These verbal assurances are needed, in part, to overcome the negative self-efficacy about learning built up during previous schooling. Most practitioners provide verbal assurances, but some programs encourage family members to provide this positive reinforcement as well. Some teachers take great care to develop a culture of support among students in their classes. These efforts ensure positive support for students.

*Addressing physiological and emotional states* is the acknowledgement that negative feelings can result from poor self-efficacy and can also lead to low self-efficacy. Examples of these states are tension and stress, among other negative emotional states. Adult learners must be helped to perceive and interpret these conditions so that they do not affect their self-efficacy. Some practitioners feel uncomfortable addressing the personal problems of their students, and all practitioners must acknowledge that they are not trained mental health professionals. Even so, many teachers use life histories and dialogue journals to help students identify the physical and mental states that can affect their learning. For example, adults with limited English skills may feel anxiety when they have to speak in class. A teacher

might ask her class to write about these feelings and practice speaking even with anxiety. Just the acknowledgement that feelings can affect learning can help diminish their negative effect.

Many of the orientation and instructional activities identified by practitioners in this study provide the experiences that Bandura has outlined. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy can act as a powerful framework within which programs can improve on the activities they have already undertaken.

***The third support to persistence is the establishment of a goal by the student.***

This process begins before an adult enters a program. An adult who could be classified as a potential ABE, ESOL, or ASE student experiences an event in his or her life that causes him or her to enter an educational program. The event might be something dramatic: a person might enter the United States as a refugee and find that she does not have the language skills needed to qualify for a job. The event might be less dramatic: a parent may decide he needs more education when his first child begins school. The event might be subtle: a school dropout might have always felt the desire to study for the GED and when her children are older and need less attention, she finally has some free time available for education. This event provides potential adult students with goals they hope to accomplish by entering an ABE, ESOL, or ASE program. The staff of the educational program must help the potential adult student define his or her goals and understand the many instructional objectives that must be met on the road to meeting that goal. Teachers must then use these student goals as the context for instruction and intermittently review them, since they may change.

***The fourth support is progress toward reaching a goal.***

Since goals are important supports to persistence, adult students must make progress toward reaching their goals. They must also be able to measure that progress. Programs must provide services of sufficient quality that students make progress, and programs must have assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress. Much of the recent interest in measuring progress has come from the need to build systems of program accountability. Helping students measure their own progress may require tools and methods that are not appropriate for accountability purposes. Accountability systems need measures that are easy to collect and quantify. These may not be useful to students and difficult to integrate into instruction. Portfolio and authentic assessment approaches may have weaknesses in an accountability system but might be very useful for adults who want to measure their own progress. These kinds of assessments can be an integral part of an instructional approach.

Further research into assessment might produce a hybrid system that serves both needs and could lead to certification of progress that occurs more frequently than at present in most programs. At this time, most adults who enter ABE, ESOL, or ASE programs will gain certification only if they pass the GED test or acquire an adult high school diploma. Program-level certification may be helpful to student morale, but state-level or even national certification of achievement might make smaller increments of learner achievement more meaningful and provide a range of goal steps.

### **In Conclusion**

Aspects of these four supports already exist in some programs, but a combination of the four may provide a more supportive environment to persistence. These supports are more likely to be built if the policymakers who provide funding value them. This means that persistence must become a more important measure in program accountability. Funding agencies must provide the technical assistance and training needed for programs to put these supports in place. Policymakers could then hold programs accountable for the quality of their intake, orientation, instruction, and program approaches that support persistence. Using the expanded definition presented here, persistence itself should be an outcome measured as part of an accountability system.

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### **Persistence and Accountability**

From the point of view of an accountability system, student persistence ends when an adult drops out of a program. When an adult returns to a program after a lapse in attendance, the program may view that student as a dropout who has returned. From the point of view of the student, persistence may continue after drop out through self-study or distance learning. The adult may view him- or herself as a persistent learner who could not attend for a while. Using only attendance in class or in tutoring sessions as a measure of persistence undervalues effective learning activities that should be encouraged. A wider definition of persistence would allow practitioners to focus on helping to become persistent learners adults who use episodes of program participation as critical parts of a comprehensive learning strategy that involves other forms of learning.

The definition developed by the study team in the Persistence Study values self-study, transfer, and reentry into a program as part of a pattern of persistence. For this expanded definition of persistence to become part of an accountability system, it must be measurable. This would require procedures for collecting evidence of “time-on-task” that could be credited to a program. Some of this “time-on-task” might be spent in classes, some in tutoring

sessions, and some in self-study through technology, media, or instructional materials. Other “time-on-task” measures might include increased time reading or reading of new, more challenging materials and engagement in community improvement efforts that require the use of English, literacy, and math skills. Methods of measuring and validating these efforts and linking them to a plan of learning developed within a program context would transform some dropouts into persistent learners who are not presently attending formal classes or tutoring sessions.

This expanded definition would require programs to relate to their students differently. Programs would need added resources to stay connected and serve adults who are not attending formal classes or tutoring sessions. With these added resources, programs could treat their students as long-term clients who use a wide range of services, some provided by the program and some by other agencies, to achieve significant improvement in their skills. Since a single adult student might participate in the services of several different programs, a way to document progress would have to be shared among them.

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### **About the Authors**

*John Comings* is the Director of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL).

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*Lisa Soricone* is a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**Reading** 

(To be read by participants *before* the session.)

**The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation**

by B. Allan Quigley

*Focus on Basics*, Vol. 2, Issue A, March 1998, pp. 6-11

*“Isn’t there anything I can do to keep my students motivated?” This is the question I asked back in 1972, when I lost two students from my first adult basic education (ABE) class. At the time, my reaction was: “I must do better.” I tried harder. I searched for more and better materials. I employed the best techniques I could find. I was as supportive as any teacher could be. But, somehow, even with my best efforts, things didn’t change much. Some students stayed. Some didn’t. I just couldn’t get a handle on it. My best wasn’t enough.*

In the late 1970s, as an ABE program director, my staff and I tried everything we could think of to improve our retention rates. We had full-time, part-time, and drop-in courses. We had block and continuous intake. We had centralized and decentralized classes around the city. We had large individualized classes, team-taught classes, childcare in some, computers in others. Still, even with our best ideas and best efforts, some students dropped out while others persisted. Our collective best still wasn’t enough.

Entering doctoral studies in 1984, I believed the books in the library would hold the answers. However, after working on this issue for almost 11 years as a professor and researcher, I still don’t have the answer. A quarter century of worrying about the same question is a long time. I nevertheless think the contemporary literature and some of what I have found recently may be taking me closer to a better understanding of how to keep students motivated. While others may disagree, I like to think we are getting closer to answers. Let’s see.

**Different Perspectives**

Looking back, I think neither my excellent co-workers nor I were really able to analyze our world because—and here’s the conundrum—we saw it as our world. You might notice in the above story that at no point did my co-workers and I draw upon the perspective of the learners. I think this is a serious self-limiting condition in ABE. As educators, we often seek to reproduce the experiences that worked for us. Most of us basically liked school and succeeded at the schooling process. Educators have a common experience that

separates us from our students. The culture of school that we so enjoyed is not necessarily a culture into which our students fit. We must keep that in mind when we design programs and instruction.

Our learners are not a “different species,” as some would have us believe (Quigley, 1997), and I must say immediately that I hate the negative stereotypes of our learners. Yet the common characteristics within our learner population, the one that distinguishes it from other populations in the educational spectrum, is that most of our students dropped out of school. Furthermore, most did so under unhappy circumstances. While our learners have many characteristics in common with mainstream adult students, they also have some radical differences. We can certainly learn from theories and research done with the larger adult population in mind, but we cannot extrapolate freely.

### **A Framework**

That said, a model provided by Patricia Cross in 1982 suggests that ABE learners—like all adult learners—must overcome three barriers to enroll and stay in ABE classes. First, ABE learners, like all the rest, must negotiate family, financial, health, transportation, and other problems if they are to come and to stay. These are the situational barriers; they arise out of learners’ day-to-day lives. Many researchers have identified and discussed these barriers in ABE (see, for instance, Hayes, 1988; Malicky and Norman, 1994; Wiklund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). Second, ABE learners, like adult learners everywhere, must confront the institutional barriers our agencies seem inevitably to create. Which adult students don’t have to deal with some type of institutional red tape, or program fee, or scheduling inconvenience at their learning institutions? Our learners face institutional rules and procedures that too often seem to serve the institution, not the learners. So, when we add up the problems that may cause learners to leave, we can separate some of them into these two categories, situational and institutional.

We can try to help our students with the situations they face by referring them to resources. But we can only refer them, we can’t be the resources. Situational barriers are often those about which we in ABE can do very little. This is an area where we need to realize our limitations and reduce the personal guilt we feel when we see our students floundering in the face of these barriers.

Likewise, we can and should keep chipping away at institutional barriers—we do have some control over these—but, again, I don’t think this is where we should expend most of our energy. I have become convinced that the third barrier holds the most promise. The third—and most enigmatic by

far—is the area of dispositional barriers. Herein lies the curious inner world of unique attitudes, personal values, and unstated perceptions. Our learners often carry into our programs mixed emotions, many of which are negative, born of past schooling experiences. These may take up more space in their dispositional baggage than we usually want to acknowledge or are willing to explore.

Our students come to our programs with hopes, fears, and expectations, just like other adult learners. But, as I have said, our students' feelings grow from negative schooling experiences. The “answers” we offer may exacerbate the problems they bring. Faced with students who show low self-esteem or an apparent lack of confidence in ABE programs, Fingeret (1985) found that ABE teachers often “try to be all things to each individual student” (p. 112). But, as Fingeret concludes, even the total devotion of a caring teacher in the face of apparent low self-esteem may not be enough. While Fingeret agrees that such “are admirable aspirations it is possible that instructors ... may actually undermine the adult student's ability to use the program as an area for risk-taking, growth, and learning” (p. 112). As Fingeret found: “Many students do not simply remain in a program because it feels good’ to them. They remain because they see the potential for meeting their goals” (p. 112). I would add, despite the unquestionable value of a caring teacher and learner-centered approaches, these are not the singular answers for retention. If they were, the dropout rate in the U.S. would not have been a staggering 74 percent in the 1993-94 year (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

I now believe that the gap in perception created by our school-based experiences, when contrasted with those of our students, is a source of serious unseen, under-researched problems. I think that if we can understand dispositional barriers better, if we can see the differences between our dispositions and theirs more clearly, we can become more effective at our tutoring, teaching, counseling, and retention.

### **Dispositional Barriers**

As I noted earlier, schooling experiences in the formative years have a lifelong effect on learners. Cervero and Fitzpatrick (1990) found, through a longitudinal study of 18,000 students from 1,200 U.S. schools, that adults who had been early school-leavers—drop outs—had extremely mixed feelings toward past schooling. Early school leavers participated in credit and non-credit adult education opportunities at a rate well below the norm for mainstream adults who had completed school. The researchers concluded that those who quit school are “shaped...by a powerful set of social circumstances” (p. 92).



Taking the same point further, Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg (1992) found that undereducated adult “participants and potential participants tend to perceive and experience the adult education programs...as extensions or continuations of the school programs in which they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals” (p. 4). This is another important conclusion that can help us think more critically about our programs.

In a study I conducted in 1992, we held in-depth interviews with potential students who chose not to attend ABE programs even though they knew they were probably eligible to attend. We found that the terms ‘education’ and ‘learning’ were understood positively if applied to the children and the friends of the resisters. These two constructs implied absolute good. When we mentioned ‘ABE’ or ‘literacy’—when we flat out asked if they would go to the local ABE programs and register—they heard ‘school.’ They said they did not want to “go back to school” although we had never used that word.

### **Theories of Participation**

If we turn to research on the psychological and socio-cultural and socio-economic factors that go into motivation, we come away disappointed. But we have no lack of advice. In the past, our field was advised to address motivation and participation using mainstream adult education models. Boshier (1973), and Rubenson and Hogheim (1978), for instance, have argued that mainstream adult education theories should be used in ABE settings. In 1986, Gordon Darkenwald wrote that if we would just use such mainstream adult theories “The quality of ABE participation and dropout research would be vastly improved” (p. 12). Maybe, but, given the differences in learner populations, it does not necessarily follow that mainstream adult education research applies to ABE.

Another model we could consider is Miller’s 1960’s force field analysis (1967), which says that certain influences pull adults towards a desired goal as other influences push them away. In the classic Miller force-field theory, we need to research the forces acting on students via a force-field analysis. Miller’s theory is, however, constructed on socio-economic status, ignoring prior education and its effects.

Peter Cookson’s (1987) ISSTAL model argues that an individual’s social background and roles, combined with a list of other external and internal elements, can act as a series of filters. These either discourage or challenge the learner to the point where she will either engage in further education or choose not to participate. Actually, Patricia Cross (1982, p. 124)

had much the same idea in her chain-of-response (COR) model a few years earlier. For Cross, the adult's decision process begins with self-evaluation and moves through a predictable sequence of links. So, according to Cookson and Cross, if we can just know the filters and links in the sequence, we can predict who will participate. Neither Cookson nor Cross explicitly includes the powerful effects of pre-adult factors such as past educational experiences in their equations.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) created a model that does allow for several pre-adult influences. Their model takes into consideration eight groups of factors from the prospective learner's experience. This seems relevant until we notice that all types of educational goals and participation are lumped together. Credit-bearing, noncredit-bearing, and variations of both are assumed to be essentially the same, and labeled further adult education. Where does ABE fit into this mix of mainstream goals? Does this theory really do justice to the formative experiences of our learners? More recent research by Roberta Uhland (1995) and researchers at the Center for Literacy Studies (1992) tells us this adult mainstream view of educational attainment can vastly oversimplify the ABE learner's decision process (and see Beder, 1990).

Perhaps the theory that, more than any other, perpetuated stereotyping in ABE was Roger Boshier's congruence model (1973, 1977). It classes all potential participants into growth-oriented and deficiency-oriented learners. Boshier effectively says that low-literate adults are at the rock bottom of any Maslowian hierarchy of needs based on 48 motives. They are so seriously deficiency-oriented in the motives department that it would seem almost impossible for our learners to be motivated at all. As Beder (1990) says, Boshier "perpetuates the very social stigma attached to low literacy which limits life success and reduces motivation (p. 44).

On the other hand, perhaps the most promising theory for our field from mainstream higher and adult education is the Vroom (1964) expectancy-valence model. It promotes research on two levels of inquiry. First, it asks what the learners' expectations are of the upcoming experience, or program, in this case. Second, it tries to measure the inherent valence—or worth—of a program as the learner sees it. The strength of these two, says Vroom, will determine participation and success. While expectancy-valence theory has been used with some success in our field (e.g., Van Tilburg & DuBois, 1989; Quigley, 1992, 1993), we are not sure how dispositional barriers interact with what learners find in programs. We don't really know how expectancy and valence interacts with dispositional barriers. And note that all of the above are theories of participation. They are asking: What influences adults to join programs? They are not explicitly focused on retention: "What influences them to stay or quit?"

## The Drop-Out Weeks

We need to go beyond participation theory and find a way to understand what our learners actually experience during the first three critical “drop-out weeks.” We do have some understanding of this period, and we have some strategies worth using.

An interesting study by Christophel and Gorham (1995) may be appropriate for us, even though it is based on college students. This study has to do with in-program, not before-program, questions. The researchers found that among young adults in college, motivation “is perceived by students as a personally-owned state, while demotivation is perceived as a teacher-owned problem” (p. 303).

While this finding has yet to be tested in ABE settings, it does make a potentially useful contribution. It introduces the demotivation side of learner experience. And it does square with ABE retention and persistence work (e.g., Bean et al, 1989; Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984), which indicates that our learners tend to come to ABE with sufficient motivation to succeed, but things happen that, through their eyes at least, “demotivate” them. It gives us language and a framework to continue the line of reasoning that persistence and motivation are not ultimately “their” problem.

This line of demotivation research also indicates that “motivation is modifiable” (Christophel & Gorham, p. 304). Squaring with the nascent ABE retention research, it suggests that teachers can do something. One positive way intervention can occur, according to Christophel and Gorham, is if teachers respond to student needs right away. They call this teacher-immediacy. As they learned, “teacher immediacy affects motivation.” (p. 304). My own research suggests that “nonverbal immediacy relationships are more slowly established than are verbal immediacy relationships” (p. 304). The point here is that early verbal connections with new learners are critical in sustaining motivation.

The value of teacher immediacy was also demonstrated by a study I conducted in 1993. Through in-depth interviews that contrasted persisters with dropouts, two interviewers found that a randomly selected group who had dropped out of an ABE program in the first three weeks due to evident dispositional barriers had chosen not to talk with their teachers about their decision to quit during the decision period. Instead, they had all gone to the intake counselor. One had done so up to seven separate times prior to dropping out. This is potentially disconcerting for teachers. In contrast, those in the study who persisted for months did not go to the counselor once in the same critical period. Instead, persisters talked to their ABE teachers regularly.

Thus, the “immediacy” role of the intake counselor or intake person may be at least as important as the role of the teachers among the potential dropout population.

Those learners asking for counselor assistance were not the ones who, to the teacher, appeared to need assistance. They were basically invisible in the classrooms. It was the potential persisters who squeaked and seemed to get noticed.

As time goes by, say Christophel and Gorham, the teacher-learner relationship becomes increasingly important in sustaining student motivation. They make it clear that the first few weeks are crucial. If teacher immediacy is not established early, the odds that students will drop out increase. It is imperative that we figure out who needs such attention.

### **Identification**

Most programs have an intake person. It may be a counselor, a teacher, a receptionist, or the program administrator. Research I have done (Quigley, 1997) suggests that some new learners—not all—will need more attention than others, both inside and outside the classroom. I believe it is worth building a sensitive interviewing process for new learners at initial contact, and right after intake, and to use the same personnel to follow up with learners who need more attention. It is also advisable that this person, or persons, not be the same as those actually teaching the learner. As I will explain, some learners may need a safety valve. To make this degree of interview and follow-up manageable, consider ways for staff—not only the teachers—to look systematically for “at-risk indicators” (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). “At risk” here means those learners who probably have the highest chance of dropping out in the first few critical weeks by virtue of the dispositional barriers they must overcome. The overall logic here is that some new students have more significant dispositional barriers than others. These “at-risk” learners can often be identified and assisted to stay in programs longer.

The study we conducted involved 20 at-risk learners and a control group. The intake counselor, a male, looked for body language and verbal cues that suggested dispositional barriers were at work, barriers sufficient to cause the applicant to drop out early on. These cues included skepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty. This observation occurred during a meeting at the beginning of the program. The second meeting was the student intake, about two weeks later, during which the counselor once again looked for the same behaviors and attitudes. At this point, if he saw the same behaviors or attitudes, he referred the student to another counselor, a female. She conducted a more in-depth interview with the new learner about her past

schooling experiences. Having toured the program by now, the student was asked to compare the past with her future expectations for this program. The Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory, which contrasts aspect of past performance and relations with peers with what the potential learner was anticipating in this program, was created and used for this more lengthy interview (Quigley, 1997, pp. 245-246).

With these three procedures, we had identified an at-risk group: learners we hypothesized were especially susceptible to demotivators. But now what? Remember how we usually place so much emphasis on a caring teachers' ability to raise self-concept? Other possibilities were tested. Those who now appeared to be at-risk were referred at random to four separate classroom settings. None were aware they were part of a study. The first randomly selected group was referred to the mainstream just like the others that came to the center. This control group was placed among the usual classes of anywhere from 15 to 20 students, taught by one teacher. Another randomly selected group received team support. This meant their teacher was made aware they were at-risk students and the female counselor visited each in this group at least once per week. The counselor and teacher used the Inventory as a baseline to see how the learner was progressing. So, this "team-supported group" received all the support that a teacher and a counselor could possible give within the program's structure. We hypothesized that if caring teachers and counselors are vital to retention, this approach would result in the highest student retention rate. The third randomly selected group went to small classes of five or six students. This option played down the teacher's importance; we hypothesized that more peer attention, not just more teacher attention, would have a positive impact on retention. The final randomly selected group were assigned to one-on-one volunteer tutors rather than to a classroom, giving them the most teacher attention one could ever get in ABE.

What happened? All three special treatment groups retained students past three weeks and beyond the control group. Our goal was met. The small group option held the most students the longest. This suggests that increased peer support as well as enhanced teacher support for the at-risk, through the small group setting during the first three weeks, may provide an "absence of negatives" sufficient for many at-risk learners. In all events, any of the three treatments were an improvement over the traditional classroom for the at-risk.

### **Implications**

What does this suggest for program design? First, identify those least likely to stay. The at-risk group should be identified by an experienced intake person in the first one-on-one meeting. These observations should be verified during a second interview, using the Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory

(Quigley, 1997). Although using this instrument hardly constitutes scientific prediction, it at least provides a profile based on the new students' own expressed expectations and personal concerns. And it grounds observed behaviors and learner self-perceptions in dispositional barriers. I recommend also using the Witkin Embedded Figures Test (Quigley, 1997; Witkin et al, 1971). This test assesses learners' field dependence and field independence, which, simply put, means levels of needing to belong.

This means making informed judgments early on in programs. Some programs will be able to place the at-risk in classes of five or six students. Some will not. Most programs can have the intake person act as follow-up support to the at-risk by meeting with these students individually at least once a week to go over their progress, using the Inventory as a baseline. The follow-up should include informing the teacher that these students will need more support than others, even if they do not always request it. Finally, the intake person and the teachers can meet and work as a team. In any case, the intake person should be someone other than the teacher so that another interested person is available to the students. This provides a second, less symbolically authoritative figure with whom the at-risk can consult.

Other team support techniques suggest themselves here. Groups within classrooms can be formed to create a smaller peer support group for the at-risk. After-class support groups can be created and the at-risk can be encouraged to attend. Approaches such as mentoring and "buddy systems" can be used with good effect. The idea is to build more support for the at-risk using peers as well as teachers and intake personnel. Finally, many programs can add volunteer tutors to ABE programs, either in or outside of ABE classrooms. The last model tried in the study was to give fuller attention through tutors. It worked better than nothing did. Why not add a tutor to help the at-risk in ABE if this is the approach available?

No one is suggesting that situational and institutional barriers will not creep up on many learners during or after the critical three weeks. We are dealing with adults here. Little is predictable; less is "controllable." But, based on this study and the success of programs that have acted on these same suggestions, we know that we can: 1) understand the time frame in which we must identify the at-risk, 2) identify an at-risk group upon which to focus energy, and 3) employ various groupings found to provide support for the at-risk. Above all, we can at least begin to untangle some of the complex issues of retention and make a better, more informed start. Yes, there is something I can do.

## The Answer

If I knew how to enhance motivation, I would have done it 20 years ago. I only wish I had taken the time to question, to analyze, and to be more self-critical in ways that allowed for greater learner input. The efforts of recent researchers, and emerging trends such as action research for the classroom (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997) are positive.

Here are some questions I think we should be asking. What are the differences—dispositional, cognitive, age, gender, and cultural—between those who stay and those who do not? What is the actual process of disengagement? Are there stages of dropout? Do demotivators—especially things done or not done by the teacher—trigger them? What role does learning style play in motivation? And how can we—practitioners, researchers, and learners alike—share and learn from our experiences so that, as a field, we are not reinventing the same disjointed solutions? In my view, just being able to communicate and share ideas through such means as Focus on Basics is a major step forward.

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## Staying in a Literacy Program

by Archie Willard

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*I was 54 years old when I got started in a literacy program. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I had struggled all my life with my reading and had been told so many times that I could not learn to read. That had always bothered me. Deep down inside, I thought I could do better than what others had said about me. Getting started in a reading program was one of the best things I have ever done for myself. After my first reading lesson I told myself, "I'm going to try to make a difference in the literacy field."*

When I was five years old and started kindergarten I was right in the middle of everything at school. I was eager to learn. Sometime in the first grade when I had my first reading lesson, things changed. I really struggled in that lesson. From then on the teacher's voice seemed different when she talked to me. When the other children in my class did things, I was not included anymore. So, when we had reading class, I just sat down in my seat and tried not to be noticed. I would be so worried about being called on to read that I lost the concentration that I needed as well as the content of the lesson. I lived in fear, thinking I was not good enough to learn how to read. It was not long after that first reading lesson that I gave up on being a formal learner. Then, after time went by, I became angry because I was being left out of the mainstream of life. I didn't want to be an angry person, but it just happened.

I faintly remember that there were some meetings between my mother and someone from the school. But this was the 1930's, and no one understood learning disabilities then. If you were not learning to read, you were looked at as a dummy. My mother could not read very well and she could not help me with my school work. As I look at my dyslexia and my symptoms I can see some of these same symptoms in my mother's life. I now feel that she must have been dyslexic, too. My father could read quite well but he was a conductor on the Chicago Northwestern Railroad and he worked ten to 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. He did not have the time or energy to help me. My parents were kind to me and encouraged me to do the best that I could do in school. There was a lot of love in our home and it was a place where I could escape from all the frustration at school.

My teacher placed me in the back of the room away from the rest of the students. I was in a room full of other students, but I felt like I was there all alone. I was passed from grade to grade. I graduated from high school, and

because I did well in football I attended college and I played football there for two years. Then I was told that I could no longer stay in school because my grades were not good enough. When I left school, I took a lot of frustration and anger with me.

I then went to work for Hormel Packing Company. I worked with my hands and did not need to know how to read. I married, and my wife and I had one child, a daughter. Hormel was a good company to work for and my family got along fine financially. I worked there for 31 years until the plant closed and I received early retirement.

One day in 1984, my wife read a newspaper article about Bruce Jenner, who had won a gold medal in the 1976 Olympics. The article told about his athletic achievements, but it also told about his being dyslexic. My wife suggested that the "symptoms" of dyslexia that Bruce Jenner exhibited could have been a description of me. That story started me thinking that maybe I had a learning disability. Maybe I wasn't a dummy, after all, as I had been told so many times at school! I was motivated to be tested to see if I had a learning disability. I then went to the University of Iowa Hospitals and was diagnosed as having dyslexia. I was elated to finally know that there was a reason why I had struggled to learn to read.

I decided that I was going to seek reading help and, at age 54, enrolled in an adult reading program at Iowa Central Community College to make changes in my life and to try again. I wanted a quick fix. I hoped that I could learn to read in three to six weeks, then leave the program and never look back. Of course it never happened that way. It had been 34 years since I had been in school and it was hard to get over the hump and get started again. After the experiences from my school years, I came into the program with a lot of frustration and was defensive. I would rather be looked at as someone who didn't care about learning to read than someone who cannot learn to read. Until I saw the program and tutor as non-threatening, I could not start learning to read again.

My tutor was a retired adult basic education program administrator. She had never tutored anyone before. She worked with me from her heart. She was not going to let me get out of this program without teaching me to read. She asked me to do reading outside of class. I did not want to be seen at the public library getting books that were at my reading level, so I read 26 Nancy Drew books which my daughter had collected when she was a young girl.

My tutor had an ability to look at me and see the little things that could keep me going in the program. We started each lesson talking about things that had happened in the world since our last lesson. Sometimes we would

read from the newspaper to help in our discussion. She helped involve me in what was happening in our community. Every second Thursday, the public library held noon programs with presentations about various topics. After our lesson on those days, she and I would take sack lunches and go to these presentations. My tutor became someone I could call “friend.” Because of this friendship, I felt comfortable in this reading program and I wanted to work harder to improve my reading.

One of the most important things my tutor did for me was to enable me to function in my new job. Although I had received early retirement from Hormel Packing Company, this retirement pay was not going to keep a family of three going without some supplemental income. I still needed to work. It was hard to find a job for someone over 50 who couldn’t read. I feel that because my wife helped fill out my application and I did well in my interview, I got a job as an insurance adjuster with Farmers Mutual Hail Insurance Company. This job was extremely hard for me to do, but my tutor helped me learn how to spell words that were used in insurance. We practiced writing insurance reports. Because of her help I was able to work for this company for 14 years.

About a year after I got into my reading program, when I was ready to do more, my tutor got me involved in other parts of the program. I did public speaking, I told my life story to schools, I was on the advisory board for the reading program, I went to a support group, I helped plan the first Iowa State Literacy Congress, and I grew from all this. All of this involvement also helped me to keep going. I began to feel good about what I was doing. The more I reached out, the more confidence I gained. I became open about having dyslexia.

My tutor then encouraged me to find out more about my learning disability, dyslexia. I attended an Iowa State Orton Dyslexia Conference. I learned that 70 to 80 percent of the adults who seek reading help have some kind of a learning disability. I went to more conferences to learn more, and began meeting and networking with people who were professionals in the learning disability field. I heard researcher Dr. Albert Galberta tell about his work and how cells (ectopic cells) get misplaced in the development of the brains of dyslexics, which causes us to have processing problems. Again, I subconsciously heard, “You are not a dummy! You can learn, but you learn differently.”

I stayed in my reading program for two and a half years. Many things kept me going. Initially, perhaps the most important motivation to me was that I wanted to prove to myself and the rest of the world that I was not a dummy. This motivation led to learning which led to more motivation to learn more...

Somehow I got a spark in my life and I became a formal learner again. Another thing that helped me was to stand up and say, "I'm an adult learner." This forced me to set standards for myself because others were watching me as an adult who was learning to read. My wonderful tutor, my understanding of dyslexia, my involvement in literacy issues, the discovery of who I am, were some of the things that motivated me. The chemistry in my home helped to keep me going. I got all the encouragement and support I could want from my wife and daughter who was a senior in high school at the time. I knew that had I not sought reading help, my family would have been very disappointed. My learning to read was so important to my daughter, that when she went off to college at the University of Iowa, she became a volunteer tutor to teach adults to read at nearby Kirkwood Community College. She then organized other college students to become tutors and they helped other adults to read.

Twelve years have passed. I am not an adult literacy student anymore, but I continue to learn. I have kept up on what the latest research has found in the field of learning disabilities. I have traveled many miles advocating for literacy. I have attended Individual Educational Plan meetings at the request of parents. I'm on three different literacy boards. I have continued to do public speaking about adult literacy and about dyslexia. This has taken me to schools, universities, national conferences, and churches. I have had the opportunity to go to Eastern Europe in 1993 and in 1995 to study how learning disabilities are dealt with there. I now work as an adult literacy coordinator for Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Each fall I teach an adult education class at several Iowa community colleges about understanding learning disabilities. In 1996 I completed a fellowship with The National Institute for Literacy.

Last summer, five other adult learners and I organized and conducted a leadership workshop for adult learners at Illinois State University. The six of us are now working with mentors to plan a March 1998 meeting at the Highlander Retreat near Knoxville, Tennessee, to form an adult learner national organization. I have a passion to bring adult learners together and to help them find themselves in life and to continue to make a difference in literacy.

**Table 1: Negative Forces  
That Hinder Learner Persistence, Identified by Learners**

N=150 (There were 150 learners total)

<b>Force</b>	<b>Description of Force</b>	<b>Percentage of Learners Who Named Force as a Top 3 Hindrance to Persistence</b>
Life Demands	Conditions at home Special child care needs Work demands Transportation Own/family's health Lack of time/being fatigued Welfare and other official rules Age Weather Moving Lack of income	48.7% (N=73)
Relationships	Unsupportive family members, friends, or colleagues Unsupportive community or welfare workers Religious beliefs Fears about letting other people down by failing in a program	16.7% (N=25)
Negative Self	Thinking negative thoughts Own laziness Lack of own confidence in their ability to succeed	11.3% (N=17)
Learning Process		8% (N=12)
Instructional Factors		6.7% (N=10)
Teacher		2% (N=3)
Program Factors		1.3% (N=2)

From Comings, J., Parrella, & Soricone, L. (1999) *Persistence among adult basic education students in pre-GED classes*. (Report #12) Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

**Table 2: Positive Forces  
That Support Learner Persistence, Identified by Learners**  
N=150 (There were 150 learners total)

Force	Description of Force	Percentage of Learners Who Named Force as a Top 3 Support for Persistence
Relationships	Friends, families or colleagues God or their church Community groups and community workers Support groups Mentors or bosses Their own children	63.3% (N=95)
Goals	Helping one's children Getting a better job Bettering one's self Moving ahead in life Attending college/some other academic goal Proving someone wrong Obtaining citizenship	57.3% (N=86)
Teacher/ Students	Individual teacher (81%) Fellow students (9%) Combination of the two (10%)	50.7% (N=76)
Positive Self	Me My determination	44% (N=66)
Process Orientation	Enjoyment of learning Skill achievement Routine/structure of learning in a program	8.7% (N=12)
Life Supports	Child Care Conditions at home Mandatory participation in a program Work schedules Pleasure in being in the United States Students' own investment in class	7.3% (N=11)
Program Supports	Facilities and structure of program Overall program quality Program counselors	8% (N=12)
Instruction	Curriculum and methods Particular subjects Access to computers	63.3% (N=95)

From Comings, J., Parrella, & Soricone, L. (1999) *Persistence among adult basic education students in pre-GED classes*. (Report #12) Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy





# Information About NCSALL

## **NCSALL's Mission**

NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort among the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

## **NCSALL's Research Projects**

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education (ABE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) student motivation, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) staff development, and (4) assessment.

## **Dissemination Initiative**

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge, and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly magazine for practitioners; *Focus on Policy*, a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports* and *Occasional Papers*, periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs.

For more information about NCSALL, to download free copies of our publications, or to purchase bound copies, please visit our Web site at:

**[www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net)**