

## **Supports: Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports**

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) conducted a study on learner persistence.

In the first phase, the study team read previous studies and related literature and talked with practitioners about how they have tried to help students persist longer in their studies. They interviewed 150 pre-GED students in New England to gain insights into the supports and barriers to persistence. Most were native speakers of English, but a few were immigrants whose English was sufficient for them to be in a pre-GED class.

They found that categories of gender, ethnicity, age, employment status, number and age of children do not tell 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.

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 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 being clear about the goal for attendance, supports persistence.

### **The NCSALL team describes four supports to persistence.**

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

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 him to drop out, and these plans must be revised as adults persist in their studies and these forces change.

Positive forces mentioned by students were support of people, especially families, friends, teacher, and fellow students; self-efficacy; and personal goals. There were no common negative forces.

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.

2. The second support is self-efficacy.

Self-confidence is a global feeling of being able to accomplish tasks. Self-efficacy is focused on a specific task and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that task. Adult education programs should provide the following experiences to students as a means to build self-efficacy.

A. Mastery experiences allow an adult to be successful in learning and to have authentic evidence of that success. Make sure that instruction provides opportunities for success early in program participation.

B. Vicarious experiences are provided by social role models. A program may employ successful present or former students as speakers during intake and orientation activities. Teachers may provide verbal assurances and develop a culture of support among students in the class.

C. Addressing physiological and emotional states acknowledges that negative feelings can result from poor self-efficacy. Tension, stress, and other negative emotional states may affect the students' self-efficacy. Use of life histories and dialogue journals may help students identify the physical and mental states that can affect their learning.

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

Program staff needs to help students define their goals and understand the instructional objectives that must be met on the road to meeting that goal. Teachers use these student goals as the context for instruction and review them, since they may change.

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

Programs must have assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress. Goals can be measured by the program's accountability system and as an integral part of an instructional approach. Portfolio and authentic assessment approaches may be useful for adults who want to measure their own progress. Programs may also develop a certification of progress.

## **In Conclusion**

These supports are more likely to be built if the policy makers who provide funding value them. Technical assistance and training must be provided to put these supports in place.

From the point of view of an accountability system, student persistence ends when an adult drops out of a program. From the point of view of the learner, persistence may continue after drop out through self-study or distance learning. The adult may view himself as a persistent learner who could not attend for awhile. A wider definition of persistence would allow practitioners to focus on helping adults become persistent learners who use episodes of program participation as critical parts of a comprehensive learning strategy that involves other forms of learning.

The definition of persistence 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, in tutoring, and/or 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.

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