

## Appendix C

To be handed out at  
Session One of the Study Circle

# Session One Materials

### Contents

Handout E: “Sample Ground Rules”

Handout F: “Readings for Session Two”

Reading #3: “The K-12 School Experience of High School Dropouts”

Reading #4: “Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out”

Reading #5: “Getting to Class and Completing a Semester Is Tough”

## Sample Ground Rules

by

The Study Circle Resource Center

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Share “air time.”
- If you are offended, say so, and say why.
- You can disagree, but don’t personalize it; stick to the issues. No name-calling or stereotyping.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- One person speaks at a time.
- What is said in the group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that.

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## Readings for Session Two

This is the list of readings for Session Two of the Study Circle. Please bring all the readings to Session Two.

<u>Session Two of the Study Circle</u>	
Date:	_____
Time:	_____
Location:	_____

As you read these articles in preparation for Session Two, keep in mind the following categories of barriers to learner persistence developed by B. Allan Quigley:

- **Situational:** These barriers include transportation, family responsibilities, financial obligations, and related issues that impede learners' abilities to enroll and stay in classes.
- **Institutional:** These barriers include program fees, "red tape," scheduling problems, and other roadblocks inherent in institutional structures.
- **Dispositional:** These barriers include learners' attitudes, negative experience with schooling, values, and perceptions about schooling that Quigley suggests affect learners' motivation to enroll in and stay in school.

(B. Allan Quigley, "The first three weeks: A critical time for motivation,"  
*Focus on Basics*, Vol. 2, Issue A, March 1998)

Reading #3: "The K-12 School Experience of High School Dropouts"

Reading #4: "Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out"

Reading #5: "Getting to Class and Completing a Semester Is Tough"

## The K–12 School Experiences of High School Dropouts

New data indicate that “school resisters” may be a minority. What does that mean for ABE programs?

by Stephen Reder & Clare Strawn

*Focus on Basics*, Vol. 4, Issue D, pp.13-17, April 2001

*Initial findings from NCSALL’s Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) are challenging the prevailing notion that individuals in the target population for adult education tend to have had negative experiences in K-12 schools, and that these experiences limit their participation in adult education. The LSAL data provide little support for this view, long held by many researchers and practitioners in adult education (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1990). Based on the idea that prior negative school experiences, difficulties in learning school curricula, and the stigma of dropping out combine to produce “school resisters” who are reluctant to go back to school or participate in programs, many adult educators have attempted to make their programs less school-like. Although a small percentage of the target population studied by LSAL does resemble the typical “school resister,” many others do not fit that profile, and, in fact, feel positive about their prior school experiences. Furthermore, among LSAL’s target population, individuals who do participate in adult education programs have very similar K-12 experiences to those who do not participate.*

### Prior School Experiences

By definition, LSAL’s study population is entirely high school dropouts who had not received a certificate of General Educational Development (GED) or equivalent by the time of the first interview. They reported dropping out of high school for diverse reasons. Although it was commonly assumed that pregnancy was one of the leading reasons women dropped out of high school a generation ago, this is no longer the case among LSAL respondents. Fewer than one in 10 (nine percent) reported pregnancy or health-related concerns as the main reason for dropping out. The two most commonly reported reasons for leaving school were boredom or feeling that one didn’t belong in school (29%) and school performance problems (26%). A variety of other reasons relating to family, relationships, and employment were also commonly reported (see Table 1).

When individuals were asked to evaluate their overall K-12 school experiences, they reported a wide range of experiences. Their overall evaluations, on a five-point scale ranging from “very negative” to “very positive,” are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 makes several points. First, it is not true, as many might believe, that most individuals who drop out of high school have had negative school experiences. A larger percentage (40%) report positive (either “somewhat positive” or “very positive”) experiences than report negative ones (28%). Although an identifiable group (11%) of individuals in our study population had “very negative” school experiences, a nearly equal number (10%) had “very positive” experiences. As might be expected, individuals who repeated grades, or who left school because of problems with academic performance, tend to evaluate their overall school experiences more negatively.

## Program Participants and Nonparticipants: Similarities and Differences

LSAL is particularly interested in contrasting the life experiences of individuals in the study population who do and do not participate in adult education programs. An important and somewhat surprising finding from the first year of data is that within the LSAL population, individuals who have participated in adult education are highly similar to their counterparts who have not participated, in their demographics, previous K-12 school experiences, literacy proficiencies, and other salient variables. Table 3 displays characteristics that do not differ between participants and nonparticipants.

Table 1. **Reasons for leaving school**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Percentage*</b>
Bored, didn't like, didn't belong	29
Problems with school performance	26
Job-related	17
Relationship problems	15
Family issues	10
Pregnancy or health problem	9

\*Percentages do not add to 100% because respondent may have selected more than one reason. n=940.

Table 2. **Evaluation of K-12 school experience**

<b>Overall Evaluation of K-12 School Experience</b>	
<b>School Experience</b>	<b>Percentage*</b>
Very negative	11
Somewhat negative	17
Neutral	33
Somewhat positive	30
Very positive	10

\*Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding. n=940.

Although some statistically significant differences can be found between the two subpopulations, these are usually small in magnitude. For example, the two groups differ slightly in average age. Those who have participated in programs are somewhat younger (average age, 27 years) than those who have never participated (average age, 29 years). The participant group shows a slightly higher percentage (12 %) of immigrants than does the nonparticipant (eight percent) group. A somewhat higher percentage (41%) of adult education participants repeated a grade during K-12 than those who never participated in adult education (33%).

**Table 3. Selected characteristics of the LSAL population, participants and non-**

<b>Demographic characteristic</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Minority	35
Lives in poverty	34
Welfare recipient in past year	11
Special Education in K-12	34
Weeks worked past year	34

n=940.

## Discussion and Implications

The baseline LSAL data provide little support for the view of the adult education student as a school resister. Although a small percentage of individuals in the target population had very negative K-12 experiences, far more had positive school experiences even though they dropped out before graduating. Furthermore, there is little indication that previous K-12 experiences are a major force in determining who among the target population participates in adult education programs. For example, if we believe that individuals who evaluate their K-12 experiences negatively are less likely to participate in adult education, we should expect a correspondingly different pattern of responses to the K-12 evaluation question among those who do and do not participate in adult education programs. In fact, there is no overall statistically significant difference between the K-12 evaluations of those who have participated and those who have never participated in adult education classes. Although some individuals fit the conception of the “school resister,” they are relatively few. Efforts to reform programs to increase outreach and retention should not assume that negative school experiences are a common barrier. Such models of the adult learner have based their argument on a few compelling case studies of learners, rather than on a broader look at the target population comparing those who do and do not choose to participate in programs.

Many of the questions we hope LSAL will answer must await the analysis of subsequent years of data showing change over time in the study population. The baseline data can already contribute important new information to the field of adult education, and will help to dispel prevalent myths. For example, the finding that, within the target population for adult education, those who choose to participate are quite similar in many respects to those who do not participate is important. That these two groups have generally similar K-12 experiences is especially important, because it counters the widespread perception that negative prior school experiences are a major impediment to improving outreach and retention in adult education programs. The two groups might not be as comparable in other locales, where characteristics of both local K-12 schools and adult education programs differ from those in our area (Portland, OR). A lack of comparability elsewhere should be established by research rather than being generally assumed and illustrated by example or anecdote, as has too often been done. The LSAL findings reported here may be broadly applicable. NCSALL’s Persistence Study (see *Focus on Basics 4A*, pp. 1-7), which examined a range of adult learners and programs in the northeastern United States, found negative prior school experiences to be relatively unimportant in adult students’ reasons

for enrolling and persisting in programs.

As follow-up data from LSAL become available, we plan to look more closely at relationships among individuals' previous school experiences, the characteristics of their families of origin, and the ways in which they form life goals. Better understanding of these relationships will help us to understand the part adult education plays in their lives. Understanding the dynamics of these relationships will help us better understand why individuals enroll in adult education programs, the factors affecting their persistence and learning in the programs, and ways in which new program designs could better serve a broader base of potential students.

## References

Beder, H. (1991). *Adult Literacy: Issues for Policy and Practice*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Quigley, B.A. (1990). "Hidden logic: Reproduction and resistance in adult literacy and basic education." *Adult Education Quarterly*, 40, 103-115.

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## About the Authors

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## Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

by Alisa Belzer

*Focus on Basics*, Vol. 2, Issue A, pp.15-17, March 1998

*Students and teachers may perceive withdrawing from a program differently.*

*To plan this issue, I read many research studies, some quantitative, some qualitative, some teacher research, others done by academics. Alisa Belzer's examination of the process that learners go through in deciding to stay or leave a program and the many factors that influence them presented many findings worthy of discussion, but one in particular intrigued me. She found that some students who were defined as "drop outs " by their literacy programs did not consider themselves as such. This difference in perception can have strong implications for the services we deliver. I asked Alisa to share this aspect of her research with us.*

-- Barbara Garner

When I was teaching and students stopped coming to class or to tutoring sessions, I never really knew quite what to think. Sometimes I blamed myself: "If only I were a better teacher." Sometimes I felt angry at the student, "If only she could get her life together." And sometimes I offered myself a structural interpretation related to the challenges that learners face: "No wonder she can't keep coming, look at what she is contending with...." In fact, I really couldn't explain it.

In 1991, I had the opportunity to lead a systematic exploration of the issue.<sup>1</sup> Although I did not conduct the study in my own classroom, the questions I asked and methods I used grew out of my experiences as a teacher and coordinator as well as those of my colleagues in a large, urban literacy program.

It seemed unlikely to me that a learner left or stayed in a program based on any one factor. It seemed more likely that a feeling or attitude about leaving the program developed and a decision got made over time. I designed a study aimed at understanding this complex process better. I was particularly interested in the interaction between the expectations learners brought to a program, their life experiences, and what the program had to offer. I gathered data on the expectations the learners brought, obstacles they and their teachers and tutors encountered, ways in which learners and teachers perceived staying in or leaving a program, and the strategies teachers and tutors employed to promote retention in the program.

One of the assumptions I had, which this article will focus on, was that if students feel badly about leaving a program, it may be difficult for them to return at a later date. This raised the question: How do students feel about leaving? In gathering and analyzing data, I focused in on this issue.

## Sample

To carry out the study, I used qualitative research methods to gain multiple perspectives on the process of participation in an adult literacy program from the point of view of learners, staff, and tutors over time. Four educators -- two teachers and two volunteer tutor coordinators -- randomly recruited two to three learners each to participate in the study. The only criteria for selection that they used were that the learners have phones and be willing to be interviewed. The group of students consisted of five individuals participating in three different classes and five individuals receiving tutoring in two different areas of the city. Beyond stratifying for type of learning context, the sample was one of convenience.

## Process

The study followed ten students from entry into the program for up to four months or until they dropped out. A former staff member and I gathered the data. We planned periodic contact in the form of face-to-face or telephone interviews with students, as well as with their teachers for those in classes, and with the tutors and coordinators of those receiving tutoring, conducting a total of 102 interviews. The ten students were interviewed 47 times, the four volunteer tutors -- one tutor became inactive almost immediately after the study began -- were interviewed 19 times, and teachers and coordinators were interviewed 36 times. One tutor remained active in the program only briefly and did not make himself available for an interview. Of the ten adult learners who participated in the study, five of them were still participating regularly in the program at the end of the study.

## Perceptions of Stopping

When students stop coming to a program, how do they perceive this action? This was one of the questions in which I was interested. We were surprised to find that the students who left the program did not seem to consider themselves "drop outs." No one would go so far as to say that she had quit the program. Each of those who left planned to return in the future. While they had stopped coming, their intentions to participate had not ended. Although they did not necessarily know when they would be able to return, they all believed it would be possible and desirable to do so. Of perhaps even greater importance to me was that no one expressed a sense of personal failure because of leaving the program. Rather, each simply felt that it was no longer possible for them to continue at that time. They attributed this to factors beyond their control a job, health problems, financial problems, legal problems, or other personal and family problems that would have to solve themselves.

This raises questions for educators who work hard to help learners avoid a feeling of failure. For the most part, the learners we interviewed who stopped coming neither felt they had failed, nor did they feel the program had failed. Instead, they communicated a feeling that the circumstances of their lives had made it impossible to continue.

The learners sense that they have little or no control over circumstances seems in some ways destructive. It implies to me a certain sense of powerlessness and suggests that these learners, at least, may feel unable to get around obstacles not necessarily insurmountable to others. It is also, however, a protective stance. It means that students can leave a program without feeling bad about themselves for being "drop-outs." This, in turn, seems to leave the door open for a return to the program in the future. The fact that nine out of the ten adults in the study had participated in

some kind of adult education at least once before and chosen to begin anew seems to bear this assumption out.

Students expressed the belief that they have not "completed" the program until they reached their goals. Yet, stopping periodically was not viewed as quitting. Most focused on what they had been able to accomplish during their time in the program, however brief. For example, one student, who had stopped for health reasons, reported that after her time in the program, she was doing more reading and comprehending better. "I feel good about myself...I'm accomplishing something," she said. Another student who remained in the program throughout the study stated that had she been forced to drop out, she would not have felt like a failure. Rather, she would feel good about the fact that she had made the effort and "I would just go to class the next year or to some other class." A student who was re-entering the program for the third time when the study began explained that she had never felt like a failure when she left in the past because she always knew that she would return. She believed that this in-and-out pattern of participation would serve her until she is able to reach her goals. Two students did admit that if they quit, they would feel unhappy. One said, "If I quit, I wouldn't like myself. This time I'd rather finish all the way." The other said that if she dropped out she "would feel blue for a while." Fortunately both of these students persisted despite severe obstacles."

## **Implications**

If one agrees with the study participants' perceptions that departure from a program should not necessarily be viewed as a failure, but rather as a temporary hiatus, the question then arises: what implications does this have for programs? Teachers and tutors could make sure that students have materials they can work on outside of class or tutoring; they should also ensure that learners know how to use those materials. Program staff could emphasize life-long learning skills, such as encouraging the habit of reading and writing every day, so that students continue practicing their literacy skills when they are unable to attend. In addition, programs might want to consider printing and distributing class lists for students to encourage contact between students outside of class. On a broader scale, teachers and program managers should plan their program structures, curricula, and assessment procedures on the assumption that even under the best of circumstances, students will come and go, and, hopefully, come again.

Many of the other findings from this study, not detailed here, affirm the notion that attempts to increase retention based on a cause and effect explanation, to frame the issue in terms of single differentiated obstacles, or to assume that decisions around dropping out come at a single point in time, are missing out on much of the complexity of the issue. The question of how to improve student retention cannot be solved with simple or single answers. The same obstacles or supports can create different outcomes for different students. Since often many complicated and interrelated factors are involved in the decision to continue participation in a program, a simple or single solution may make no difference. It is, however, still useful to try to identify potential obstacles, whether they arise during the recruitment and enrollment phase or as a student participates in a program, and to seek strategies that can help retention.

The sample size of this study was small and the time for data collection was relatively short. As with all qualitative studies, the findings here are not necessarily generalizable to an entire population. Rather, they are meant to be suggestive and provocative. I am hoping that this study can help practitioners reconsider a familiar problem in a new way and that it can help clarify

understandings of a complex issue through learning about the perspectives of a small group of students and the literacy practitioners with whom they worked. It can neither provide the field with definitive answers of how to cure retention problems nor suggest how to motivate all students. It can help us to think hard about how we formulate programs, curricula, and learning contexts that best respond to the realities of adult learners' lives.

### **Other Questions**

Many retention questions remain to be investigated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Although this study has strongly suggested that no single answers to improving retention exist, data on various program factors would certainly aid programs in their efforts. Here are some of the questions in which I am interested. Is there a relationship between tutor or teacher retention and student retention? Do students participating in classes, on average, have retention rates different than those who participate in one-to-one tutoring? What happens to students when they leave the program? Do they go to other programs? How often do they return? How long do they stay away? How do the retention rates of open-entry open-exit programs compare with programs that use semester systems, and what does that suggest? Programs might develop their own questions about retention and use their investigations as a way to help them develop retention strategies and set policy. They should also think about how to best structure themselves to address reality: some students will always be coming and going.

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### **Endnote**

1 The study was funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education, with funds from the U.S. Department of Education.

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### **About the Author**

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## Getting to Class and Completing a Semester is Tough

From Sticht T., McDonald, B. and Erickson, P. (1998). Passports to Paradise: The Struggle to Teach and To Learn on the Margins of Adult Education. *El Cajon, CA: The Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc. Used with permission.*

*“Today is last day in a school, the frist time when I learn English at shool. I was feeling intrested with the way instructor teach me! I was feeling to improve English in the short time. The teacher helps the student to learn vocabulary very funy such as vocabulary game; to reading Daily new made students knowledge of culture in USA. I’, really sorry! can’t continue to study English your class, because I have to work the other job which start 7:15 until 3:30. If I have free time I’ll come back to learn.” S., Advanced ESL*

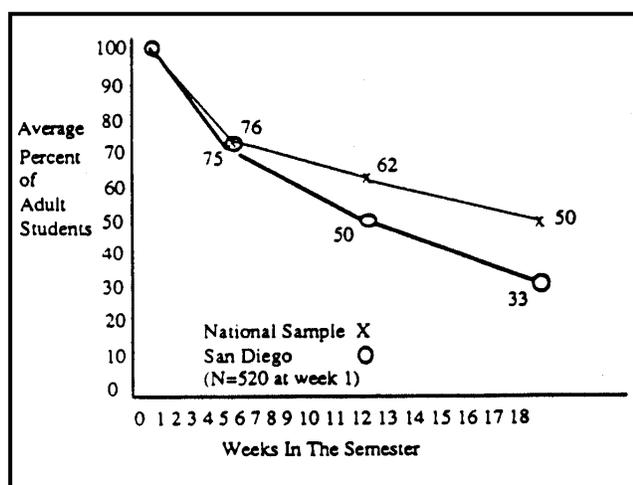
Once adults overcome the many barriers that have prevented them from participating in adult education, and have actually enrolled in a course of study, the daily struggle to meet family and work demands often have a depressing effect on the actual amount of education they can participate in before they must meet other pressing needs.

In this chapter we focus on studies of the largest group of adults who enroll in the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education, those adults undertaking the study of English as a second or other language (ESL). We consider the problems that these adult students encounter in going to school in terms of three issues: persistence, attendance, and turbulence.

*Persistence* refers to how many students complete a course of study. *Attendance* is concerned with how often students attend classes, indirectly indexed here in terms of the numbers of instructional hours in a semester students complete. *Turbulence* refers to the numbers of adult students who are added to and dropped from a class during a semester.

Following our study of persistence, attendance, and turbulence, we provide some insights into the problems that adult students encounter in going to school, and some of the types of program factors that may encourage greater persistence and attendance among students.

**Figure 4.1. Percentage of ESL students who started in week 1 who completed week 18.**



## Persistence

Persistence is examined in two different ways. First, we consider how many adults who start to attend classes in the typical 18 week semester of the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education, actually stay enrolled for all 18 weeks and complete the semester.

Figure 4.1 shows average persistence rates for adult ESL students in 12 classes, ranging from beginning to advanced ESL in the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education for the fall 1995 and spring 1996 semesters.

Persistence data are also available for California's federally funded adult ESL education programs in 1995-96. The data show that after 80 to 100 hours of instruction, which would be between five to eight weeks in the San Diego system, 61 percent of ESL students were either in the same class or had transferred to another class (CASAS, 1996, p. xi).

The San Diego data for weeks 5-8 are in line with these state-wide data on persistence, though they do not include students transferred to another class. Data are presented below to suggest that perhaps as many as 25 percent of the adult students who dropped out of the ESL classes in San Diego may have transferred to another class. If that is the case, then the eighteen week persistence rate in school, though not in a given class, might be as high as 57 percent.

**Perhaps 25 percent of adults who dropped ESL classes in San Diego transferred to and completed another class. If so, the 18 week persistence rate in school might be as high as 57 percent.**

Also presented in Figure 4.1 are data for persistence in ESL programs from the national study of federally funded adult literacy education programs.

While the data from the San Diego sample are not necessarily representative of all ESL classes in the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education, they are consistent with the national data in showing that large percentages, perhaps over half, of adults who start classes do not persist through the end of the semester.

*Progression to Higher Levels of Study.* A second way to look at persistence is to consider how many ESL students enroll in beginning, middle and advanced courses of study. Here, interest is in determining whether the adults who start at the beginning levels of an educational sequence persist and progress through the sequence.

In April 1994, the CWELL Action Research Center published the results of an extensive study of instructional programs in the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education (SDCCD/CE) (McDonald, et. al, 1994). Among other things, the report presented data on the numbers of adults in San Diego who enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) programs during July 1992 to June 1993.

As Figure 4.2 shows, over 13,000 adults enrolled in Beginning ESL. But less than half that number enrolled in Intermediate ESL, and fewer than 3,000 enrolled in Advanced ESL. That is less than one fourth of the number of students who enrolled in Beginning ESL.

This raises the important question of where does everybody go? Why aren't the thousands who start out at the Beginning level of ESL continuing to enroll at the Intermediate and Advanced levels? While we do not know the answers to this question, it seems likely that the need to meet the demands of daily living encourage adults to leave school with the barest minimum of skills needed to get a job or negotiate the requirements for English that permit them to get by.

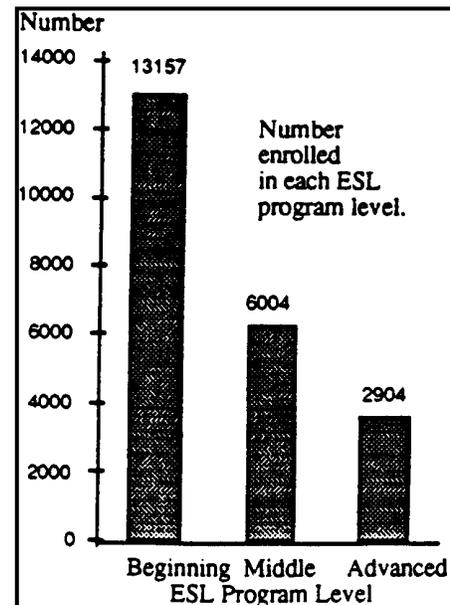
### **Attendance: Getting to Class Each Day Is Not Easy!**

The studies of persistence rates for the 12 ESL classes reported above show the percentage of students who were enrolled during the semester after eighteen weeks. But many times those students who are enrolled do not actually attend class very much. These daily fluctuations in attendance affect the numbers of hours of instruction that students actually receive.

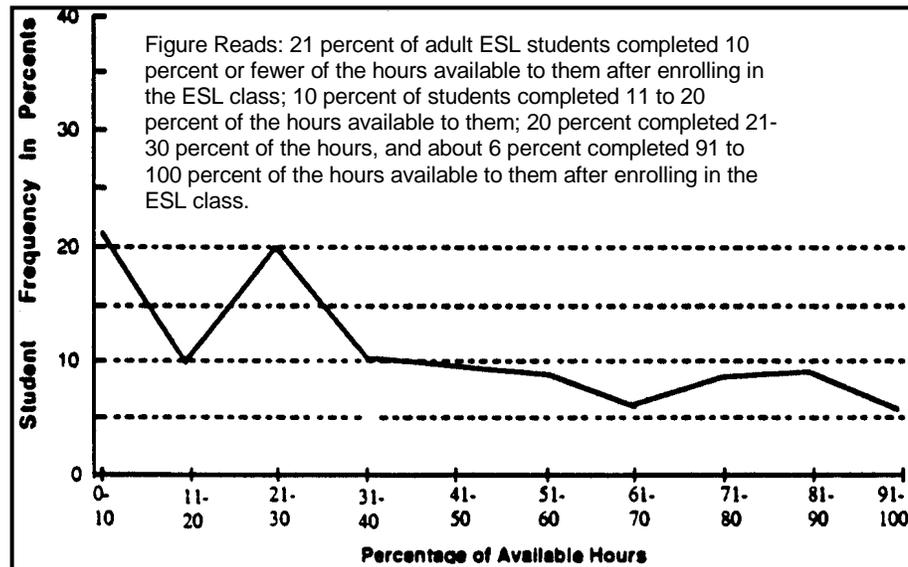
Because of the open entry/open exit policy in the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education, some students enter after the first week and many enter after the 6th, 10th, 12th and even 15th weeks. For four of the 12 classes studied earlier, data were obtained on the total numbers of hours of instruction that students attended from the day they enrolled in the class until the end of the semester. For example, a student who joined in the fifth week of the semester had 195 hours of ESL instruction available in the remainder of the semester. We then determined the percentage of hours out of the 195 possible hours of instruction the student actually completed. As indicated in Figure 4.3, some 50 percent of students attended 30 percent or fewer of the hours available in the semester after the date of their enrollment.

The data in Figure 4.3 are for all students who enrolled during the semester, including all adds and drops. If one looks only at the hours of instruction completed by those ESL students who persisted throughout the 18 week semester, they completed an average of around 70 percent (189) of the available hours of instruction. This indicates that those persons who stay with the class also attend the most often.

**Figure 4.2 Numbers of adult English as a second language (ESL) students enrolled in three levels of ESL, fall**



**Figure 4.3. Hours of instruction completed by adult students in four ESL classes**



### Voices From the Community-Part 3: Journal Writings Reveal the Struggle to Go to School

In several ESL classes, the CWELL ARC engaged teachers as researchers in the process of studying journal writing as an instructional technique. During the course of these activities, some students in an advanced ESL class were asked to write what they liked most about class that week. Here is a sample of writings by ESL students that reveal something of the difficulties they encounter in getting to school on a daily basis.

*“What I like about the class this week well I mist all this week. because I had to do something but that was only one or two days and the other days because I felt lazy I didn’t wanted to walk, I just wanted to stay home and one day because of tha rain. But now I relace that is not good stay at home doing nothing because today I come here and I see the vocabulary but I don understand all of them so now I’m insicure to take the test and the dication so I don’t think I’m going to fail the quiz I’m sure I’m goint to fail. but now I’ll try to come her every day., I like the fridays because we do lots of thing that are good to improve our self, also I love to listen the songs and try to write the most I undertend that’s my favorite thing so I promes I won’t mist one friday even if I don’t come in the I whole week. I’ll have to come in the whole week. I’ll have to stop I sorry. Toll next time.” C. E., Advanced ESL*

*“Even thoug I have come only two days to the school this week. I could say that what I liked the most was that I saw my friend again. I have been with personal matters during a period of time. I was planning to come back to school again as soon as I could. It is I nice to be hare again. It is good to see friend, teachers and students, that I han’t seen for a while. I like school where I can find more friends with the same likes that I have.” J., Advanced ESL*

*“I spend time that I study English at this free school. I used to go to ALI of SDSU, and I paid huge money to them, though. This school is as well as ALI, I think. I really agree with your way teaching English, especially I like what you explain hadline of newspaper at latest. I watch on TV sometime, but I can’t get to the point on news. So it’s very helpful for me to undrestand news. And also I had known new difficult words, since I have become coming here. But I’m aftaid, I can’t come to shool for meanwhile. For my I-20 has already expired, I neet new I-20. I’m going to go the new language school at down town to get I-20. I would like to come back this class, after that. I intend to study for myself.” H. S., Advanced ESL*

### **Turbulent Lives May Lead to Turbulent Classrooms**

Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines “turbulence” as “wild commotion.” Personnel researchers have studied the effects of turbulence, or “wild commotion” on teams of personnel who work together to accomplish their training and job duties. In these studies, “turbulence” was measured in terms of the numbers of people who were added to and dropped from the team in a given period.

The personnel researchers considered that for an instructional system to work, some degree of personnel stability is necessary. A team leader, like a teacher, needs sufficient time to learn the strengths and weaknesses of personnel, time to create a group identity and cohesion, and of course time to provide instruction. The researchers noted that constant turbulence, adding and dropping people from teams, takes a toll on the ability of the team leader to train and the team members to learn to proficiency standards (Bialek, 1977).

*CWELL ARC Study of Turbulence in the ESL Classroom.* During the January-June 1995 period researchers in the CWELL Action Research Center studied turbulence in the four ESL classrooms cited in Figure 4.3. The ESL programs ranged from low to advanced in English skill levels and were made-up of one Vocationally oriented (VESL) and three conventional (CESL) ESL classes. Weekly data were collected on how many adds and drops there were during each of the 19 weeks in the semester (though there are usually only 18 weeks in a semester, the spring 1995 semester started in the middle of a week and so an extra week was added).

The data show a lot of movement into and out of each of the four classes. As an example, in a large, advanced (level 6), conventional ESL class (CESL) there were 40 students enrolled in the first week. In the second week, six new students were added and one student was dropped. In week three, three students were dropped. In week four, two students were added and one was dropped. In week five three students were added. In week six four new students were added and three were dropped.

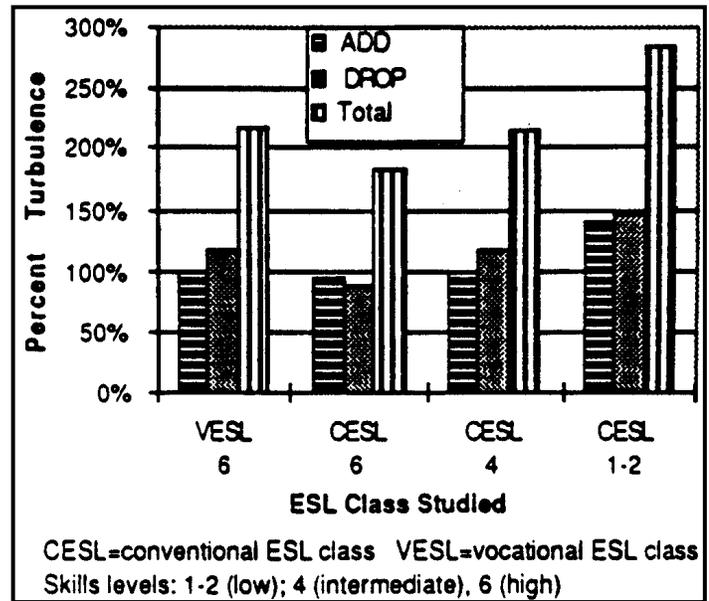
Altogether, in weeks two through six of this advanced ESL class, fifteen students were added and eight were dropped. During weeks seven to twelve, seven students were added and nine were dropped. During weeks thirteen through nineteen, sixteen students were added and eighteen were dropped.

In this one class, then, during the semester 38 new students were added to the original week one total of 40, and 35 were dropped from the class. While the numbers were not the same, the outcome was essentially the same in the three other classes -- new students entered and had to catch up, and old students disappeared from sight without a trace. What is being observed here are the visible signs of turbulence in the classroom.

Data on the numbers of adds and drops in the four ESL classes during the semester were obtained to calculate turbulence rates. The total additions to and drops from the class during the semester were added together and divided by the week-one total enrollment. For the four classes combined, the total first week enrollment was 125.

Figure 4.4 shows turbulence rates for each of the four ESL classes. The figure shows that there was a rather large change in the student population throughout the semester. For example, the beginning level conventional ESL class, CESL 1-2, had an initial enrollment during the first week of the class of 28 students. Then, during the semester, 39 new students were added while 41 students were dropped. Thus, a total of 80 students was added and dropped. When 80 is divided by 28, the first week's enrollment, the result is 2.86; a turbulence rate of almost 300 percent.

Figure 4.4. Turbulence rates for four ESL classes.



### Why do students drop out of ESL classes?

In order to find out more about why adults drop out of classes, CWELL staff made a phone call to students who did not attend classes for a week. They were asked their reasons for not attending. When they dropped the course, they were asked why they were not planning to come back. Out of the 280 students who dropped out, we were able to reach 94 students, just over a third of the drop outs, who gave their reasons for leaving the ESL instruction. These reasons were categorized according to the scheme proposed by Cross (1981) in her studies of reasons of barriers to adult education. She identified three major categories of reasons: dispositional, situational and institutional. A dispositional reason is one that stems from the behavior, attitudes, and abilities of the student; a situational reason involves baby-sitting problems, changes in work schedules, moving, and so on. An institutional reason involved the instruction itself,

Table 4.1. Reasons why adults drop out of ESL classes.

Reasons	Number	Percent
<b>Dispositional</b>		
• Personal	09	09.6
<b>Situational</b>		
• Moved	12	12.8
• Job	37	39.4
• Medical	08	08.5
<b>Institutional</b>		
• Transferred to another class	25	26.5
• Curriculum related	03	03.2

or the policies and requirements of the school. Using this scheme, the reasons for dropping for the 94 students are given in Table 4.1.

According to this limited survey, the major reason that students dropped out was due to their job situations. They either got new jobs or had changes to work schedules.

The second major reason for leaving one class was to enroll in another. Though we do not know why students transferred from one class to another, conversations with teachers and students from time to time revealed that there are several types of activities that could lead to transfers among classes. Students sometimes move from one class to another because they have a friend or relative in another class, so they decide to go to class with their friend. Or they may change classes to better fit their work schedules or their children's school schedules, or because their teachers suggest that they should be in another class.

### **The Importance of “Focus” to Persistence in ESL**

As we considered the reasons why adults frequently enroll in a course of study and then quickly drop out, we wondered whether or not this might have something to do with both an adult's interest in some specific goal and the institution's ability to focus courses on specific goals that an adult might have.

We developed this concept of “focus” by considering that both adults and institutions can sometimes have very global, generalized purposes for education. In this case, adults may wish to attend educational programs just to improve themselves or to further their general education. In response, institutions may develop general education programs that have no particular focus but aim to provide adults an opportunity to develop their cognitive skills and broaden their knowledge.

On the other hand, there are some adults who have very specific goals in mind, such as getting a job in the electronics field. In this case, their focus is on getting a particular kind of job. If the institution can then offer them education and/or job training that they see is directly related to their goal, it is possible that they may be more motivated to complete such a focused course than a course in “general development.”

To explore this concept of “focus” on the part of adults and education programs, the CWELL ARC took a two-pronged approach. First, we looked at the reasons that adult students gave for why they were attending English as a second language education and the types of classes they were attending. We wanted to see, for instance, whether adults who, were attending Vocational ESL courses, in which the focus of language instruction is upon the vocabulary and concepts of a given job field, are more likely to give job-related reasons for attending ESL instruction than are adults enrolled in other types of courses. This indicates the degree to which adults are focused on a particular goal.

*In* a second approach to trying to better understand the role of focus in persistence we looked at the course completion rates of adult students in three vocationally oriented ESL programs that differed with regard to the specificity of the vocational training component of the ESL instruction. Here we were interested in whether the degree to which a vocationally-oriented ESL

course focused on actual job training and job placement increased the likelihood that adults would complete the program.

### Reasons for Attending English as a Second Language Courses.

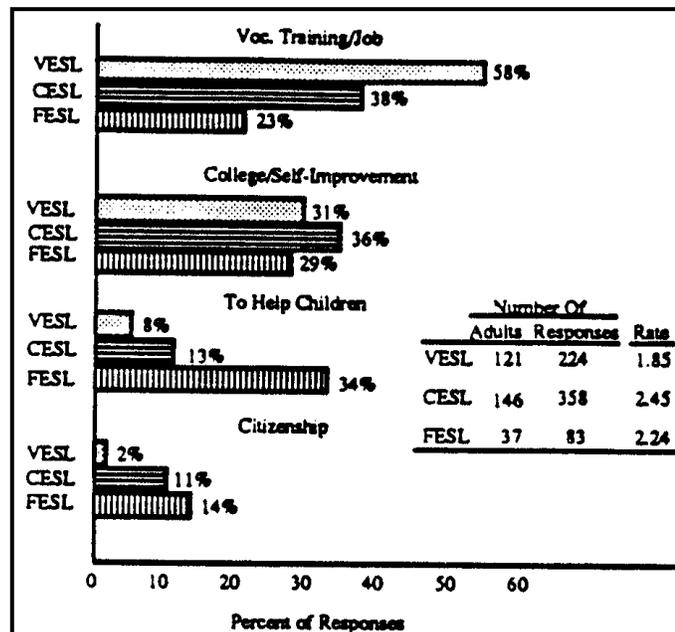
To gain some insight as to why adults taking ESL want to go to school, and to determine their degree of focus on a particular goal, interviews were held with adult students in three different types of ESL program: VESL = Vocational English as a Second Language, in which the teaching of English was accomplished using job-related terminology and tasks; CESL= Communicative English as a Second Language, in which general conversational and school-related English usage was emphasized, and FESL = Family English as a Second Language, in which the emphasis was upon how parents could help with their children's learning and schooling.

As a part of the interviews with adult students, they were asked to complete a survey that included the question, "Why are you taking this course? (circle one or more)." Then seven alternatives were presented: (1) to get a job, (2) to keep a job, (3) to get into vocational training, (4) to go to college, (5) for self-improvement, (6) to help my children, and (7) for citizenship.

In analyzing the responses, the seven alternatives were combined into four categories: Vocational Training/Job (items 1,2,3); College/Self-Improvement (items 4,5); To Help Children (Item 6); and Citizenship (Item 7). Altogether, data were obtained from three VESL (n=121), four CESL (n=146) and two FESL (n=37) programs with a combined total of 304 adult students who completed the surveys.

Figure 4.5 shows that in general, adults' stated reasons for wanting to attend ESL showed a degree of focus and paralleled the type of ESL program in which they were enrolled. Some 58 percent of those adults enrolled in the VESL programs indicated that at they were taking the courses to get into job training or into a job. The figure shows that the 121 adults enrolled in VESL courses made 224 responses to the seven alternatives listed above. When 224 is divided by 121, the result is 1.85. This means that on the average, the adults in the VESL courses were quite focused. They marked fewer than two of the alternatives.

Figure 4.5. Percentage of adults in ESL classes indicating their reasons for taking ESL classes.



Those enrolled in VESL were primarily interested in taking ESL to help them get a job or a better job. They were less interested in ESL for college or self-improvement purposes, while these were very important reasons for the 146 adults taking the CESL classes, whose response rate was 2.45 choices marked out of seven. Interestingly, the CESL students were slightly more likely to say they were interested in ESL for job-related reasons than for broader, college education or self-improvement reasons.

The 37 adults enrolled in the two FESL classes were primarily interested in taking ESL to help their children. Their rate of marking was 2.24 choices out of the seven choices indicating that, like the CESL students, they were less focused than the VESL students.

**Focus and Persistence.** As mentioned above, to explore the concept of “focus” on the part of adults and education programs, we took a two-pronged approach. First, we looked at the reasons that adult students gave for why they were attending English as a second language education and the types of classes they were attending. We wanted to see, for instance, whether adults who were attending ESL courses having a particular focus, such as being vocationally-oriented, are more likely to give job-related reasons for attending ESL instruction than are adults enrolled in other types of courses. The data of Figure 3.5 indicate that this is indeed the case. The types of courses that adults were enrolled in reflected the types of reasons, or focus, that adults had for enrolling in ESL classes.

In a second approach to try to better understand the role of focus in persistence, we looked at the course completion rates of adult students in three vocationally oriented ESL programs that differed with regard to the specificity of the vocational training component of the ESL instruction. Here we were interested in whether the degree to which a vocationally-oriented ESL course focused on actual job training and job placement increased the likelihood that adults would complete the program.

To find out if the relationship between the focus for taking an ESL course and the closeness of fit of the course to this focus might have some affect on course completion, we looked at three different VESL classes in the Continuing Education Division of the San Diego Community College District. One VESL program was a 10 week, six hour a day program for Electronics Assembly that offered electronics-related English as a second language instruction for three hours in the morning and electronics assembly training for three hours in the afternoon. The program electronics instructor maintained close relationships to the electronics industry and was very strong in placing people in jobs at the end of the course. The other two VESL programs were full semester, 18 week programs, in which adults attended class for three hours a day. One of the VESL programs was solely focused on Office Technology. The other VESL program was a more general pre-vocational introduction to different job fields such as Office Technology, Automotive Trades, etc. It focused more on job readiness training, how to do a job interview and so forth. Neither of these semester long programs had close links to job placement.

**Figure 4.6. Percentage of Adult Students in VESL Courses Who Completed the Course As A Function of the Extent to Which the Course Focused on Getting a Job**

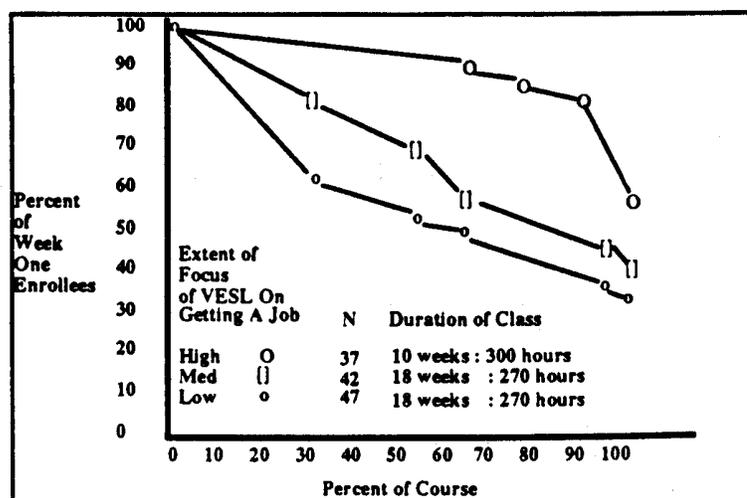


Figure 4.6 shows that, in general, the closer the fit between the focus of the adult students for taking the VESL course, in this case to get a job, and the focus of the program, in this case focusing directly on vocational training and finding jobs for students, the more likely the students were to complete the course. This is clearest for the VESL program that was six hours a day but only 10 weeks in duration. Almost 60 percent of the students who enrolled in week one of the 10 week course completed all ten weeks, and over 80 percent completed nine weeks (90 percent of the course), by which time many of them already had a job in electronics assembly.

In contrast, for the other two courses, both of which were 18 weeks long, the course with the focus on a particular job field (Office Technology) had a rate of persistence of about 70 percent at the nine week point (50 percent of course) compared to over 80 percent retention in nine weeks for the high focus course, and fewer than 40 percent completed the full 18 week semester. The course with the least focus on specific jobs had a nine week retention rate of less than 60 percent and a course completion rate of just over 30 percent.

The foregoing data on the effects of the focus of interests of adults for taking an ESL course and the focus of interest of the course on persistence and completion rates are based on only a very small sample, and there is confounding of focus and the length of the course. But keeping these factors in mind, the data offer reason to suggest that persistence in the ESL classroom might be increased if there were a closer connection between the focus that adults bring to the classroom and the focus of the course.

Also, there is reason to suggest that courses that are brief as well as strongly focused might help increase completion rates. This is suggested by the fact that in all three courses completion rates were higher the fewer the number of weeks that the course went on. In the two 18 week, semester long courses, retention rates half way through the courses, at the end of nine weeks, were considerably higher than they were at the end of 18 weeks.

### **Summary and Discussion**

In this chapter we examined three major issues that relate to the participation of adults in English as a second language (ESL) classes in the San Diego Community College District, Division of Continuing Education: persistence, attendance, and turbulence.

#### **Persistence**

How many adult students who start an ESL class actually persist and complete the course? In the sample of 12 classes studied by the CWELL ARC, 75 percent completed six weeks of study, 50 percent completed 12 weeks and 33 percent completed the full semester of 18 weeks. This contrasted with an 18 week persistence rate of 50 percent for adult ESL students in the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1995).

In a recently completed study of student outcomes, the Division of Continuing Education indicated that, at the end of the Spring 1997 semester, out of 10,453 students who had been enrolled in ESL during the semester, 3,939 (37.6 percent) were attending at the end of the semester (Division of Continuing Education, 1997). This is similar to the 33 percent persistent rate found for the 12 ESL classrooms studied by the CWELL ARC researchers.

*Progression to Higher Levels of ESL.* Data for the fall 1995 showed that during the previous year, over 13,157 adults had enrolled in beginning levels of ESL, whereas only 6004 (45.6 percent) were enrolled in mid-level ESL and 2904 (22 percent) were enrolled in advanced level ESL. This suggests that there are dramatic drop-offs in persistence in ESL instruction after the beginning level.

*Why Do Adult Students Drop Out of Class?* A follow-up of 94 adult students who had left their ESL class revealed that the major reason (39.4 percent) adults gave for leaving were related to the demands of their jobs. But the second largest reason (26.5 percent) was that they transferred to another class. Thus persistence rates *in school* may be higher than persistence rates in a given class. Though it is highly unlikely, if all the 26.5 percent who transferred to another class completed the class, then semester completion rates might have been as high as 57 percent, more than 10 percent above the national rate of persistence (50 percent) for 18 weeks of instruction. But we lack data on these transfers so it is not possible to say what their actual persistence rates were.

### **Attendance**

Using hours of instruction attended as an indicator of attendance, the data for four ESL classes indicated that 50 percent of ESL adult students attended fewer than one-third of the hours of instruction available to them after their enrollment in the ESL class. Seventy percent completed half or fewer of the available hours. Those students who persisted throughout the semester completed about 70 percent (189 out of 270) of the hours available to them.

The typical ESL adult student completed about a third, or 90 hours of instruction in the 18 week semester. This compares favorably to the ESL students studied the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1995). In that study, adult ESL students enrolled for an average of 30 weeks of classes and completed a median of 113 hours of instruction. On a weekly basis, this indicates that, on average, the San Diego sample completed about 5 hours of instruction per week, or about a third more hours of instruction per week than the national sample which completed about 3.8 hours of instruction per week.

### **Turbulence**

The concept of *turbulence* was introduced by the CWELL ARC to refer to the total number of adds to and drops from ESL classes divided by the number of adults enrolled during the first week. In three of the four classes studied, turbulence rates were over 200 percent, and in one turbulence reached a level of 286 percent of the first week's enrollment.

High levels of turbulence, which may result in classes that follow policies of "open entry/open exit" have been shown in personnel research to adversely affect training and learning in teams of personnel (Bialek, 1977). This is similar to the situation of students in classrooms that primarily utilize large group instruction, as is the case in the four ESL classes that the CWELL ARC observed.

## Focus and Persistence

Realizing that adult students generally indicate more than one reason for wanting to attend classes, but may have a central or main reason, the concept of *focus* was introduced by the CWELL ARC to indicate the degree of correspondence between a student's focal or main reason for attending an ESL class and the extent to which a given ESL class focuses on the same main reason as the students have for being in the class.

Research on Vocational ESL (VESL), Communicational ESL (CESL) and Family ESL (FESL) classes revealed that adult students do tend to have more than one reason for attending classes, but they also have a main reason. VESL students are mainly interested in jobs, CESL in jobs or college/self-improvement, and FESL in helping their children.

A study of naturally occurring variations in the degree of focus among three VESL classes suggested that in classes where the focus of students and classrooms are more closely aligned, persistence rates may tend to increase.

The data on persistence rates for twelve classes and those for the three VESL classes concurred in showing that persistence rates tend to be higher for half a semester than for a full 18 week semester. This suggests that if ESL classes were "chunked" into smaller time periods students might be motivated to attend more often and complete the course in greater numbers.

What do these data on attendance and turbulence mean for how well students learn and transfer their learning outside the classroom? This question is examined next in Chapter 5.

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