

# STEPS FOR FACILITATING SESSION ONE

**Objectives:** By the end of this first session, participants will be able to...

- Compare the perspectives from four reviews of literature on participation, retention, and persistence that are specific to adult basic education.
- Distinguish amongst three types of barriers to persistence and outline ways to overcome those barriers.
- Summarize the positive and negative forces that support or hinder student persistence.
- Explain four supports to persistence suggested from the NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study.
- List practical ideas for supporting the persistence of adult students.

**Time:** 3½ hours

## Preparation:



**NEWSPRINTS** (Prepare ahead of time: Underlined in the steps)

- \_\_\_ Our Obstacles
- \_\_\_ Purpose of the NCSALL Study Circles
- \_\_\_ Session One Objectives
- \_\_\_ Session One Agenda
- \_\_\_ What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle
- \_\_\_ Discussion Questions
- \_\_\_ Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence
- \_\_\_ Situational
- \_\_\_ Institutional

- \_\_\_ Dispositional
- \_\_\_ Discussion Questions (NOTE: The questions listed in this newsprint can also be adapted for the alternative activity involving the Persistence Among Adult Education Students video.)
- \_\_\_ Definition of Persistence
- \_\_\_ Four Supports for Student Persistence
- \_\_\_ Discussing Supports for Student Persistence
- \_\_\_ Useful / How to Improve

For Use with Supplemental Handouts

- \_\_\_ Goal: Continuing to Pursue Our Educational Goals
- \_\_\_ What Brings You Here?
- \_\_\_ Most Important Forces That...



**HANDOUTS** (Photocopy ahead of time: *Italicized* in the steps)

- \_\_\_ Overview of Study Circle
- \_\_\_ Sample Ground Rules
- \_\_\_ Negative Forces
- \_\_\_ Positive Forces

Supplemental Handouts for Session One

- \_\_\_ Brainstorming and Prioritizing
- \_\_\_ Acting It Out
- \_\_\_ Classroom Discussion
- \_\_\_ Snowball Consensus
- \_\_\_ Affinity Diagramming
- \_\_\_ Student-to-Student Interviews

Handout Assigned for Session Two

- \_\_\_ Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction

(Make a few extra copies of the Pre-Meeting Packet handouts for participants who forget to bring them.)



## READINGS ASSIGNED FOR SESSION TWO (Photocopy ahead of time: **Bolded** in the steps)

- \_\_\_ Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students (Make a few extra copies for participants who have misplaced their Pre-Meeting Packet.)
- \_\_\_ Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out
- \_\_\_ “One Day I Will Make It” A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief

### MATERIALS

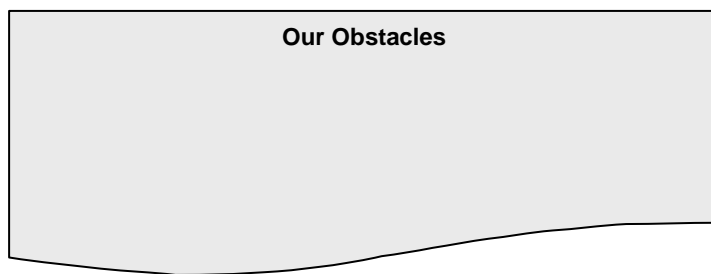
- \_\_\_ blank newsprint sheets
- \_\_\_ newsprint easel
- \_\_\_ markers, pens, tape
- \_\_\_ the Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video

### Steps:

#### 1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

(15 MINUTES)

- **Welcome participants** to the first meeting of the study circle.
- **Introduce yourself** and state your role as facilitator of the study circle. Explain how you came to facilitate this study circle and who is sponsoring it.
- **Post the newsprint Our Obstacles.**



- **Ask participants to introduce themselves briefly** (name, program, role) and to say whether they have ever taken

#### Note to Facilitator

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

part in a study circle. Ask them to **briefly describe one obstacle** they had to overcome to be here today. Summarize the responses on the newsprint and post it.

- **Make sure that participants know** where bathrooms are located, when the session will end, when the break will be, and any other “housekeeping” information.


## 2. PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY CIRCLE, SESSION ONE OBJECTIVES, AND AGENDA

(10 MINUTES)

- **Post the newsprint Purpose of the NCSALL Study Circles** and review the purpose with participants.

### Purpose of the NCSALL Study Circles

1. To help practitioners read, discuss, and use research to improve their practice.
2. To generate recommendations and practical suggestions for other practitioners or policymakers about how to translate research into practice.

-  **Distribute the handout *Overview of Study Circle*.** Give participants a minute to read the handout, then provide a brief overview of the three sessions.
- **Post the newsprint Session One Objectives and review the objectives** briefly with the group.

**Session One Objectives**

By the end of this session, you will be able to:


- Compare the perspectives from four reviews of literature on participation, retention, and persistence that are specific to adult basic education.
- Distinguish amongst three types of barriers to persistence and outline ways to overcome those barriers.
- Summarize the positive and negative forces that support or hinder student persistence.
- Explain four supports to persistence suggested from the NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study.
- List practical ideas for supporting the persistence of adult students.

- **Post the newspaper Session One Agenda and describe each activity briefly.** Ask if people have questions about the agenda.

**Session One Agenda**

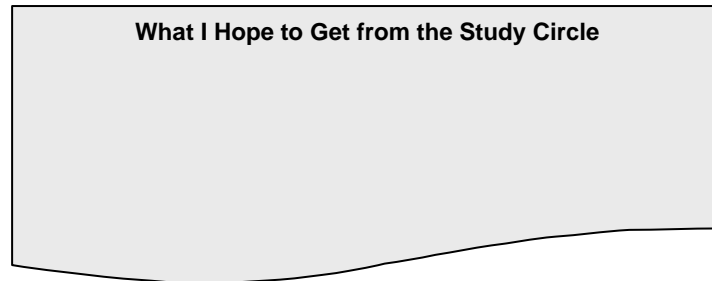
- Welcome and Introductions (Done!)
- Purpose and Overview of the Study Circle, Session One Objectives, and Agenda (Doing)
- Participant Expectations and Group Guidelines
- Discussion of First Reading
- BREAK
- Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers
- Negative and Positive Forces
- Four Supports for Adult Student Persistence
- Evaluation of Session One and Assignment for Session Two

**3. PARTICIPANT EXPECTATIONS AND GROUP GUIDELINES (20 MINUTES)**


-  **Direct attention to handout** *The Role of the Participant*, which was included in the Pre-Meeting Packet. Ask participants if they agree with this role and whether they

would like to add or change anything about their role in this study circle.

- **Post the newsprint What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle.**




**Ask each person to make a short statement in response to this question.** Write their statement on the newsprint as they say it. (If someone begins to talk about his or her teaching situation, etc., point to the Session One Agenda newsprint and remind them that there will be a chance to talk about that a little later in the meeting.)

- **After everyone has made a statement, summarize what you heard.** Refer to the handout *Overview of Study Circle* and talk about how and where in the three-session study circle their needs will be met. Also, be clear with participants about learning expectations they may have stated that are not part of the study circle. For example, the study circle is *not a training* that will provide them with handouts or demonstrations on teaching techniques or materials for teaching. This study circle will, however, cue them into the instructional and programmatic areas that research has shown to be important and effective in increasing student persistence. Hopefully this research will guide them as they make decisions about how best to address student persistence.
-  **Refer participants to the handout *What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison*, which was also included in their Pre-Meeting Packet.** Explain that the study circle is for discussing:


- theories and concepts from the research
- their context and experiences in relation to the topic
- their ideas about the implications of the theories and research for their own and other practitioners' practice and policy

Ask if there are any questions about what a study circle is or is not, or about the design of this one.

- **Next, explain that one of the things that helps study circles to run smoothly** is an agreement among participants about the ground rules to follow during the meetings and discussions.
-  **Distribute the handout *Sample Ground Rules*.** After giving participants a few minutes to review it, ask if there are any ground rules they would like to add to or delete from the list. Write these on newsprint as they are mentioned.
- **Ask if everyone agrees with these ground rules.** Use the "I can live with that one" criterion, i.e., you might not be crazy about one or more of these but you can "live with it" and agree to abide by it. The discussion should be only around those ground rules that participants find objectionable and "can't live by." Let participants know that it is your job, as facilitator, to remind them of these ground rules if you see them being broken.

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF FIRST READING

(50 MINUTES)

-  **Explain that in this next activity** participants will reflect on the first reading for today's meeting, **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students.** *If you want the group to view the Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video instead of doing the small group discussion activity, this is the time to do so. See Another Idea.* ➔

#### Another Idea

Invite participants to set the ground rules to be followed for the study circle. Write ground rules on newsprint as participants say them.

After five minutes or so, distribute the handout *Sample Ground Rules* and ask participants if there are any ground rules on this handout that they would like to add to their list. Add these to the newsprint.

#### Another Idea

Instead of dividing into small groups to discuss the research, show the NCSALL/NIFL Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion video (on DVD) to the whole group. You will need a television and DVD player *or* a computer that can play DVDs and a projector. The video takes about 25 minutes. At the end of the video, use the questions in this activity to lead a whole group discussion about the Adult Student Persistence Study.

[Note to facilitator: The article describes persistence and reviews the research and practice literature about ways to support it. It also draws on the research on adult student persistence that the authors completed with a team from MDRC and NCSALL. The article concludes by suggesting that a quality program must have a persistence support component and describing a set of persistence interventions that have research evident to support the contention that they would have an impact.]

- **Post the newspaper Discussion Questions.** Ask participants to form small groups of three to four people to explore the following questions. Ask the groups to also note questions that arise during their discussions that they would like to discuss with the whole group.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- What did you see as the key points of this article?
- Which of the findings or practices did you find surprising or intriguing? Why?
- The article summarizes the findings of four literature reviews and describes the first phase of the Persistence Study. What did you find as commonalities across the studies? What did you see as the differences?
- What characteristics of adult students seemed to support persistence? Which characteristics did not appear to be associated with persistence?
- What else might you like to ask the researchers?

- **After 25 minutes, reconvene the whole group.** Each group reports back to the whole group about any observations, questions, or issues that arose from the reading or small group discussions. After each group presents, there should be time allotted for questions and comments from other groups. (This should be encouraged by the facilitator.).

### **BREAK (15 minutes)**



## 5. SITUATIONAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND DISPOSITIONAL BARRIERS

(30 MINUTES)

- **Post the newsprint Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence.**

**Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence**

**Situational or Influences of the Adult’s Circumstances:** These barriers include transportation, family responsibilities, financial obligations, and related issues that impede students’ abilities to enroll and stay in classes.

**Institutional or Influences of Systems:** These barriers include program fees, “red tape,” scheduling problems, and other roadblocks inherent in institutional structures.

**Dispositional or Influences of Experience:** These barriers include students’ attitudes, negative experience with schooling, values, and perceptions about schooling that Quigley suggests affect students’ motivation to enroll in and stay in school.

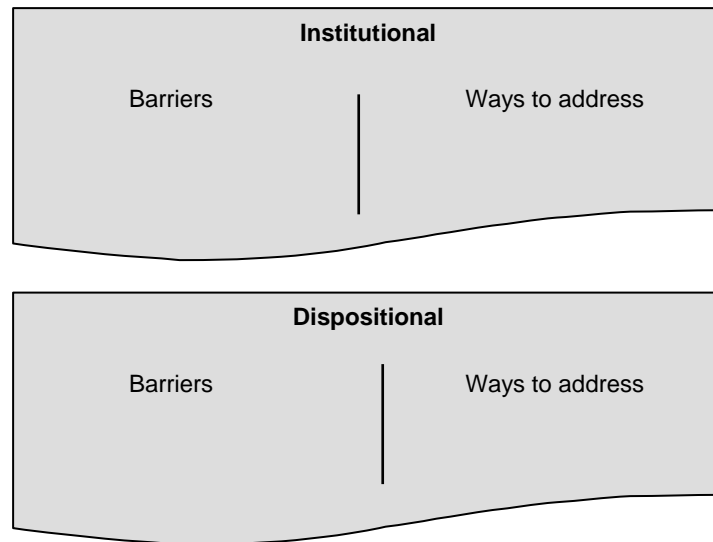
- **Explain to participants that** many researchers refer to a framework outlined by B. Allan Quigley in which he identified three categories of barriers to student persistence. Those barriers are summarized on this newsprint.
- **Briefly review these summaries** and ask participants to refer to these summaries as they reflect on their own experiences. Ask participants to list the barriers that their students have had in persisting in adult education long enough to meet their goals.
- **Post the newsprints Situational, Institutional,** and Dispositional.

**Note to Facilitator**

If participants would like to read more about Quigley’s categories of barriers to student enrollment and persistence, refer them to the following article:  
 B. Allan Quigley, “The first three weeks: A critical time for motivation,” *Focus on Basics*, Vol. 2, Issue A, March 1998.

**Situational**



Barriers		Ways to address
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- **Ask participants to form three small groups** and assign one type of barrier—situational, institutional, or dispositional—to each group. Ask groups to brainstorm examples for the type of barrier that could negatively effect student persistence and record these ideas on the left hand column of the newsprint. Then ask participants to think of ways to address these examples and record them on the right column. Encourage participants to draw from their own experiences. Give the groups 15 minutes to work.
- **Ask groups to post the newsprints** and **ask participants to take 10 minutes to walk around** and read the newsprints. [Note to facilitator: Save the newsprints for Session 3.]
- **Reconvene the large group** and ask participants to compare the obstacles they had to overcome to be here today (see posted newsprint from Introductions activity) with the examples of barriers they just read. Ask two or three participants for their responses.
- **Then ask participants** which types of barriers might be feasible for adult education programs and staff to address.
- **Explain to participants** that later in this session, they will be discussing recent research about forces and barriers that affect adult student persistence, motivation, and retention in adult basic education.

**6. NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FORCES**

(30 MINUTES)

-  **Explain that, in this next activity,** participants will review the results that NCSALL got in using the force-field analysis during the study on adult student persistence with 150 students in pre-GED classes throughout New England. Remind participants that they read an article for today's session where the author describes a process designed to guide groups of students through an examination of the forces that hinder and support their efforts to achieve educational goals.
-  **Distribute the handout *Negative Forces* and the handout *Positive Forces*.** Ask participants to spend five minutes reading over the forces in the tables from the NCSALL study. Point out that the students were able to articulate many positive forces; however, many students did not articulate negative forces.
- **Post the newsprint Discussion Questions.**

**Discussion Questions**

- What are your general impressions of the forces listed in these two tables? What do you see as the critical forces?
- In what ways are the students' positive forces similar to the ways to address the barriers that you brainstormed? In what ways are they different? What might account for the differences between your perceptions and those of the group of students?
- What forces, if any, do you think are absent from the NCSALL research or from your brainstorming? What might account for those absences?
- What are some possible reasons for the researchers' finding that students did not name negative forces? What might be the implications of this for program practice?

- **Facilitate a 25-minute discussion** using the questions as a guide. Make the point that the authors of the Adult Student Persistence Study wrote about the importance of hearing from students about their supports and barriers to

**Note to Facilitator**


If participants would like to review other activities for hearing from students on negative and positive forces, make the following handouts available:

- *Brainstorming and Prioritizing*
- *Acting It Out*
- *Classroom Discussion*
- *Snowball Consensus*
- *Affinity Diagramming*
- *Student-to-Student Interviews*

persistence and then of coming up with a plan, together with those students, to manage those forces over time.


## 7. FOUR SUPPORTS FOR ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE (25 MINUTES)

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-  Point out that, in the reading **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students**, the authors identify four supports for persistence, based on their own research and on other research about this issue.
- **Make the following points** about the NCSALL Adult Persistence Study:
  - The study asked students who were currently enrolled in programs not only about their barriers but also about their *supports* to persistence.
  - The report describes what the students identified as their most important supports and barriers to persistence.
- **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 than the ones they use.
- **Post the newsprint** Four Supports for Student Persistence.

**Four Supports for Student Persistence**

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

- **Point out that one support**—management of the positive and negative forces—was addressed in the last activity. In this next activity, the study circle group will discuss the remaining three supports.
-  **Divide participants into three small groups (or do as a whole group if your group is small).** Instruct Group One to review and discuss self-efficacy, Group Two, establishment of a goal, and Group Three, progress toward reaching a goal. Ask each group to review the description of their assigned support on pages 38-39 of the reading.
- **Post the newspaper Discussing Supports for Student Persistence** and allow 10 minutes for the groups to discuss the questions and summarize their discussions on newspaper.

**Discussing Supports for Student Persistence**

- What is your opinion about the importance of this support for student persistence?
  - How would you help students achieve a sense of self-efficacy?
- OR**
- How would you help a student establish a meaningful goal?
- OR**
- How do you help students see their own progress in ways that are meaningful to them?

- **After 10 minutes, reconvene the whole group.** Give each group a few minutes to report back a summary of their

discussion. Then facilitate a seven-minute discussion, continuing to use the newsprint as a guide for the whole group. [Note to facilitator: Save the newsprints for Session 3.]

## 8. EVALUATION OF SESSION ONE AND ASSIGNMENT FOR SESSION TWO

(15 MINUTES)

- **Explain to participants** that, in the time left, you would like to get feedback from them about this first session. You will use this feedback in shaping the next two sessions of the study circle.
- **Post the newsprint** Useful/How to Improve.

Useful	How to Improve

### Note to Facilitator

Save this newsprint and copy participants' comments onto the Feedback Form you submit to NCSALL. This form can be found at the end of the study circle guide.

Ask participants first to tell you what was useful or helpful to them about the design of this first session of the study circle. Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under "Useful."

- **Then ask participants for suggestions on how to improve this design.** 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 that you do not defend or justify anything you have done in the study circle or anything about the design, 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?"

-  **Distribute Readings Assigned for Session Two:**

**Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students.** Tell participants that they should read the rest of the article, pp. 39-45.


**Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out.** Tell participants that they should read the entire article.

**"One Day I Will Make It" A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief.** Tell participants that they should read the entire article.

-  **Distribute Handout Assigned for Session Two:**

*Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction.*

Tell participants that they should use their program's most recent, end-of-year data to complete the handout.

-  **Refer participants again to the handout** *Participants' To-Do Form.* Go over the instructions for what they are to do to prepare for Session Two. To the best of your ability, make sure that participants are clear about what they are required to read before the next meeting. Find out if they have any questions about what they are to do before the next session. Thank them for the preparation they did for this first session.

- **Repeat the date, time, and place for the next meeting.** If applicable, explain the process you will use for canceling and rescheduling the next meeting in the event of bad weather. Be sure that you have everyone's home and/or work telephone numbers so that you can reach them in case of cancellation.






<b>Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session One</b>	
<b>1. Welcome and Introductions</b>	<i>15 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone introduces themselves.</li> <li>• Housekeeping and logistics.</li> </ul>	
<b>2. Purpose and Overview of the Study Circle, Session One Objectives, and Agenda</b>	<i>10 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post newsprints; pass out handout <i>Overview of Study Circle</i>; review.</li> </ul>	
<b>3. Participant Expectations and Group Guidelines</b>	<i>20 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review handout <i>The Role of the Participant</i>, post newsprint <u>What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle</u>.</li> <li>• List responses to <u>What I Hope to Get from the Study Circle</u>.</li> <li>• Summarize against <i>Overview of Study Circle</i>.</li> <li>• Refer to <i>What Study Circles Are, and Are Not: A Comparison</i>.</li> <li>• Pass around handout <i>Sample Group Rules</i>; add rules; discuss.</li> </ul>	
<b>4. Discussion of First Reading</b>	<i>50 mins., SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP 50 mins., WHOLE GROUP (if video)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Form small groups; post newsprint for groups to discuss (25 minutes in groups).</li> <li>• Reconvene whole group; representative from each small group shares observations, questions, and issues; questions and comments from other groups.</li> </ul> <p><b>OR</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show <i>Persistence Among Adult Education Students Panel Discussion</i> video (25 minutes); whole group discussion adapting questions on newsprint and in guide for this activity.</li> </ul>	
<b>15–Minute Break</b>	

<b>Quick Reference Sheet for Facilitating Session One</b>	
<b>5. Situational, Institutional, and Dispositional Barriers</b>	<i>30 mins., SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post newsprint <u>Three Barriers to Adult Student Persistence</u>; review barriers.</li> <li>• Post newsprints: <u>Situational, Institutional, Dispositional</u>; form three small groups to brainstorm and list kinds of barriers students have to participation and possible ways to address these barriers.</li> <li>• Reconvene whole group; conduct gallery walk.</li> <li>• Whole group discussion to compare the barriers participants' had in being here today and these lists and to identify which types of barriers adult education programs might be able to address.</li> </ul>	
<b>6. Negative and Positive Forces</b>	<i>30 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review <i>Negative Forces</i> and <i>Positive Forces</i> handouts.</li> <li>• Whole group discussion using newsprint questions.</li> </ul>	
<b>7. Four Supports for Adult Student Persistence</b>	<i>25 mins., WHOLE GROUP, then SMALL GROUPS, then WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post newsprint <u>Definition of Persistence</u>; review.</li> <li>• Post newsprint <u>Four Supports for Student Persistence</u>; review.</li> <li>• Form three small groups to discuss one of the assigned supports, using question(s) on newsprint <u>Discussing Supports for Student Persistence</u>.</li> <li>• Reconvene whole group; representative from each small group summarizes their discussion; continue discussion using newsprint as guide.</li> </ul>	
<b>8. Evaluation of Session One and Assignment for Session Two</b>	<i>15 mins., WHOLE GROUP</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post newsprint <u>Useful/How to Improve</u>.</li> <li>• Distribute <b>Readings Assigned for Session Two</b> and <b>Handout Assigned for Session Two</b>; refer to <i>Participants' To-Do Form</i>.</li> <li>• Remind participants of next session date, time, and location.</li> </ul>	

## Materials to Hand Out in Session One


### CONTENTS

#### Handouts for Session One


Handout : *Overview of Study Circle*


Handout : *Sample Ground Rules*


Handout : *Negative Forces*

Handout : *Positive Forces*

#### Supplemental Handouts for Session One

Handout : *Brainstorming and Prioritizing*

Handout : *Acting It Out*

Handout : *Classroom Discussion*


Handout : *Snowball Consensus*

Handout : *Affinity Diagramming*

Handout : *Student-to-Student Interviews*


#### Readings Assigned for Session Two

Reading : **Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students** (Pre-Meeting Packet)

Reading : **Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out**

Reading : **“One Day I Will Make It” A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs Research Brief**

Handout Assigned for Session Two

Handout : *Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction*

## Overview of Study Circle

### SESSION ONE

Get introduced to study circles; share information about your interest and experience with barriers to adult student persistence; examine the research on persistence, retention, and motivation; review four suggested supports for persistence; and examine the forces that support and hinder student persistence.

### SESSION TWO

Look in more depth at the research on adult student persistence, discuss program strategies for increasing persistence, and review the five pathways for program participation that are determined by students' personal and environmental factors.

### SESSION THREE

Consider specific ways programs and practitioners address persistence in their situations and plan for what you might do to improve student persistence in your own programs or classes.



## Sample Ground Rules\*

The Study Circles 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 rule.

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## Negative Forces That Hinder Persistence, Identified by Students\*

N=150 (There were 150 students total)

Force	Description of force	Percentage of students who named force as a top 3 hindrance to persistence
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.



## Positive Forces That Support Persistence, Identified by Students\*

N=150 (There were 150 students total)

Force	Description of force	Percentage of students 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.





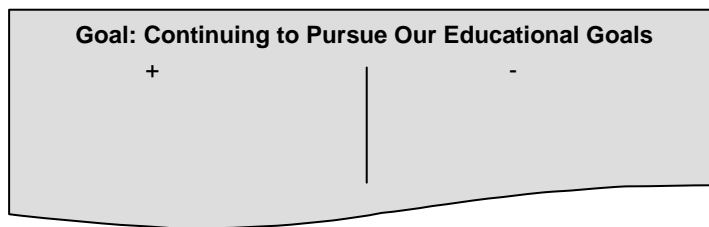
## Brainstorming and Prioritizing

This activity is helpful in guiding a group to think about the forces that hinder and help them to achieve a goal.

(Note: To adapt for use with an individual, skip Steps 7-12.)

**Step 1:** Ask the group to think about the goal of continuing to pursue their educational goals.

**Step 2:** Write the goal on the top of a sheet of newsprint. Then, draw a vertical line down the middle of the newsprint, with a + (positive sign) over the left-hand column and a – (negative sign) over the right hand column, as shown below:



**Step 3:** Ask students to first brainstorm all the things that make it hard for them to continue to pursue their educational goals. Write them on the right side of the newsprint. Use the question: *Who or what gets in the way of continuing to come to these classes?*

**Step 4:** Then ask students to brainstorm all the things that help them to attend class or to continue to pursue their education goals. Use the question: *Who or what helps or supports you to continue to stay in these classes?* Write these responses on the left side of the newsprint.

**Step 5:** Ask the students to look at the newsprint and talk about what they see. For example, *are there more negative than positive forces? Where do the forces come from (e.g., from the class, from your life, etc.)?*

- Step 6:** Give each student an index card or a blank piece of paper. Ask each student to write down the answer to this question: *What two forces from the list do you most want us to work on in class?* Point out that they can take their forces from the positive force list (forces they would want to work on strengthening/increasing), from the negative force list (forces they would want to work on weakening/decreasing), or from a combination of the two.
- Step 7:** Ask students to get into pairs and discuss their two forces, coming to agreement about the two forces they feel are most important to work on in class. One person in each pair should write their new list of two forces on another piece of paper or card.
- Step 8:** Have two pairs join to form a group of four. Have each pair share its list of two items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two forces upon which all four can agree. Ask a volunteer to write their new list of two forces, representing their “consensus,” on a piece of newsprint to hang in front of the class.
- Step 9:** Then ask a member from each group to post their newsprint and read the two forces the group listed. Instruct the whole class to examine the newsprints, looking for similarities, and ask: *Are there any forces that appear on everyone’s list?* If so, write these on a fresh sheet of newsprint (which will represent the whole class consensus).
- Step 10:** Continue until all of the items listed on more than one newsprint are rewritten on the fresh newsprint. Then ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original newsprints are important enough to include on the fresh newsprint. When completed, the fresh newsprint represents a list of all the forces that the class wants to work on in the coming semester or year.
- Step 11:** If, at this point, there are only two forces listed on the “consensus newsprint,” skip to Step 12. If there are more

than two forces, give out two dot stickers to each student. Ask each student to come up to the newsprint and place his/her two dots on the forces that s/he feels are the most important to work on in class.

**Step 12:** The class has now whittled their forces down to the two which they most want to work on and address in class. The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces.







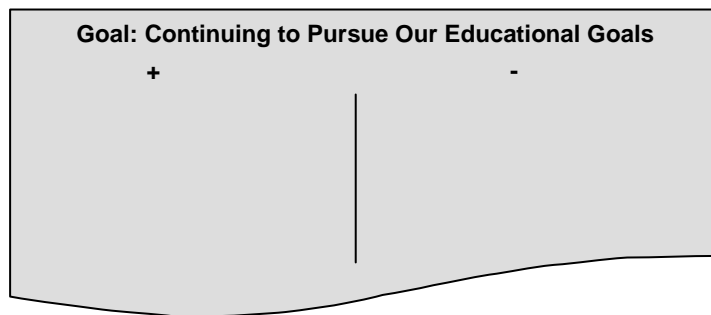
## Acting It Out

This activity is a way to bring students' experiences with a particular issue to life and set the stage to analyze those experiences.

(Note: The acting out portion of this activity is better suited for use in a class of four or more students rather than for a one-on-one teaching situation.)

**Step 1:** Ask the group to think about the goal of continuing to pursue their educational goals.

**Step 2:** Write the goal on the top of a sheet of newsprint. Then, draw a vertical line down the middle of the newsprint, with a + (positive sign) over the left-hand column and a - (negative sign) over the right hand column, as shown below:



**Step 3:** Ask students to first brainstorm all the things that make it hard for them to continue to pursue their educational goals, to stay in the program. Write them on the right side of the newsprint. Use the question: *Who or what gets in the way of continuing to come to these classes?*

**Step 4:** Then ask students to brainstorm all the things that help them to attend class or to continue to pursue their education goals. Use the question: *Who or what helps or supports you to continue to stay in these classes?* Write these responses on the left side of the newsprint.

**Step 5:** Ask each student to copy one of the forces on an individual strip of paper with positive forces on one color and negative forces on another color. Spread out the strips with the positive forces along one side of a table and the strips with negative forces along the other side.

**Step 6:** Then explain what will happen during the activity and the roles that people will need to fill.

- Students will act out the forces they have just generated.
- One person will play the role of the representative student and this person will listen quietly.
- The rest of the group will divide into two smaller groups: the positives and the negatives.
- Each person can choose which group s/he would like to be in, but the final two groups should have approximately the same number of people as the number of strips of paper representing positive or negative forces.
- The “positives” go to the side of the table with the positive forces, and the “negatives” go to the side with the negative forces.
- The representative student sits at the head of the table.

**Step 7:** Once everyone is in the right place, ask students to choose the strips of paper with the forces that stand out for them, trying to evenly distribute all the forces among the students until all the paper strips are taken.

**Step 8:** Ask students to spontaneously act out one force at a time, going back and forth between positive and negative forces, trying to build on what was said before them, until all the forces are voiced. The representative student’s job is to sit quietly and listen to all the forces as if they are voices within him or herself.

Explain that they are all acting out roles, and that what they say does not necessarily represent their own views. They are to try to understand and bring to life the forces

they have chosen and should feel free to add words and feeling to their role.

- Step 9:** Once all the forces have been acted out, ask the representative student what comments or reactions s/he has and what s/he feels. Be sure to give this student the opportunity to speak first about his/her experience; then ask the rest of the group what it was like to act out the forces.
- Step 10:** Then facilitate a discussion with the whole group, asking guiding questions that encourage the students to reflect on: (1) insights they gained about the issue, and (2) questions they now have.
- Step 11:** Give each student an index card or a blank piece of paper. Ask each student to write down the answer to this question: *What two forces from the list do you most want us to work on in class?* Point out that they can take their forces from the positive force list (forces they would want to work on strengthening/increasing), from the negative force list (forces they would want to work on weakening/decreasing), or from a combination of the two.
- Step 12:** Ask students to get into pairs and discuss their two forces, coming to agreement about the two forces they feel are most important to work on in class. One person in each pair should write their new list of two forces on another piece of paper or card.
- Step 13:** Have two pairs join to form a group of four. Have each pair share its list of two items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two forces upon which all four can agree. Ask a volunteer to write their new list of two forces, representing their “consensus,” on a piece of newsprint to hang in front of the class.
- Step 14:** Then ask a member from each group to post their newsprint and read the two forces the group listed. Instruct the whole class to examine the newsprints, looking for similarities, and ask: *Are there any forces that*

*appear on everyone's list?* If so, write these on a fresh sheet of newsprint (which will represent the whole class consensus).

- Step 15:** Continue until all of the items listed on more than one newsprint are rewritten on the fresh newsprint. Then ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original newsprints are important enough to include on the fresh newsprint. When completed, the fresh newsprint represents a list of all the forces that the class wants to work on in the coming semester or year.
- Step 16:** If at this point, there are only two forces listed on the "consensus newsprint," skip to Step 17. If there are more than two forces, give out two dot stickers to each student. Ask each student to come up to the newsprint and place his/her two dots on the forces s/he feels are the most important to work on in class.
- Step 17:** The class has now whittled their forces down to the two which they most want to work on and address in class. The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces.

## Classroom Discussion

This activity is one way to organize a discussion and then use the fruits of that discussion as a way to address persistence.

(Note: To adapt this activity to a one-on-one teaching situation, pose the questions in Step 1 to a student in a dialogue journal. Then respond to the student's answers to these questions in the journal. Together, you and the student can explore ways to help increase persistence that fit that student's particular context.)

**Step 1:** Use the following questions addressing student motivation, retention, and persistence to guide the discussion. Write the questions on newsprint to hang at the front of the room.

**What Brings You Here?**

- What makes it easy for you to come to this program?
- What makes it hard for you to come to this program?
- What keeps you interested while you are here?
- What would make it more interesting?
- Imagine that for some reason you decide to stop coming to this program. How do you think you would feel?
- Do you think you would return to this or another program at some point? Why or why not?
- What, if anything, would help you to return?

**Step 2:** Set ground rules as a group if these have not already been done. Ask students what they need to feel safe talking in pairs or a group. Write down the ground rules and post them.

**Step 3:** Ask students to work in pairs. Give each student a handout with questions that mirror those on the newsprint. Ask that one student in each pair be the

recorder who will later report back to the whole group key points in their discussion.

- Step 4:** Give the pairs 15 minutes to discuss the questions and record their answers. For classes with very low literacy skills, students can simply discuss the questions and not record their thoughts.
- Step 5:** After 15 minutes, ask the recorder in each pair to report their discussion to the whole group. Record on newsprint their responses to the questions: *What makes it easy for you to come to this program? What makes it hard for you to come to this program? What keeps you interested while you are here? What would make it more interesting?* This will be your record of the conversation.
- Step 6:** After hearing from all the pairs, open up the discussion to the group at large. Ask them such questions as: *Are there other things that people would want to add? What similarities and differences do you see? Are there things that surprise you? What questions do you now have?*
- Step 7:** Then ask students to look at the issues raised on each of the newsprints. Point out that they have written about forces that both help them to continue coming to class and forces that hinder them or get in the way of their coming to class. Ask them the question: *Of all the points written on these newsprints, which two points do you want to work on in class?* (Some possible answers would name something that the class could work on to strengthen or increase the positive forces, something the class could work on to weaken or decrease the negative forces, or an idea for how to make the class more interesting.)
- Step 8:** Put up a fresh piece of newsprint. Ask each student to come up and write two forces from the discussion that they most want the class to work on together. Tell them that if someone else has already written a point that they agree with, they can simply make a check mark next to that point on the newsprint. Continue until each student has written his/her two forces on the newsprint.

- Step 9:** Give each student two dot stickers. Ask each student to read through the list on the newsprint and decide which two areas s/he would like the class to work on together. Tell them to place their dots next to those items.
- Step 10:** The class has now whittled their forces down to the two which they most want to work on and address in class. The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces (strengthen the positive; weaken the negative).







## Snowball Consensus

This activity guides a group to develop a list of ideas or course of action with which all can agree.

- Step 1:** Pose a question to the whole group related to the ideas wanted: *What are the two forces that most help you in continuing to pursue your educational goals, and what are the two forces that most hinder you?* (It's best to give people a specific number of ideas to state, e.g., what *two* forces...)
- Step 2:** Have students get into pairs and discuss these questions, coming to agreement about the two helping and two hindering forces that affect both of their lives. Have one of them write these four forces on a piece of paper.
- Step 3:** Have two pairs join to form a group of four. Have each pair share its list of four items with the other pair. The group of four now has several minutes to come up with a new list of two helping and two hindering forces upon which all four can agree. One of them should now write their new list of four forces, representing their consensus, on a sheet of newsprint, divided like this:

Most Important Forces That . . .	
Help us continue:	Make it hard to continue:
1.	1.
2.	2.

- Step 4:** Have groups post their newsprints on the wall and take turns reading aloud the helping and hindering forces listed on their newsprint. Then ask the whole class to look at the newsprints for similarities, asking: *Are there any helping or hindering forces that appear on everyone's list?* If so, then write these on a fresh newsprint sheet (which will represent the whole class consensus).

- Step 5:** Continue until all of the items listed on more than one newsprint are rewritten on the fresh newsprint. Then ask the class to consider which items still remaining on the original newsprints are important enough to include on the fresh newsprint. When completed, the fresh newsprint represents the whole group's consensus about the most important forces, supporting and hindering, that affect students continuing their learning.
- Step 6:** The next step is to brainstorm with the class the various ways in which the class can work together to address these forces (strengthen the positive, weaken the negative).



## Affinity Diagramming

This activity guides a group to develop a list of categories or key ideas.

(Note: This activity works well with smaller groups of up to six in size.)

- Step 1:** Give each individual in the class a number of small (3" x 3") sticky notes. People can either work individually or in pairs (especially if reading skills are low). Ask each individual or pair to list a number of forces that help them or hinder them in continuing to pursue their educational goals, writing each force separately on a sticky note. They should indicate with a + (positive sign) those forces that help and a - (negative sign) those forces that make it harder.
- Step 2:** Divide people into small groups of four to six. For each group, place a large sheet of newsprint in the middle of the table or on the wall. Ask the members of each group to stick their sticky notes on their newsprint, in no particular order.
- Step 3:** When all sticky notes are on the newsprint, ask each small group to take 10 minutes to read the sticky notes and rearrange them according to ones that are similar. (Note: Sticky notes can be read aloud by one member of the group to others with less reading skill.) At first, they could clump all the positives together and all the negatives together. Then they could try to find sticky notes that go together by content (e.g., all the sticky notes that have to do with transportation). They can do this by simply pulling up and re-placing the sticky note near others that are similar in nature. Duplicate sticky notes can be pasted on top of one another.
- Step 4:** After the sticky notes have been placed near each other in several bunches, ask students to draw a line around each

set of sticky notes so that the separate bunches of sticky notes that are alike are clearly outlined. Then ask each group to choose a name or title for each bunch of like sticky notes and label the categories on their newsprint.

- Step 5:** Ask each small group to put up their newsprint on the wall so that everyone can see the newsprints from all the groups. Ask a reporter from each group to read aloud the category names from his/her newsprint. Ask the whole class what categories they see that are similar across all the newsprints. Facilitate a discussion about what this means to the students: *Do these categories represent the forces that help or hinder them in continuing to pursue their educational goals? What does this mean to them?*
- Step 6:** Ask each student to think about which two categories s/he would most want to work on together as a class in order to make it easier to continue to come to class. Give each student two dot stickers. Ask them to come up to the newsprints and “vote” on the two categories they would most want the class to address together.
- Step 7:** In future classes, use the two prioritized categories as guides to the curriculum. Brainstorm with students ways the class can address these categories as a group in order to increase student persistence (strengthen the positive, weaken the negative).



## Student-to-Student Interviews

This activity is helpful for gathering information with and from students, especially those who are uncomfortable talking in a large group. It may take some practice and guidance for students to be able to interview each other.

**Step 1:** Explain that you will model an interview with a volunteer from the class. You will be the interviewer and the student will be the one interviewed. The questions which you model should be the same ones the students will be given when they do interviews with each other.

Use the following questions that address student motivation, retention, and persistence. (Note: If students are new to the program, these questions can be modified to ask about prior learning experiences.)

- *What made it easy for you to come to this program?*
- *What made it hard for you to come to this program?*
- *What keeps you interested while you are here?*
- *What would make it more interesting?*
- *Imagine that for some reason you decide to stop coming to this program. How do you think you would feel?*
- *Do you think you would return to this or another program at some point? Why or why not?*
- *What, if anything, would help you to return?*

**Step 2:** Conduct the interview, being careful to use good interview techniques (see the list below). Ask students to take notes or remember what they observe.

**Step 3:** Process the activity. Ask students what they observed and what questions they have about interviewing. Pose the question: *What makes a good interview?*

**Step 4:** Record students' responses on a newsprint titled, "Tips for Good Interviewing." Following are some tips to include if they don't come up during the discussion.

### Tips for Good Interviewing

- Listen carefully.
- Take notes to help you remember what the other person says. (If the class is at a low writing level, ask them to report on what they remember.)
- Allow the person being interviewed plenty of time to speak.
- Don't share your own ideas and experience. An interview is not a discussion.
- Both the interviewer and interviewee will have a time to speak.
- Encourage the other person to talk by asking him/her to explain things s/he says.
- Repeat what the other person says to be sure you understood it correctly. This will also help you remember what s/he said.
- Show that you are interested. Make eye contact.

**Step 5:** Give each pair one set of the interview questions. Allow 20 minutes for the interviews, ten minutes for each person. Monitor the time to let the first interviewer know that in just a few minutes it will be the other person's turn.

**Step 6:** Ask each pair to report out. Each person will report on what was learned from the person s/he interviewed. As the learners report out, the teacher should record the responses to the following questions on newsprint: *What made it easy for you to come to this program? What made it hard for you to come to this program?* The newsprint will represent the entire group's responses.

**Step 7:** Talk about both the process of interviewing and the questions themselves.

*Were there any surprises in the interview process?*

*Which role – interviewer or interviewee – did people enjoy more? Why?*

*What similarities and differences do you see in each other's responses?*

*What questions do you now have?*

*What would you like to know more about?*

**Step 8:** Then, together look at the answers on the newsprint questions: *What made it easy for you to come to this program? What made it hard for you to come to this program? What keeps you interested? What would make it more interesting? What*

*would help you return?* Ask each learner to think about which two items on the newsprints they want the class to work on in order to increase their chances of staying in the program. Point out that they can choose one answer from each of the questions, or they can choose both of their answers from one of the questions. Give learners two dot stickers and ask them to come up to the newsprints and place their dots next to the two they have chosen. After everyone has “voted,” count up to see which ones receive the most votes.

**Step 9:** Brainstorm with learners possible next steps for addressing the issues that received the most votes.





## Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

Belzer, A. (1998). Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out. *Focus on Basics*, 2(A), 15-17.

### 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.

## ENDNOTE

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alisa Belzer is project director of the Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network (PALPIN) and a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. She has worked as an ABE/GED teacher, tutor, volunteer coordinator, and trainer.



## “One Day I Will Make It” A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs\*

Porter, K., Cuban, S. & Comings, J. (2005). “One day I will make it” A study of adult student persistence in library literacy programs. NCSALL Research Brief.

<p><b>KEY FINDINGS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The length and intensity of library literacy program students’ participation in services fell short of the amount needed to make substantial improvements in literacy levels and there were no substantial changes in the duration or intensity of program participation over the study period.</li> <li>• Improving student persistence requires that personal barriers to persistence be addressed, but most of the LILAA programs were reluctant to develop a social service capacity. When social services were offered, implementation proved difficult.</li> <li>• Participants in the LILAA programs followed five different “pathways” through literacy education: Short-Term, Tryout, Intermittent, Long-Term, and Mandatory. The programs cannot determine which path a student will follow when the student enrolls.</li> </ul>	<p>Whether in the context of work, parenting, or civic responsibility, strong literacy and communication skills are more essential than ever to realizing one’s full potential in America. Many people who did not acquire these skills while growing up look to adult education programs for instruction in literacy, English language fluency, or other types of basic skills. Research shows, however, that adult students often do not participate in such programs long enough to reap substantial learning gains.<sup>1</sup> Many quickly drop out or attend education activities only sporadically, making little learning progress. Research suggests that students in adult literacy programs participate an average of 70 hours in a 12-month period;<sup>2</sup> yet 100 to 150 hours of participation are required to improve literacy by one grade level.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, concerns about low levels of persistence in adult education have become a major policy and program issue as federal funding has been made increasingly contingent on programs’ abilities to demonstrate improvements in their students’ achievement.</p>
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**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

- Identify and offer the social support services appropriate to the capacity and mission of libraries, and develop a system for referring students to other social service and education providers. Provide support and referrals early and often.
- Teach staff about the different types of pathways traveled by literacy students; enable staff to help students develop plans to continue to learn or sustain their gains during periods when they do not attend the library program.
- Modify existing educational services and add new ones that cater to the variety of pathways traveled by literacy students.
- Consider adapting or adding programmatic improvements in light of the LILAA experiences, including expansions of off-site instruction and drop-in classes, sponsorship programs, and the explicit use of learning plans to support persistence.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

- How can libraries effectively offer support services that are appropriate for both the students' needs and the libraries' missions and capacities?
- Which changes in educational programming lead to more sustained participation on the part of students?
- How can libraries most effectively support students' continued learning when they are not participating in the program?
- What impact do policies have that acknowledge the five student pathways?

Public libraries have long been important providers of adult education. As familiar community institutions, libraries tend to offer welcoming and accessible environments for local residents seeking to improve their literacy skills. Through a range of services that include one-on-one tutoring, classes, and small-group instruction, as well as computer-assisted learning, library literacy programs provide valuable learning opportunities for students who may have no other education options because of their low literacy skills. Like other adult education providers, library literacy programs struggle to help students participate in learning activities long enough to improve their skills. And because students in library literacy programs have particularly low skill levels, they typically need many hours—often years—of instruction.

The Wallace Foundation launched the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative in 1996 with the goal of helping public libraries around the country develop new ways to increase adult students' persistence. The Wallace Foundation also contracted with MDRC and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) to document the libraries' experiences and to examine whether the new strategies led to longer, more intense program participation and improvements in literacy and language skills. In the study, the planning and implementation of strategies to improve student persistence were investigated in well-established library literacy programs in nine branches of five libraries (described in Table 1 on page 107) over the course of four years, from 2000 through 2003.



Three previous reports defined the problem of adult student persistence and recorded early progress in enhancing library literacy program services.<sup>4</sup> This final report from the LILAA persistence study offers lessons on the challenge of addressing factors that undermine persistence. Although a formal impact study was not conducted, this report's findings illustrate the difficulties library literacy programs face in increasing student participation. The analyses presented here break new ground in several respects. First, thorough documentation of students' participation and achievement over the course of the LILAA initiative allowed for a detailed examination of persistence levels and patterns and of achievement trends. In general, participation was not intense enough to make substantial differences in literacy (as confirmed by achievement tests), and the average duration of participation did not systematically improve over the years studied, though the average hours in months when students did attend increased slightly. Secondly, the implementation research suggests why improving student persistence is so difficult and reveals the kinds of supports that adult students need in order to persist. Overall, the report provides a framework for understanding the challenges of putting in place various persistence strategies, and it concludes with recommendations for what library literacy programs and other adult education providers may want to try next.

## KEY FINDINGS

### THE STUDENTS IN THE LILAA PROGRAMS

- *Adults who participated in the LILAA programs shared a desire to improve their low literacy skills, but otherwise they were a diverse group.*

The clientele of the LILAA programs reflected the characteristics of their communities. The programs attracted more women than men (approximately 60 percent of the students were women), and students' ages ranged broadly. Most participants were people of color (less than 5 percent were white), with each site drawing a third or more of its students from a single racial or ethnic group. Many students were recent immigrants who wanted to learn English, while others were native English speakers who wanted to improve their literacy and basic skills.

- *Overall, the literacy levels of students in the LILAA programs were low, and native English speakers showed lower average levels of achievement than did students who were learning English.*

Toward the beginning of the study, 242 students at five of the programs took a battery of tests measuring various literacy competencies. Scores ranged from approximately the third-grade level on assessments of

reading, phonetic decoding, and comprehension to the fifth-grade level on a test of vocabulary. Students who were learning English scored higher than native English speakers on two of the three literacy tests, perhaps in part because they had stronger literacy skills in their native language. The low overall levels of literacy at the outset of the study suggest that the students needed to participate in literacy learning activities for many hours in order to achieve their literacy goals.

### **PATTERNS OF PERSISTENCE AMONG LILAA PARTICIPANTS**

- *Overall, the length and intensity of students' participation in services fell short of the amount needed to make substantial improvements in literacy levels.*

Almost two thirds of entering LILAA students stopped participating within six months of enrolling in library literacy activities. In the months during which students did participate, they spent an average of 8.5 hours in literacy learning activities, or a little more than 2 hours per week. Overall, students spent an average of 58 hours in literacy activities at a LILAA program (before leaving for a period of at least three months)—far fewer than the 100 to 150 hours needed to increase literacy by a grade level.

- *Over the life of the LILAA initiative, overall participation remained low. For all demographic groups, there were no substantial changes in the duration or intensity of program participation over the study period.*

Based on a comparison of two cohorts of students who entered the LILAA programs—one early in the initiative and the other late, after most program improvements had been implemented—there was little change in students' participation patterns over time. About 80 percent of both cohorts stopped participating in program activities within a year after entering, although those in the later cohort stopped participating somewhat sooner. This slight drop in the duration of participation may be attributable to administrative changes aimed at casting a wider net for students (leading to unintended increases in enrollment of students for whom the programs were not appropriate) or to new enrollment processes or expectations that may have deterred some students. The intensity of participation increased slightly between cohorts, from 8.3 hours per month for the earlier cohort to 9.0 hours per month for the later cohort. This slight increase in the intensity of participation is attributable to students' spending more time in the computer lab, probably to take advantage of the expansion and upgrade of computer facilities at all the programs during the LILAA initiative. At the same time, the average number of hours in tutoring declined from the earlier to the later cohort.

Older students tended to participate in the programs longer than younger students, but—across all subgroups defined by gender, race, and primary learning activity—there were no significant differences in persistence or in trends in persistence.

- *Although the LILAA programs faced similar challenges in improving student persistence, the severity of the problems varied across programs.*

The levels of student persistence varied considerably across the nine LILAA programs. For example, exit rates one month after program entry ranged from 4 percent to 42 percent, and exit rates six months after program entry ranged from 44 percent to 84 percent. These wide ranges likely reflect differences in types of students, recruitment and intake procedures, or strategies for raising student engagement.

The intensity of students' participation in the LILAA programs during the months in which they were active also varied substantially by program, ranging from 6.4 hours to 11.4 hours per month in active months. The differences in intensity could reflect different capacities to help students dedicate substantial amounts of time to literacy activities. Alternatively, the differences could reflect different priorities regarding what kinds of students to serve and the types and frequency of instruction to offer.

### **TRENDS IN ACHIEVEMENT AMONG LILAA PARTICIPANTS**

- *There were modest improvements in student achievement as measured by standardized tests.*

A sample of students took achievement tests at the beginning of the study, and about two thirds took the same battery of tests approximately one year later. For these students, there were small but meaningful average gains (enough to exhibit improved skills) on the tests that measured overall reading comprehension but little or no improvement on other tests measuring phonemic decoding and vocabulary. No subgroups of students defined by gender, age, or race were more likely or less likely to experience improvement. Also, there was no relationship between the number of hours of participation and achievement gains. Students who participated for more hours between the two waves of tests were no more likely to show higher achievement after one year than were students who participated fewer hours. This finding suggests that students with higher participation levels did not spend enough time in learning activities to improve the literacy skills captured by standardized tests.

## THE CHALLENGE OF IMPROVING PERSISTENCE

- *The students in the LILAA programs faced a variety of difficulties that hampered their efforts to participate steadily and intensively in literacy learning.*

Most of the students were from low-income households, and many worked long, unstable hours. Many also had health problems or histories of substance abuse that prevented them from keeping steady employment. Program staff believed that many native-English-speaking students had undiagnosed learning disabilities that hampered them in their education and in other areas of their lives. Some students were in abusive relationships and lacked emotional support to improve their literacy skills. Finally, some of the students who were learning English were recent immigrants struggling to acclimate to their new environments. All these personal difficulties can be serious barriers to persistence in literacy services.

- *Improving student persistence requires that personal barriers to persistence be addressed, but most of the LILAA programs were reluctant to develop a social service capacity. When social services were offered, implementation proved difficult.*

Six of the LILAA programs did not attempt to implement such support services as child care and transportation assistance. Program staff felt that social service supports would distract them from their core mission of improving literacy. Others worried that such services would conflict with key pillars of the U.S. library system: the privacy and equal treatment of all patrons. Capacity constraints were also a key consideration. Of the three programs that attempted to provide an in-house social service—which in each case consisted of on-site child care or transportation vouchers—only one succeeded in meeting students’ needs. The services offered by the other two programs were mismatched with students’ needs or could not be sustained. Given that few approaches to addressing students’ personal barriers were implemented successfully, it is not surprising that persistence did not improve over the course of the study.

- *The LILAA programs were more successful in making programmatic improvements than in offering social services. The programmatic changes were of degree rather than kind, and they had less potential than social supports to improve student persistence.*

The LILAA programs implemented a variety of strategies that strengthened their core services. Some strategies (such as off-site instruction, drop-in classes, and expanded self-paced computer-assisted

instruction) made literacy services more accessible; some (such as improved tutor training and faster entry into instructional services) were designed to make students feel more welcome and more comfortable; and other strategies (such as diagnostic testing, interventions for students with learning disabilities, and goal-setting activities) focused on students' educational needs and goals. Programmatic strategies were easier to implement than social service strategies, because the former are more in line with libraries' core mission of improving literacy. However, most of the strategies that the LILAA programs put in place represented small improvements on existing practices. Combined with the limited potential of these strategies to affect participation, this finding may also explain why there was no improvement in student persistence over the course of the LILAA study.

### ADULT STUDENTS USE LIBRARY LITERACY PROGRAMS IN DIFFERENT WAYS

- *Participants in the LILAA programs followed different “pathways” through literacy education.*

The LILAA study uncovered five main persistence pathways among adult literacy students at the LILAA programs. Students on the long-term pathway participated on a steady, prolonged basis. They typically had few or no barriers to persistence and found program participation enjoyable. However, many students on the *long-term* pathway lacked clear goals and may not have concentrated enough on their literacy education to make meaningful improvements in their literacy skills. Other students' program participation was required as part of an agreement with a public assistance or law enforcement agency. Students on this *mandatory* pathway typically faced several barriers to participation, but, with the support of their agency, they were often able to persist.

Students on the three most common pathways tended to have clear literacy goals but had barriers to persistence that affected their participation in different ways. Those with the most or highest barriers often followed the *tryout* pathway, leaving the program soon after entering it. They often needed to address personal difficulties before making a commitment to literacy learning. Students on the *intermittent* pathway also faced considerable barriers to participation, but they dropped in and out of the program for months at a time. Their continuing contact with the program indicates a desire to participate, but the frequent interruptions in their attendance interfered with progress toward achievement goals. Students on the *short-term* pathway may or may not

have had high barriers to persistence, but they had targeted, short-term goals that they were able to reach quickly before leaving the program.

- *Libraries cannot determine in advance which pathway any individual literacy student will take, but they can do more to acknowledge, accommodate, and improve the persistence of students on all pathways.*

Given the large numbers of students, their diverse needs, and the complicated nature of barriers to persistence, addressing the individual needs of all students is beyond the capacity of most library literacy programs. The LILAA programs tended to respond to this reality by developing strategies that could be applied to all students, but persistence levels remained low. The long-term pathway may seem to be the most promising route to literacy learning, but it is not feasible for all students. If students feel that this is the only pathway available, they may be less likely to persist or even to enroll in a literacy program. Although all the LILAA programs offered a warm, welcoming environment, some students seemed not to realize that other persistence pathways were also available, acceptable, and valuable.

### **WHAT LIBRARY LITERACY PROGRAMS MIGHT TRY NEXT**

- *Offer realistic social support services.*

Legitimate concerns about equity, privacy, and capacity may limit the extent to which public libraries can offer services beyond literacy instruction. Nonetheless, because boosting student persistence sometimes requires that personal and environmental difficulties be addressed, some library-based social services seem to warrant further exploration. One of the LILAA programs showed that on-site child care, for example, can be part of a library-based literacy program. Although the LILAA programs' attempts to provide transportation assistance were unsuccessful, further experimentation may reveal more successful approaches to implementation. And other types of services, such as some forms of counseling, may also show promise.

- *Develop a system for referring students to other social service and education providers.*

Providing referrals fits well with a library's role as an information resource in the community. Library literacy programs could offer information about local social service and education providers more proactively by formalizing and institutionalizing their referral processes. Rather than relying on staff to offer advice when a student reveals a difficulty or a need that they cannot address, for example, they could

develop ways to make sure that students have access to referral information at any time. Library programs could also develop relationships with other community service providers in order to better understand locally available services and to make sure that their students actually receive the services they need after they are referred. This information could then be regularly distributed among program staff, so that all staff have accurate, up-to-date information to share with students who seek assistance.

- *Adapt and add programmatic improvements.*

The programmatic improvements that were observed in the LILAA persistence study—though only minor enhancements of what the nine well-established programs were already doing—might serve as models for library literacy programs that have not yet implemented any strategies along these lines. Moreover, even programs that are already implementing the programmatic strategies in some form might wish to alter them in light of the LILAA experiences. For example, off-site instruction and drop-in classes, which the LILAA programs implemented on a limited basis to make instruction more accessible to students who had transportation difficulties or scheduling conflicts, could be expanded according to student demand. Similarly, programs might try adapting the drop-in approach, which the LILAA programs offered solely in the form of an English-language conversation class, to other types of instruction. Also, evaluating and addressing learning disabilities—a key barrier to persistence for many adult literacy students—might also warrant introduction or expansion.

The study's findings also point to two new strategies for library literacy programs to consider. First, staff could implement sponsorship programs in which students are matched with individuals who can support their persistence and learning. The 2003 LILAA report notes that students who had a sponsor attributed their ability to persist to that person.<sup>5</sup> Library literacy programs could foster sponsorship by helping students identify sponsors, by involving sponsors in program activities, and by educating sponsors about how to support students. Second, programs could use learning plans as a way to support persistence. By incorporating not only tutoring and classes but also homework and other activities—as well as any participation in social service or other education programs—learning plans could serve as a path toward literacy goals that guide students both in and out of the program and as a way to link different periods of participation.

- *Modify existing services, and design new services to help students on all pathways.*

The pathway perspective that emerges from the LILAA study provides a new way for libraries to think about the implementation and goals of their literacy programs. In applying the pathway perspective to the recommendations that come out of the LILAA experience, the study suggests that programs should put less emphasis on group learning activities—in which one can easily fall behind—in favor of offering more one-on-one, computer-based, and self-directed activities that allow students to dip in and out as their ability to participate fluctuates. This perspective also highlights the importance of providing referrals to social service and education providers in a timely, systematic fashion.

The pathway perspective might also guide the content of learning plans. For example, programs could incorporate self-study plans to accommodate the intermittent pathway, additional education choices to accommodate the short-term pathway, and benchmarks met through a variety of activities to accommodate the long-term pathway.

Finally, library literacy programs could take steps to heighten awareness of the variability and unpredictability of students' journeys on the persistence pathways. The goals would be to create a program atmosphere in which there is no stigma associated with participating irregularly or with returning to the program after a hiatus; to give students information up front about how to continue learning during periods when their participation is intermittent or nil; and to follow up systematically when participation becomes erratic.

## NOTES

1. See M. Young, H. Fleischman, M. Fitzgerald, and N. Morgan, *National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs: Patterns and Predictors of Client Attendance* (Arlington, VA: Development Associates, 1994).
2. This estimate comes from an official in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education.
3. See T. Sticht, *Evaluation of the Reading Potential Concept for Marginally Illiterate Adults* (Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization, 1982); G. Darkenwald, *Adult Literacy Education: A Review of the Research and Priorities for Future Inquiry* (New York: Literacy Assistance Center, 1986); and J. Comings, A. Sum, and J. Uvin, *New Skills for a New Economy: Adult Education's Key Role in Sustaining Economic Growth and Expanding Opportunity* (Boston: Mass Inc., 2000).
4. See J. Comings and S. Cuban, "*So I Made Up My Mind*": *Introducing a Study of Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs* (New York: MDRC, 2000); J. Comings, S. Cuban, J. Bos, and C. Taylor, "*I Did It for Myself*": *Studying Efforts to Increase Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs* (New York: MDRC, 2001); and J. Comings, S. Cuban, J. Bos, and K. Porter, "*As Long As It Takes*": *Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs* (New York: MDRC, 2003).
5. Comings, Cuban, Bos, and Porter, 2003.



**TABLE 1 : THE FIVE LIBRARIES PARTICIPATING IN THE LILAA PERSISTENCE STUDY**

<b>Library</b>	<b>Number of Branches</b>	<b>Where Program Is Housed</b>	<b>Program Features</b>
Greensboro (NC) Public Library	9	Chavis and Glenwood branches	Chavis offers afternoon and evening GED classes and a computer lab. Glenwood offers small-group instruction in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), one-on-one tutoring, and a computer lab.
New York Public Library	85	Fordham (Bronx), Wakefield (Bronx), and Seward Park (Manhattan) branches	Fordham serves 150 students with individual tutorials and in small groups and offers a computer lab for independent literacy self-instruction. Wakefield serves about 100 students, mostly of Afro-Caribbean origin, in small groups and computer self-study; offers job search resources. Seward Park serves a diverse group of 80 students in small-group tutoring.
Oakland (CA) Public Library	19	Downtown office building near the library	Founded in 1984, the program offers classes and one-on-one tutoring through a mix of 150 volunteers in addition to professional staff; with 20 computers, offers computer-assisted instruction.
Queens Borough (NY) Public Library	62	Central (Jamaica), Flushing, and Rochdale Village branches	Founded in 1977, the program enrolls over 2,500 adults per year, offering ESOL and basic literacy instruction.
Redwood City (CA) Public Library	3	Redwood City Public Library, with services in other community organizations, including schools, a jail, and a halfway house	More than 180 volunteers tutor approximately 200 adults one-on-one and in small groups; the program includes a learning disabilities component. Three quarters of adult students are Hispanic.

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\* NOTE: Quantitative data were collected only from the Glenwood program.



## Program Data on Duration and Intensity of Instruction

Review your program data to figure out what your retention rates are by using exit rates after one session, before 12 contact hours, and after one month, three months, six months, and so on. Finally, determine how many students stay through completion of their goals and/or the program year.

Also, record the number of mandatory and short-term students. Figure the “intensity” of students’ participation by number of hours per week, month, and year. Complete the following table, and reflect on how it measures retention and persistence.

Total number of students	_____
Number of mandated students	_____
Number of short-term students (< 30 hours) with goal attainment	_____

Students who exited the program...	Number exited	Percentage exited (number exited/total number)
After 1 session	_____	_____
Before 12 contact hours	_____	_____
With 12 or more contact hours, but less than 1 month	_____	_____
1 to 3 months	_____	_____
4 to 6 months	_____	_____
7-9 months	_____	_____
10-12 months	_____	_____
Completed 1 year without exiting	_____	_____

Average total weeks of attendance	_____
Average total hours attended	_____

