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ABSTRACT

Findings from research on student retention and adult education participation can guide educators in improving the persistence of adult students. In order to increase student persistence, programs and teachers should: address real needs; create a supportive learning environment; minimize problems and barriers; communicate accurately; and monitor attendance and dropout rate so that a problem can be identified and dealt with quickly. Variables affecting participation in adult education have been identified: (1) factors having to do with the individual; (2) socioenvironmental forces; (3) individual expectations; (4) the learning experience; (5) continuous evaluation; and (6) satisfaction with the learning experience. Among the models which have been advanced to explain participation are the Congruence Model which states that congruence within the participant, and between the participant and the educational environment, can determine whether a person drops out; and the Chain of Response (COR) Model which is based on the premise that participation is not a single act but a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the individual's position in the environment. This fact sheet includes a bibliography of two references and three additional resources, some of which are available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Retaining Adult Students.

OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 12.

by

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Career, and Vocational Education

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RETAINING ADULT STUDENTS

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

The factors that motivate adults to participate in and drop out of adult education have not been identified. But the last twenty years of research has many implications that can be used as a guide. Check your program strategy to see if it includes some of the following suggestions and implications put forward by the research on student persistence and dropping out.

Address real needs. When adults attend a workshop, course, or other educational activity, they expect to benefit in specific ways. Programs that do not assess and address adult needs and interests almost always have high dropout rates. The most difficult task is assessing needs that have not been verbalized.

Create a supportive learning environment. Experienced adult students expect a supportive and flexible learning environment where they are treated by the teacher as equals and where social relations are comfortable rather than tense or competitive. Teachers should adapt instruction as much as possible to accommodate students' particular needs, goals, and abilities. They should let students know what is expected of them and what they can expect in return, and should provide frequent feedback on student performance in a sensitive, constructive manner.

Minimize problems and barriers. Program developers and administrators can do a great deal to counteract negative environmental factors. Accessibility, flexibility, convenience, efficiency, and sensitivity are particularly germane in this regard. Remember—the role of student is a secondary one for adults. If it interferes too much with other primary roles and responsibilities, most adults feel compelled to drop out. Accessible learning sites, convenient scheduling, and even the provision of child care or transportation services may be necessary to enhance student retention.

Communicate Accurately. Do not promise more than you can deliver. Communicate clearly and candidly. Let the students know, both in promotional materials and in the classroom, what is expected or required of them to profit from the course or program in question. There is convincing evidence that most adult students are unaware of the commitments required of them, and of the problems they are likely to encounter in attending classes. Related to this issue is the practice of enrolling unprepared students in courses or programs where specific qualifications or abilities are necessary for success. If the adult education agency staff is unable or unwilling to remediate severe deficiencies, or to exclude unprepared students, students should be informed that they may encounter problems. Reasons for such an assessment should also be given.

Dropout assessment and action. It is important to develop a system for recording and monitoring attendance and dropout rate so that a problem can be identified and dealt with quickly. Irregular attendance, especially absence from two or more consecutive classes is symptomatic of problems that can be resolved by an emphatic teacher or counselor confronting the potential dropout directly.

If you have not integrated all of these suggested implications into your planning strategy, you may need to "rethink" some of the principles. To accomplish such a task, you might want to look at the circumstances under which an adult student enters a program.

RESEARCH-IDENTIFIED VARIABLES

The studies on participation in adult education have identified the following variables.

Factors Having to Do With the Individual

- initial motivation
- relevant abilities
- self-confidence

Socioenvironmental Forces

- impersonal or situational reinforcers (both positive and negative) such as illness, class schedule, and availability of transportation
- social-interpersonal reinforcers, such as encouragement from spouse, children, and peer and reference groups

Individual Expectations

- outcomes or benefits
- ability to successfully cope with the learning process
- teacher behavior (supportiveness, competence, appropriateness)
- behavior of other students

The Learning Experience

- initial expectations concerning teacher and other student behavior
- the effectiveness and enjoyable qualities of the teaching-learning process
- the extent to which the desired outcomes are achieved

Continuous Evaluation

- based largely on initial expectations
- the extent to which reality is perceived as congruent or incongruent with these expectations

Satisfaction with the Learning Experience

- in relation to students' expectations
- at a given point in time

Most recently, it has been found that education attainment, the most educationally relevant variable included in most descriptive studies, is more closely related to educational participation than are *race, sex, income*, and many other variables used to classify adult learners.

PERSISTENCE/DROPOUT MODELS

In most cases these variables have been manipulated under loosely structured experimental designs in order to explain participation. Two models that deserve to be explored further are the Congruence Model and the Chain of Response Model.

The Congruence Model. Boshier's (1973) congruence model of adult education participation purports to take into account the internal psychological and external environmental variables. The notion of congruence is used by Boshier in two somewhat different ways. "Intrasef congruence" is basically a function of psychological adjustment. "Growth-motivated" or self-actualizing adults manifest intrasef congruence, while "deficiency motivated," other directed, and neurotic adults are characterized by intrasef incongruence. Boshier hypothesizes that intrasef incongruence leads to "self-other" incongruence (i.e., incongruence between self and other students, and self and teacher), and that self-other congruence, in combination with social, psychological, and subenvironmental variables leads to a person's dropping out. In short, congruence within the participant, and between the participant and the educational environment can determine whether a person persists or drops out.

Chain of Response (COR) Model. Although Cross' (1981) model has not been tested in its entirety, the conceptual framework is worth considering so as to get an overview of the persistence/dropout phenomena. Her model is based on the premise that participation in a learning activity, whether in organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in the environment. This conception of behavior as a constantly flowing stream rather than a series of discrete events has been prompted by recent work in motivation which suggests that it is more important to understand the determinants of change than to find what "drives" impel specific behavior. Whether or not the individual reaches the point of participation in adult learning is controlled by an atmosphere of goals and the expectation that goals will be met. This COR model suggests that the key to understanding participation in adult learning begins with the understanding of attitudes toward self and education.

The intention of reporting the research findings and suggestions has been to initiate your involvement. A more developed understanding of the problem and solutions can be achieved by exploring the suggested readings.

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This Overview is based on the following publications:

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