Table 1: The Five Libraries Participating in the LILAA Persistence Study

Library	Number of Branches	Where Program Is Housed	Program Features
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.

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

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"One Day I Will Make It"

A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs*

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Key Findings

- 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.

- 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.

- 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.

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.[1] 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;[2] yet 100 to 150 hours of participation are required to improve literacy by one grade level.[3] 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.

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 8) 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.[4] 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. Second,

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.

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.

• 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.[5] 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.

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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.