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Managing Programs for Adults Learning English

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels and adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve goals related to job, family, and further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for program administrators to provide information and strategies that will promote their success with managing programs for adults learning English.

Introduction

Programs for adults learning English vary widely in size and scope. Some are large, multilevel programs, such as the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Virginia, which has more than 45 staff members, over 100 volunteers, and an array of student services for the 7,500 learners served annually at the program's 7 locations. Others are relatively small, such as Montana's Bozeman Adult Learning Center, which serves fewer than 70 students a year with 1 part-time teacher, 1 administrator, and a number of volunteers. Programs can be found in community colleges, public school systems, community centers, corrections facilities, and workplaces. They can be faith-based, for profit (proprietary), managed by local education agencies, or community supported (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008a).

Administrators in these programs are also diverse in their experience and training. While some may be managers by profession, others may have no previous experience in program administration. In the latter category are many experienced teachers of English language learners who have moved into program management. Others may have managed, or are managing, literacy, ABE, ASE, or other types of programs and have added an adult English as a second language (ESL) component to their existing responsibilities.

This brief addresses the needs of administrators with these varied backgrounds. It begins by outlining fundamental responsibilities of adult education administrators. It then describes components of typical programs serving adult English language learners and includes resources and tools that can facilitate successful administration of program components. It concludes with suggestions for further research.

Fundamental Responsibilities of Program Administrators

The work of administrators of programs serving adult English language learners is multifaceted. In addition to implementing the program's vision and goals, determining progress and success in meeting those goals, and managing financial and policy requirements, administrators of adult ESL programs need to have knowledge of second language acquisition, research-based instructional approaches with this population, and the daily realities and needs

of teachers and learners. Some administrators may also be teachers in their own programs and need to juggle two roles. For administrators of programs large and small, the literature on program management consistently describes the responsibilities of administrators to include successfully implementing program components and playing a leadership role that involves ensuring the program's financial viability (e.g., Christison & Stoller, 1997; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008; Langerman & Smith, 1979; Matuszowicz, 1999; Reasor, 1986).

Implementing Program Components

Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003) gives information about program components, standards for achieving them, and ways to assess the extent to which they are in place (see also Peyton, 2005, for further discussion of these components and electronic tools that can be used in program review). The following program components are discussed here:

- Knowledge of adult learners and second language acquisition processes
- Learner recruitment, intake, and orientation
- Assessment of learner needs and progress
- Learner retention and transition
- Learner support services
- Curriculum and instruction
- Staffing and employment conditions
- Staff professional development supervision, evaluation, and support

Knowledge of Adult Learners and Second Language Acquisition Processes

Adult English language learners bring to programs complex identities and skill sets that are based on a number of factors, including age, gender, ethnicity, cultural background, sociopolitical position, language and literacy, desire to learn English, and opportunities to use English outside of class (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008a). Program administrators need to understand these diverse backgrounds and the impact they can have on learners' language development and success in and beyond the program (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

To learn about the learner populations in their programs, administrators might consult data on local immigrant and refugee populations (including U.S. Census data on the foreign born) and data collected from initial intake and needs assessments on learner characteristics. Young and Peyton (2008) discuss ways in which administrators can use the following data to understand learners in their programs:

Personal background (age, sex, native language[s], country of origin, ethnicity, level of education, literacy level in native language and in English, length of time in the United States, occupation in the native country and in the United States)

- Reasons for being in the program and educational goals
- Participation patterns in previous programs or the current program, if relevant (enrollment, attendance, persistence)

Administrators without training in the second language acquisition processes of adults will want to familiarize themselves with the field and with what makes these specific processes different from those with which the administrator may be more familiar, such as learning among children or among native English-speaking adults. Familiarity with the research and with practice-oriented publications in the field will help the administrator make informed decisions about serving learners. The following resources provide helpful information:

Framework for Quality Professional Development for Practitioners Working With Adult English Language Learners (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008b) gives information about the knowledge and skills that teachers of adult English language learners need and approaches to professional development for teachers.

How Languages Are Learned (Lightbown and Spada, 2006) gives an overview of second language acquisition research, including a review of popular ideas about language learning and research-based applications for classroom teaching.

Practitioner Toolkit: Working With Adult English Language Learners (National Center for Family Literacy & Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008) provides background information on adult nonnative English speakers in the United States; the challenges of programs that serve them; tools and guidance for conducting orientation, needs assessment, and other program activities; and numerous articles on topics in adult ESL education.

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is the national professional organization serving practitioners who work with English language learners of all ages. TESOL's Web site (www.tesol.org) links to news, publications, communities, research, and other items that can help administrators become and stay current in the field.

Learner Recruitment, Intake, and Orientation

The processes of learner recruitment, intake (registering learners for classes), and orientation must be carefully planned. They are particularly important for adults learning English, some of whom may not be accustomed to the educational system in the United States or even in their own country. Program administrators should have a recruitment plan with clear objectives and should collect data on outreach efforts and successes, patterns of enrollment, and learner feedback on recruitment (Comings, Soricone, & Santos, 2006; Wonacott, 2001). For example, the Boston Higher Education Resource Center ESOL Program's orientation and intake process includes small group activities in which potential students meet with returning students who talk about how they overcame difficulties that could have led them to drop out and how they have benefited from enrollment in the program (Boston Higher Education Resource Center, n.d.).

Intake and orientation are also crucial opportunities to gather information about learners' needs, goals, expectations, and language and skill levels, as well as to welcome learners to the program. These practices contribute to a learning environment that is attentive to and respectful of learners' abilities, which can improve learner gains and the overall success of the program in meeting its goals. For programs serving adults learning English, this process may be complicated by both language and cultural issues (Schalge & Soga, 2008). One program in Northern Virginia provides a toolkit that allows students to sample program activities before enrolling and helps to clarify expectations of students, teachers, and other program staff (Prince William County, 2008).

Assessment of Learner Needs and Progress

Most adult education programs, particularly those serving adults learning English, serve learners with differing levels of language and literacy skills and past schooling. Program administrators need to ensure that all learners' needs are met; otherwise, learners may drop out without voicing dissatisfaction (Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997). Needs assessments can also provide insight into learner transition patterns and can guide the development of curricula that are responsive to learners' needs (Lambert, 2008). For these reasons, programs need to assess learner needs and abilities shortly after intake and consistently evaluate progress throughout enrollment (Snow & Strucker, 2000). Needs assessment tools for use with learners at all levels of English proficiency can be found in the *Practitioner Toolkit: Working with Adult English Language Learners* (National Center for Family Literacy & Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008).

Many program administrators use a variety of assessment tools to determine and track learner progress on a range of competencies (e.g., language proficiency, numeracy, health literacy) (see Van Duzer, 2002, and Van Duzer & Berdán, 2000, for discussion of how assessments can be selected, developed, and used). Standardized assessments are

important for outcome and accountability reporting and for tracking learner progress and program effectiveness. Programs that receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education generally use the following standardized tests with adults learning English:

- *BEST Plus* (www.best-plus.net)
- *BEST Literacy* (www.cal.org/topics/ta/bestliteracy.html)
- *CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System;* www.casas.org/home*)*
- *TABE CLAS-E (Test of Adult Basic Education, Complete Language Assessment System-English;* www.ctb.com*)*

Teachers also use a variety of formative, classroom-based assessments; learner self-assessments; and student observations to track learners' progress toward meeting curriculum goals. Increasingly, program administrators are using assessment data to inform program improvement and teacher professional development (see Young & Peyton, 2008, for a description of how this might be done; Gottlieb and Nguyen, 2007, also provide a useful blueprint for the comprehensive assessment of English language learners).

Learner Retention and Transition

Learner retention, or persistence, is the extent to which learners remain with the program, both within a single course and through the subsequent classes and levels that are offered. A number of factors affect adult learner retention, including availability of classes that meet the needs of learners who may be juggling multiple job and family responsibilities; availability of child care; and links to opportunities beyond the program such as personal, education, and career counseling. At the Genesis Center in Rhode Island, potential English language learners are given a simple yes/no questionnaire that asks them to gauge for themselves whether they can commit to the class schedule and requirements at the present time (The Genesis Center, 2008). (See Comings, Soricone, & Santos, 2006; Crandall & Shepherd, 2004; Reder, 2000; and Wonacott, 2001, for discussions of ways to promote learner retention; see World Education, 2009, for tools to use to promote learner persistence.)

Transition involves moving beyond the program to other educational and vocational opportunities, to college and university (Warriner, 2007; Zafft, Kallenbach, Spohn, 2006), or to workplace training and work (Burt & Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). In assisting adult English language learners in their transition to other educational and vocational environments, program administrators need to help them connect with a variety of student academic and career support services, including college preparation courses, financing options for higher education, job training programs, and local job fairs (Compton, Cox, & Santos Laanan, 2006; Reder, 2000; see also Mathews-Aydinli, 2006, for discussion of these and other ways that programs and their managers can prepare English language learners to transition to further education or training).

Learner Support Services

Program administrators need to collaborate with service providers in the community to create access to other needed services, including health care (e.g., through connections with community health and other social service organizations), child care (e.g., through access to daycare providers and afterschool childcare programs, or through providing child care within the program), and academic support services (e.g., computers and other technology; libraries; academic advising; supplemental instruction, including tutoring help outside the classroom; study groups; test accommodations; counseling; and advising; and self-study resources).

Curriculum and Instruction

A curriculum is the complete course of study offered by a program. It may include statements about not only language skills and content knowledge to be gained, but also about social competencies, life skills, and desired outcomes. Crucially, a curriculum informs the selection of materials (e.g., textbooks) and the choice of instructional activities. Having the students purchase their own textbooks has been cited as a factor that contributes to per-

sistence as students feel they have a stake in their education and also the ability to study on their own (Roberts, 2006). Curriculum is constantly changing because it is the tangible result of ongoing processes that include conducting needs assessments, setting goals and objectives, identifying program beliefs regarding language learning, organizing individual courses, and evaluating outcomes and feedback (Graves, 2000).

Schaetzel & Young (2007) describe how content standards for adult ESL programs (e.g., the *Maryland Content Standards for Adult ESL/ESOL* [Maryland State Department of Education, 2003]) can guide curriculum development. An administrator can lead program staff in carrying out the necessary processes and in creating a dynamic curriculum that responds to student needs and conforms to the standards of the field.

Quality instruction reflects principles of adult learning and language acquisition and is guided by the program's curriculum. A program administrator will want to ensure that the teachers in the program

- Understand the principles of adult learning and the language acquisition needs and patterns of adults learning English (see Knowles, 1973, for a list of key principles of adult learning; Lightbown & Spada, 2006, for a list of language learning principles that can guide instruction)
- Are familiar with the state's or other states' ESL/ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) content standards and how to align instruction with the standards (Schaetzel & Young, 2007; Young & Smith, 2006)
- Know how to promote interaction among learners and integrate focus on vocabulary and focus on form into communicative, topic-focused instruction (Rodriguez, 2009)
- Know how to use appropriate technologies to facilitate learning (Moore, 2009)
- Are familiar with common misconceptions about second language learning and the research on those topics, such as the role of focus on form, the native language, and vocabulary knowledge in second language learning.

(See the *Framework for Quality Professional Development for Practitioners Working With Adult English Language Learners*, Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008b, for discussion of content knowledge that teachers of adults learning English need; Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005; Condelli & Wrigley, 2002; Goldenberg, 2008; Harper & De Jong 2004; and Wagner & Venezky, 1999, for discussion of common misconceptions about language learning.)

Staffing and Employment Conditions

Program administrators should provide a respectful and welcoming environment for teachers and other staff. This may include offering compensation and benefits for staff at a level commensurate with those of comparable staff in similar programs, the implementation of policies and procedures that encourage professional treatment of employees and volunteers, and the creation of a safe and clean working environment. Given the diverse learner populations in adult education programs serving English language learners, staff should be linguistically and culturally diverse, trained in cross-cultural communication, and aware of the needs of this population of learners. (See Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003, for a list of desired working conditions for teachers in programs serving adult English language learners; 2008, for standards for teacher quality.

Staff Professional Development, Supervision, Evaluation, and Support

Program staff need ongoing professional development that engages them with real-world questions and practical applications (Magestro & Stanford-Blair, 2000; Wagner & Venezky, 1999). Facilitating professional development efforts can include providing the following:

- Access to a series of workshops and institutes that provide opportunities to practice ideas and strategies in the classroom—perhaps with a coach or mentor—and to interact with col-

leagues online (Schaetzel, Peyton, & Burt, 2007)

- Study circles that focus on a specific topic over a period of time, with reading and discussion sessions. The *CAELA Guide for Adult ESL Trainers* (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007) includes study circle guides on four topics relevant to teachers of adults learning English: second language acquisition; teaching learners at beginning levels; teaching listening, speaking, and pronunciation; and preparing adult English language learners for the workforce.
- Classroom-based research and reflective practice (Farrell, 2008; Florez, 2000). Johnson (2002) describes the process of action research and how teachers may use it for professional growth and problem solving.

Administrators are encouraged to create a data-driven, formalized professional development plan and implement it over time in collaboration with teachers. Young and Peyton (2008) describe ways to implement this process, and the *CAELA Guide for Adult ESL Trainers* (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007) gives descriptions of a number of professional development models.

Two previous briefs in this series discuss knowledge and skills that administrators in programs with adults learning English need in order to work effectively with teachers. In *Supporting and Supervising Teachers Working with Adults Learning English*, Young (2009) emphasizes that administrators should engage collaboratively with teachers to reflect on and improve their practice. In *Observing and Providing Feedback to Teachers of Adults Learning English*, Marshall and Young (2009) suggest a number of collaborative and alternative forms of observation and feedback that program administrators can use with teachers, including teacher portfolios, peer observation, and journaling, as well as other more traditional forms.

Providing Effective Leadership

Leadership in programs for adults learning English requires collaboration, communication and advocacy outside the program, ongoing learning, and effective financial administration.

Collaborative Approaches to Program Administration

Effective administrators collaborate with teachers and other staff in a variety of ways, such as through the development of program goals, curriculum and materials, and professional development plans that focus on ensuring that program staff are able to work effectively with a diverse learner population, often from many different countries and cultures, with a range of language and literacy skills in many different languages (Bruce & Bishop, 2002; Condelli & Wrigley, 2002; Schwarzer, 2009; Wrigley, 2003).

Learners are also partners in the collaborative approach. Learners should be given opportunities to give feedback on course content, instructional practices, and the extent to which the program has met their expectations. Data of this type can provide valuable information to administrators seeking to improve program components and make resource allocation decisions. It is particularly important for programs serving diverse learner populations with many language and cultural backgrounds. Questions presented to learner focus groups or on a survey might include the following:

- What do you like about the program?
- What needs to be improved?
- Do you have any suggestions for us?
- Would you recommend this program to others?

Although adult English language learners may not feel comfortable initially giving this kind of feedback to program managers, teachers, and others in authority, it is a skill worth acquiring. Tools given to learners at orientation, such as *Learning English: The Journey Begins with You* (Prince William County, 2008), can provide information about the program and engage students from the beginning as active partners in learning.

Communication and Advocacy Outside a Program

Communication outside the program is carried out to ensure that the program is visible, accessible, and of service to the local community (Wu & Carter, 2000). To accomplish this, program administrators need to understand the community they are serving and establish connections and work with other organizations, such as those involved in workforce development and higher education, or those that promote transitions to jobs, community colleges, and other education opportunities (Burt & Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; McLaughlin, Rodriguez, & Madden, 2008; Zacharakis, 2007; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). An administrator might also advocate for the program with other local and state stakeholders—school, county, and state boards of education; state departments of education; state and local funders; community organizations; and advisory councils—to gather information about available opportunities and inform stakeholders about the program and its participants (Warriner, 2007).

Ongoing Learning

Professional development for program administrators starts with an assessment of their own strengths and the areas in which they need to develop knowledge and skills. These areas may include leadership; knowledge of the adult ESL field; balancing multiple stakeholders' needs and interests; and using data to guide systematic decision making, strategic planning, and program improvement. Becoming involved in action research (Campbell & Tovar, 2006) and systematic, ongoing, formal, and informal learning are two ways to address these needs (Kelly, 2008; Ziegler, 2005). Administrators may also benefit from becoming involved with communities of adult education program administrators through online discussion lists (e.g., the series of lists sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, particularly the Adult English Language Learners Discussion List and conferences (e.g., Commission on Adult Basic Education [COABE], TESOL). Finally, administrators may want to read literature on organizational management theory and practice that is responsive to individual situations and stakeholders (see, e.g., Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008).

Administering Finances Responsibly

Administrators of programs for adults learning English, like all program administrators, are responsible for securing the financial resources of the program, keeping fiscal information organized, and ensuring funding continuity (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003). Revenue sources for adult education programs can be varied. Many programs associated with community colleges or public schools are funded by state, local, and federal government monies. Others are funded by private grants. Some operate on a for-profit basis, collecting fees from learners, while others are supported by faith-based organizations and other community endeavors.

Proactive administrators may not only rely on existing funding sources (e.g., money from their state department of education, awarded through Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, or dedicated funding from the organization where the program is housed), but also pursue additional funding from the private and public sectors. National, state, and local foundations that have provided funding for programs serving adult English language learners include, for example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org); the Lilly Endowment (www.lillyendowment.org/guidelines); Pew Charitable Trusts (www.pewtrusts.org); or Toyota Grants (www.toyota.com/about/philanthropy/education/grants/).

To stay abreast of funding opportunities targeted for programs serving adult English language learners, administrators might subscribe to lists that announce grants and contracts, such as the federal register. Program administrators can increase their knowledge about applying for contracts and grants by reading documents such as *Doing Business with the U.S. Department of Education* (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) or checking Web sites such as Mission Oriented Business Integrated Services (MOBIS). Administrators might also check

Web pages of agencies that have an impact on their work, such as the U.S. Departments of Commerce, Education, Labor, or State to see upcoming funding and issues highlighted. They might also attend local, state, regional, and federal meetings and conferences at which education initiatives, research, and funding streams are discussed. Finally, they might invite policymakers to visit their programs and observe classes or have learners testify at local school board meetings about how the program is meeting their needs and how important it is that funding continue or be increased.

Areas for Further Research

Limited research is available on the credentials needed for administrators working in programs that serve adults learning English, the training and mentoring that they need and receive, and the outcomes of training and technical assistance. There are also few studies on the growth in knowledge and skills of program administrators, their patterns of persistence in programs, and their reasons for staying or leaving. Crandall and Sheppard (2004) suggest examining a group of representative programs to identify their promising practices, including the needs, roles, and responsibilities of their administrators. Research on the roles and responsibilities described in this brief would assist administrators and other stakeholders in building strong programs with skilled, effective management.

Conclusion

If current trends continue, the United States population will increase by 142 million individuals by 2050, and 82% of that increase will be due to immigration (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Faced with a need to serve larger numbers of adult learners with diverse language and cultural backgrounds, programs will need skilled and effective administration. The fundamental responsibilities of an adult ESL program administrator are to achieve success with the various components of the program, play a leadership role within and on behalf of the program, and provide sound financial management. All decisions that fall under these responsibilities must move the organization toward the goals it has established and be based solidly on data drawn from the program components.

Administrators of programs working with adults learning English benefit from collaboration with all stakeholders, both those inside and those outside the program. Mangers also need to engage in ongoing learning. Program administrators with adult ESL teaching experience but without management backgrounds may be able to use previously acquired knowledge and skills, such as their ability to work with people of different cultural backgrounds and their knowledge of appropriate content and instructional delivery, to enrich their work as managers. However, they may also benefit from professional development materials developed specifically for administrators. Administrators who lack experience working with adult English language learners may benefit from the resources cited herein to expand and deepen their knowledge of these learners' unique needs and ways to meet them.

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