Exploratory Study of Perceived Barriers to Learning in an Urban Educational Opportunity Center

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceived barriers of adult learners to program in the State University of New York (SUNY) Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center (MEOC) from the perspectives of students and teachers. The study also sought to determine teachers' insights regarding means of motivating adult students to continue program participation. This study was primarily quantitative and employed the Professional Standards for Teachers in Adult Education: Self-assessment (PSTAE; 2008) as well as a program survey designed to assess the impact of situational, institutional, and dispositional deterrents. Data were collected through SurveyMonkey. The data resulting from this comparison between teachers' and students' perceived barriers to program participation were consistent with prior research in this area. The MPSTAE self-assessment results identified that use of technology was rated lowest in terms of mastery among the six standards related to helping adult learners.

Keywords: adult education, barriers, motivation, professional standards, adult learner

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The State University of New York (SUNY) Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center (MEOC) is part of a network of educational institutions funded by the New York State Legislature through the SUNY Center for Academic and Workforce Development (CAWD). Founded in 1966, the MEOC offers academic and vocational training programs to New York State residents, particularly in the Harlem community. The primary goal of the MEOC program always has been to effectively serve the adult students in their catchment areas through providing high quality educational experiences. However, MEOC enrollment goals were not being met consistently. This study represented the program's first systematic attempt to help to explain how low program enrollment could be increased and maintained. Specifically, the study focused on determining barriers to student participation in the SUNY-MEOC, as well as factors and techniques that could promote student retention.

Literature Review

Understanding the barriers to participation in adult education programs has been a subject of special interest to researchers and policymakers. Studies using a variety of research methods, including in-depth interviews, survey questionnaires, and hypothesis testing, have been used to address this issue. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) first proposed the existence of situational and dispositional deterrents. Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) conducted a national survey that also found both situational and dispositional barriers related to adult student program participation. Cross (1981) suggested a third category known as institutional barriers. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) added an additional barrier to the research in this area by proposing informational barriers that deter learning in adults when information about available learning experiences is not easily accessible.

Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) reviewed the literature on deterrents to participation and concluded that there were six categories of deterrents that emerged in most settings and with most populations: individual, family, and home-related problems; cost concerns; questionable worth or relevance of educational opportunities; negative perceptions of the value of education; lack of motivation or indifference to learning; and lack of self-confidence. Subsequently, Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) developed a systematic means of assessing barriers or deterrents to student participation in adult learning programs.

They developed the Deterrents to Participation Scale (DPS) in order to investigate the limits of participation among allied health professionals in continuing education programs. When the DPS was administered to a large random sample of health professionals, factor analysis yielded six orthogonal factors: disengagement, lack of program quality, family constraints, cost, lack of benefit, and work constraints. Multiple regression analyses indicated that the factors were "potent predictors of participation" (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984, p. 155). This study also concluded that meaningful deterrent factors can be identified, that the construct of deterrent is multidimensional, and that there was empirical support for incorporating concepts related to deterrent theories of participation (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984).

Hayes (1988) interviewed 160 urban low-literate Adult Basic Education (ABE) program students from seven institutions. The study provided a typology to improve general knowledge of deterrents to participation in adult education using the Deterrents to Participation Scale—Low-literate learners (DPS-LL) instrument (32 items on a Likert-type scale). Hayes (1988) found that six low-literate adult focus groups were identified on five deterrent factors: low self-confidence, social disapproval, situational barriers,

negative attitude to classes, and low personal priority. Manning and Vickery (2000) discovered six deterring factors: personal disengagement, lack of program quality, work constraints, cost, family constraints and professional disengagement. Different studies have addressed deterrent barriers related to student participation in adult education programs through a variety of research methods and have yielded different results. However, there seems to be general consensus that quantifiable barriers related to situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers do exist and that they do have an impact on student participation.

Methods

Setting

The SUNY-MEOC student population is diverse in age, ethnicity, country of origin, and catchment area. Approximately 50 different countries are represented in the student population. In addition, 30 different languages are spoken in the students' households including French, Haitian-Creole, Swahili, Mandarin, Bengali, Arabic, and Spanish.

Most students identify as African American/Black or Latino/ Hispanic descent with many speaking English as a second language. The median age of the students is 33, with Generation Y or Millennials (ages 19 to 34) accounting for the largest group of students, and women accounting for approximately two-thirds of the student population. This rich diversity enhances and challenges the environment for students and reflects the global and intergenerational reality in educational and occupational settings.

Participants

There were 10 MEOC programs in the SUNY system at the time of this study, but this study focused on only one program. The participants for this study were drawn from the 300 students who had email addresses (among all who registered during the 2017 spring semester) and from the 30 teachers (four full-time instructors and 26 part-time instructors), all of whom had email addresses.

There were two groups of volunteer participants in this study: 15 teachers from SUNY-MEOC; 35 students of the 300 possible students responded in SUNY-MEOC. This study used quantitative methods to identify perceived barriers to program participation from both students and teachers. The study also assessed teachers' self-perceptions of competency related to adult education standards as well as their insights regarding sources of student motivation and methods and techniques for maintaining program participation among adult students.

Instrumentation

This study employed two on-line surveys. The first was a program-developed survey designed to assess the impact of situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers on program participation. The second instrument was the Maryland Professional Standards for Teachers in Adult Education (MPSTAE) Self-Assessment plus three additional open-ended questions in the survey.

The MPSTAE self-assessment survey is a 38-item instrument that addresses competencies related to the six standards of the Maryland Adult Education Standards Framework: help establish and support program goals and responsibilities; provide a positive adult education-learning environment and promote lifelong learning; plan, design, and deliver learner-centered instruction; assess learning and monitor progress; implement technology; and maintain knowledge and pursue professional development measured through the survey. Only teachers completed this survey.

Data Collection

Students' and teachers' survey data were collected using a web-based survey tool (SurveyMonkey). Potential participants were contacted via e-mail with a link. The SUNY-MEOC director sent a reminder email to its members if they had not responded by a determined date. Participation was anonymous, voluntary, and uncompensated.

Data Analysis

Once the surveys were completed, the data were retrieved from SurveyMonkey and were exported to Excel. Data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Percentages were used to describe participants' demographics information, and descriptive statistics were calculated to report the socio-demographics of the sample. Three questions (37, 38, and 39) in this survey had open-ended responses. Question 37 asked about students' perceptions of barriers to program participation, question 38 addressed factors related to students' motivations to continue, and question 39 addressed teachers' suggestions for motivating students outside the classroom. The responses from the open-ended questions were recorded in a separate table under the headings of: barriers for participation (question 37), motivation (question 38) and how to motivate outside of classroom (question 39). The responses in this table were consistent with those from prior research.

Results

Student's Survey

Survey results indicated that only 3.3 percent of the respondents reported child care as an issue, which is noteworthy given that most of the participants are women. Survey results indicated that students reported in order of importance, the following institutional barriers: "Amount of time required to complete programs" and "strict policy for attendance" (37% each). Less than half (41%) of respondents stated lack of time for program completion as a main barrier as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of student's survey

Answer Options	Response Percent
Situational Barriers	
Not enough time for study/homework	66.7%
Home responsibilities	50.0%
Job responsibilities	40.0%
No or not enough money for MetroCard	40.0%
No place to study or practice	16.7%
Friends, family or relatives don't like the idea of going to school	13.3%
No or enough child care	3.3%
Institutional Barriers	
Amount of time required to complete programs	40.7%
Amount of class time required	37.0%
Strict attendance requirement	37.0%
Did not meet entrance requirements for desired program	25.9%
Entrance or progression to higher program requirements	22.2%
Not enough opportunity for workshops that fit my schedule	14.8%
Courses/programs are not scheduled when I can attend	11.1%
Dispositional Barriers	
Afraid that I'm too old to begin or continue with program	34.6%
Low grades and school failures in the past - not confident of my ability	34.6%
Not enough energy and stamina to keep up with school work and other responsibilities	30.8%
Don't understand classroom materials but afraid to ask questions or ask for help	23.1%
Don't know what to learn or what it would lead to	15.4%

Don't really enjoy studying	11.5%
Don't want to associate with classmates and instructors	3.8%
Tired of school, tired of classrooms	0.0%

Ostiguy, Hopp, and McNeill (1997), however, identified "no course interest" and "lack of information provided" (p. 15) as major institutional barriers, and Sloane and Kops (2008) found "lack of access to information" and "costs of programs" (p. 40) to be most important. Both results are different than those for SUNY-MEOC students. It is noteworthy that around one-third (35%) of respondents stated that concerns about age and bad experience for learning in the past were important. Nonetheless, these two areas were still selected most often. None of the participants indicated that they were tired of school or tired of classrooms, which suggests that although self-confidence may be low, intrinsic motivation still remains.

Teachers' Results

Open-ended question results. The open-ended questions addressed barriers to program participation, sources of student motivation, and methods and techniques to motivate these students inside and outside the classroom. Among the barriers noted by the teachers who responded to the first open-ended question were: "transportation problems," "trouble arranging childcare or elder care," "too little time for studying," "lack of preparation for the study program," "difficulties competing with younger students," "physical and mental illness," and "substance abuse."

The second open-ended question addressed sources of student motivation. Teachers indicated that learners are often "motivated through tangible awards" (certificates, recognition of their accomplishments), "immediate positive feedback," "a sense of belonging and being part of a community," "peer support," and "resources being available and extra support to help them balance between their daily responsibilities" in order to develop increasing participation in learning experiences.

Finally, when asked how to motivate students inside and outside the classroom, teachers suggested "providing technology for learners with special needs," "promoting laws and regulations to further assist students," "taking periodic refresher workshops on adult learning theory," "more communicative and learner-centered approaches to literacy development including a discussion of concrete ways to apply these theories," and "identified to engage with students inside and outside the classroom" to their teaching.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, there was a relatively small sample size among both teachers and students. Second, the population for the study consisted only of those students who had email addresses. Given that the majority of students did not have email accounts, a different survey method may have yielded different results. Finally, the study assessed the sources of students' motivation indirectly from teachers' survey.

Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory study investigated the extent to which situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers influenced program participation and program persistence among students in an urban adult education center. Findings suggested that situational barriers still exert a substantial influence on program participation. One factor stands out: students lack sufficient time. This finding is consistent with other studies noting the influence of situational barriers (Chang, Wu, & Wu, 2012; Dench & Regan, 2000; Ostiguy et al., 1997; Pevoto, 1989; Sloane & Kops, 2008). Lack of time is also a barrier represented under institutional barriers, though course scheduling, per se, was not among the most significant barriers reported by students in this category. Finally, one important factor that stood out in these results is the importance of student self-confidence (dispositional barrier).

Advisors and counselors must work with individual learners to build self-esteem and confidence by reinforcing their level of progress. They should also work closely with course instructors (before or after class) to offer encouragement and provide advisement. This could happen by offering regularly scheduled life skills, career, and employment preparation workshops and implementing technology workshop topics, which were reported by teachers through MPSTAE self-assessment result as shown in table 2.

Table 2

MPSTAE Self-Assessment Results

Areas of improvement

Teacher's Professional Standards	Percent		
	Proficient	**Progressing**	**Needs improvement**
1. Make suggestions for instructional materials/programs or student support program improvement	53.33%	40.00%	6.67%
2. Design activities for and encourage independent study skills	53.33%	26.67%	20.00%
3. Provide frequent and varied opportunities for learners to practice and apply their learning	53.33%	33.33%	13.33%
4. Interpret formal and informal assessment results, review the results with learners, and develop appropriate educational plan	40.00%	53.33%	6.67%
5. Effectively integrate technology into instruction	33.33%	33.33%	33.33%
6. Develop and maintain knowledge of instructional techniques and referral procedures for learners who have special needs	33.33%	20.00%	46.67%

Total N= 15 teacher's answers

Findings from this study suggest that in order for adult learner programs and teachers to overcome deterrent barriers to program participation, motivation is essential. Programs should provide friendly and welcoming learning environments, both in classrooms and outside of classrooms, self-exploration, realization activities, and community engagement. In addition, they should provide counseling services plus emergency cash in case of a dire financial situation to help students to persist with a program.
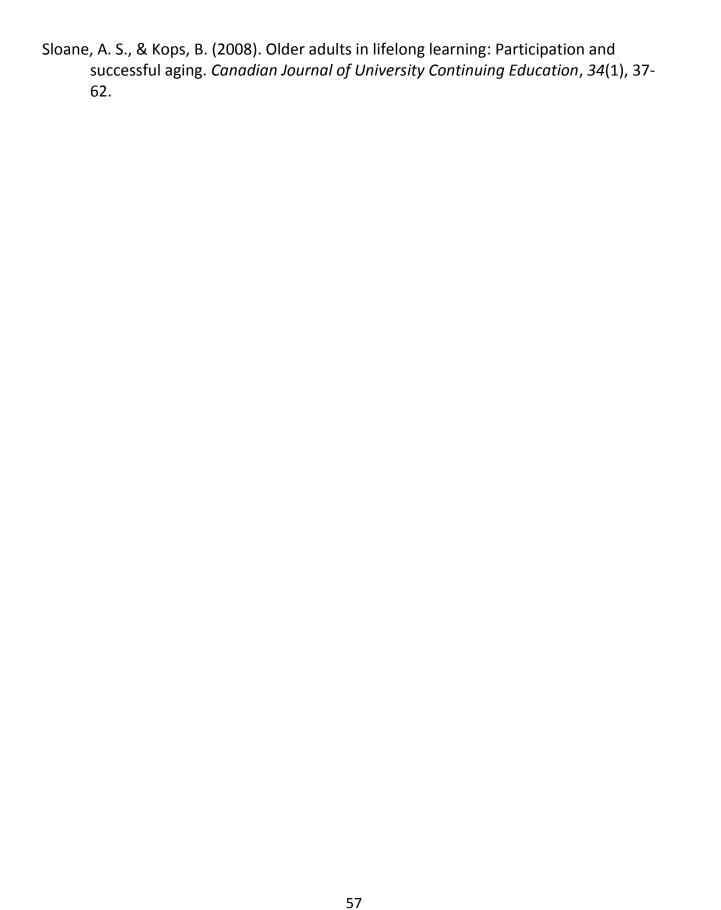
Instructors should provide constant and consistent feedback on student attendance and classroom performance, as well as programmatic incentives upon successful completion of a milestone. In addition, they should share with adult learners how a skill they are about to teach had helped a real person in the past or even saved them academically.

They also should make an effort to identify successful peers and have them share their experiences.

Finally, it is important for all stakeholders to remember that the teachers' and students' results were consistent except physical and mental illness. Some teachers believed that the students have a mental illness, which might be another topic for the further research.

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