



MAKING IT WORTH THE STAY

Findings
from the
New England
Adult Learner
Persistence
Project

MAKING IT WORTH THE STAY:

Findings from the New England Adult Learner Persistence Project

By Andy Nash and Silja Kallenbach

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Boston Higher Education Resource Center, MA	Middletown Adult Education, CT
Central Falls Library Literacy Program, RI	Nashua Adult Learning, NH
Clinton Adult Learning, MA	Quincy Community Action Program, MA
Community Learning Center, MA	Quinsigamond Community College, MA
Dover Adult Learning, NH	Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative, RI
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The Genesis Center, RI	Sumner Adult Education, ME
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ABSTRACT



The underlying assumption of the New England Learner Persistence Project was that persistence is the underpinning for academic progress that ultimately results in positive outcomes and an improved quality of life for adult learners. To that end, the project aimed to expand our collective knowledge base and practical resources from which all adult education programs can benefit. The New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education designed a process that drew on existing research, primarily by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) and associated promising strategies, and engaged adult education programs as research partners in adapting and testing those strategies for their program contexts.

A total of 18 adult education programs from five New England states participated in the project. Their interventions impacted 755 students. Even though the implementation of new learner persistence strategies (i.e. the action research phase) lasted only one academic semester, Jan/Feb-May/June, 2008, in aggregate, they resulted in significant improvements in the rates of attendance and course completions.

The persistence strategies employed by the 18 programs produced both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. This report details the persistence strategies and their outcomes by the four categories that roughly correspond to students' phases of participation in the program: 1) Intake and Orientation; 2) Instruction; 3) Counseling and Peer Support; or 4) Re-engagement.

This report also casts the persistence strategies and their outcomes into a bigger frame of needs that they fulfill in adults. Through our analysis of the programs' data and other research, we have come to believe that ultimately, the persistence strategies derive their power from the fact that they meet these affective needs of adults:

- A. Sense of belonging and community
- B. Clarity of purpose
- C. Agency
- D. Competence
- E. Relevance
- F. Stability

Adult education providers can boost learner persistence by intentionally addressing these needs through all facets and phases of the program. They can do so by employing multiple strategies or, conversely, one strategy may address several needs. The task ahead is to construct policies and provide resources that support the institutionalization of multiple promising practices, so that adults are more likely to persist.



INTRODUCTION



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The New England Learner Persistence project was a response by the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) at World Education to the expressed need and interest by adult educators in New England to address learner persistence. Learner persistence emerged as the top program improvement priority in a regional strategic planning process conducted by NELRC. The goal for this project was to improve adult learner persistence and outcomes in order for adult learners to be able to meet their educational and related life goals, and to thus strengthen workforce development in New England.

The underlying assumption of the Project is that persistence is the underpinning for academic progress that results in positive outcomes and an improved quality of life for adult learners. When low-income adults' life circumstances improve, their children do better in school, their health improves, the tax base increases, the pool of qualified workers increases and our communities become stronger. None of this is possible if we do not become better at supporting adults to complete their education and meet their goals.

Most adult learners flag in their persistence for good reasons. They stop coming or miss class due to changing work schedules, having to work two jobs, lack of reliable child care or transportation, poor health, need to take care of other family members, or just simple exhaustion. For the most part, these are forces beyond their or the program's control. This project took on the challenge to improve persistence against these odds. We looked for strategies that were within adult education providers' control and limited budgets to implement.

The foundational research for the New England Learner Persistence (NELP) Project came from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) that operated as part of Harvard University from 1996 to 2006. NCSALL reports that most adult learners require at least 100 hours of instruction in order to make one grade level equivalency. Yet, NCSALL's study of 150 pre-GED learners showed that most learners participate far fewer hours (Comings, Parrella and Soricone, 1999).



NCSALL researchers Comings, Parrella and Soricone found that adult students mentioned more positive than negative forces affecting their persistence, and that building up positive supports, such as supportive relationships inside and outside of the class, clear goals, and sense of self-determination, “may be more critical to increasing persistence than is the removal of barriers” (p. 37). Based on this research, they recommend four key supports of adult learner persistence:

- 1) Establishment of a goal by the students that is then used as context for instruction and reviewed and possibly revised over time;
- 2) Helping students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence and building on that understanding, helping them make plans to manage those forces and build up positive ones; and
- 3) Fostering students’ self-efficacy regarding goal attainment and the academic achievement it entails;
- 4) Instituting assessment procedures that allow students to assess their progress toward their goals on a regular basis.

NCSALL also put forth a typology of five “pathways” of participation and corresponding service strategies: 1) long-term; 2) intermittent; 3) mandatory; 4) short-term; and 5) try-out. Their findings indicated that most students fall within the intermittent category, moving in and out of programs as their priorities and circumstances allow. Belzer (1998) contributed to this body of research with her finding that many adult learners who stop out do not necessarily view stopping out as failure, and often plan to resume their studies later. Given the patterns of adult learners’ participation, NCSALL researchers recommended that programs focus on “learner re-engagement,” staying in contact with students who have stopped out and encouraging them to return to services.

Based on NCSALL research, the NELP Project defined learner persistence as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must stop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow.” In other words, persistence is sustained participation in learning inside and/or outside of class time. We measured it by rates of attendance, completion of a course and/or hours of self-study. Many of the participating programs also tracked students’ learning gains and attainment of educational goals related to their intervention. Our objective was to make measurable improvements in adult learner persistence using these measures.



To achieve our goal, the NELP Project supported 18 adult education programs in investigating the impact of context-specific interventions to improve student persistence. This report details the quantitative and qualitative outcomes that were documented by the participating programs from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. This was very a diverse mix of adult education (ESOL, ABE and ASE) programs from urban, rural and small town settings, and sponsored by school districts, multi-service agencies, community-based organizations, libraries, a community college, and a church.

We are grateful for the thoughtful participation of the teachers, counselors and administrators in this project that has enabled us to learn from their collective experience and specific individual practices. We also appreciate the technical assistance provided by Dr. Cassandra Bryant for the action research training. We value the research foundation provided by NCSALL, and we thank our funders and supporters.

Andy Nash, Director, New England Learner Persistence Project
Silja Kallenbach, Director, New England Literacy Resource Center



The New England Learner Persistence Project aimed to expand our collective knowledge base and practical resources from which all adult education programs can benefit. To that end, the New England Literacy Resource Center designed a process that drew on existing research and associated promising strategies, and engaged adult education programs as research partners in testing those strategies in specific program contexts. The project provided adult educators with options for two phases of engagement:

Phase I: Study Circles

Adult educators across New England were invited to join a learner persistence study circle in their state. Most study circles drew educators from several programs but in some cases, the study circles were held at a program for that program's staff. Participating in the New England Learner Persistence project at this level meant making a commitment to attend three study circle sessions lasting a total of 10 hours and doing the readings in preparation for them.

By the end of February 2008, each New England state had held at least one study circle: 16 study circles were held in total. In addition to one state Director of Adult Education (VT), 131 adult educators from 51 programs participated. The study circles followed a process developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The readings included in the NCSALL model were supplemented by the 'Taking Action to Stay in School' issue of NELRC's Change Agent magazine (fall 2007). With the exception of two study circles that were facilitated by NELRC's project staff, the study circles were facilitated by adult educators in each state, usually pro bono.

Overall, the participants evaluated the study circles very positively. The facilitators' and participants' feedback confirms that the study circles served their intended purpose of creating a common knowledge base and thereby paving the way for action research.



I found these study circles very informative and enlightening! It made me think about improving student persistence in our programs. (ME)

People really liked the opportunity to read research and have time to discuss it with others. I saw people thinking about new possibilities and connecting the readings to their own situations. Everyone seemed comfortable with the amount of reading and came prepared. (NH)

Participants loved talking with one another about what they were trying out, what they were thinking about based on the research, what might work in their programs and classes, and what they could imagine wouldn't work and why. . . Participants came from a mix of programs. This provided the fodder for rich conversation and multiple perspectives. (MA)



Phase II: Action Research

All programs from which at least one staff person had completed the study circle were eligible to apply for a \$3,000 mini-grant to conduct action research. Applicants were also required to complete and submit a program self-assessment based on an inventory of promising persistence practices developed by NELRC. Based on the results, applicants were asked to choose the focus for their action research from among four aspects of program operations:

1. Intake and Orientation;
2. Instruction;
3. Counseling and Peer Support and;
4. Re-engagement

Programs then developed or adapted specific strategies related to their chosen area of investigation. Of the 21 applicants for action research mini-grants, 18 programs were selected for funding. Each program was required to have a project team of at least three staff members including the program coordinator.



To prepare the participating program teams to conduct action research, NELRC organized a two-day learner persistence summit in January, 2008. The first day offered workshops aimed at deepening the participants' knowledge of persistence-related strategies and practices. Topics ranged from goal-setting and implementing distance learning to building students' self-efficacy.

The second day of the summit prepared the program teams in action research methods and protocols led by Dr. Cassandra Drennon, whose expertise includes training in action research. The 18 action research teams received guidance in articulating a theory of change related to their chosen persistence strategies and then developing a logic model that laid out the steps that lead to such change. Day two of the summit also initiated the participants in the project's qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

Subsequent to the summit, February through June, the 18 action research teams implemented their chosen strategies. They documented formative and summative data related to their chosen intervention, posting monthly 'Significant Change Stories' on an intranet site created for the project by NELRC and collecting quantitative persistence data as described below. The NELRC project staff provided support and guidance to the teams online and through individual and cross-team phone meetings.

Phase III: Cross - Program Data Analysis

The project staff (Nash and Kallenbach) analyzed all the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the programs and through meetings in order to identify and articulate the cross-program findings and promising practices that are captured in this report.



PROJECT LIMITATIONS



The New England Learner Persistence Project was exploratory and its findings should be considered in light of its limitations. The major considerations that have a bearing on the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of this project include:

Short duration. Perhaps the greatest limitation of this project was the short duration of the action research; the programs implemented interventions between January/February and May/June 2008.

Sample size. Depending on the program and type of intervention, the size of the learner cohort affected was as few as two students and as many as 163.

High baseline attendance and completion rates. Both of these starting rates were over 70% in some programs, such as HERC, Middletown and SCALE. Given the many factors that affect learner persistence that are beyond an adult education program's control, it is difficult to make much improvement in these rates.

No baseline data for some interventions. For some new interventions, such as those aimed at stop-outs, there was no comparison data.

Other factors. We could not control for the many other factors that might have affected persistence negatively or positively in the class or program during this time period, and that may or may not have been operational during the comparison period of spring 2007. The program staff made their best attempt to describe any factors that might have changed from one year to the next.



PARTICIPATING PROGRAMS



The following chart details the basic features of the 18 adult education programs that participated in the persistence project.

INTAKE AND ORIENTATION					
PROGRAM	TYPE	SERVICES	SIZE	LOCATION	ENROLLMENT
Clinton Adult Learning (MA)	School district (LEA)	ESOL, ABE, GED	140	Mixed	Open
Franklin County ABE (ME)	School district (LEA)	ESOL, ABE, GED, College transition, Work readiness	235	Rural	Open
Nashua Adult Learning (NH)	CBO	ESOL, ABE, GED, College transition	900	Urban	Open
Quincy Community Action Program (MA)	CBO	ESOL, ABE, GED	175-200	Urban	Modified
Vernon Regional ABE (CT)	School district (LEA)	ESOL, ABE, GED, EDP, CDP, College transition	1000	Mixed	Becoming managed



COUNSELING AND PEER SUPPORT					
PROGRAM	TYPE	SERVICES	SIZE	LOCATION	ENROLLMENT
Quinsigamond Community College (MA)	Community college	ESOL, ABE, GED, College transition, Workplace education	300-350	Urban	Open
Boston HERC (MA)	CBO	ESOL, Family literacy	120	Urban	Managed
Middletown Adult Education (CT)	School district (LEA)	ESOL, ABE, GED, EDP, CDP, Family literacy, Workplace education	500	Urban	Open
SCALE (MA)	School district (LEA)	ESOL, ABE, GED, EDP/ADP	600	Urban	Mixed
INSTRUCTION					
PROGRAM	TYPE	SERVICES	SIZE	LOCATION	ENROLLMENT
Int'l Institute of Boston (MA)	CBO	ESOL, Citizenship prep, Social services	225	Urban	Open
Central Falls Library Literacy Program (RI)	Library-based	ESOL	90-140	Urban	Managed
RI Family Literacy Initiative (RI)	Library-based	ESOL, Family literacy, Citizenship prep	327	Urban	Managed
Genesis Center (RI)	CBO	ESOL, EDP, Work readiness, Job training	575	Urban	Managed
Second Start (NH)	CBO	ESOL, ABE, GED, College transition, Tutorial services	300	Suburban/Rural	Modified
Sumner Adult Education (ME)	School district (LEA)	ESOL, ABE, GED, ADP, College transition, Office skills & CNA training	125	Rural	Mixed



RE-ENGAGEMENT					
PROGRAM	TYPE	SERVICES	SIZE	LOCATION	ENROLLMENT
Community Learning Center (MA)	Municipal	ESOL, ABE, GED, ADP, Family literacy, College transition, Workplace education	1000	Urban	Open
Dover Adult Learning (NH)	CBO	ESOL, ABE, GED, ADP	2900	Mixed	Open
EASTCONN Adult Education (CT)	School district (RESC)	ESOL, ABE, GED, CDP, Family literacy, Citizenship prep, College transition, Work readiness	800-900	Mostly rural	Open



KEY CROSS-PROGRAM QUANTITATIVE OUTCOMES



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Project-wide Data

The New England Learner Persistence Project captured consistent data regarding attendance rates and completion rates. A subset of programs also captured optional data on learning gains and independent study hours. Remarkably, both attendance rates and completion rates increased significantly in all four categories of program activities as detailed in the table below.

Overall, interventions carried out in 18 New England programs impacted 755 unique students. For 730 of them, programs tracked attendance and completion rates; the remaining 25 students completed independent study hours only. Thirty-one class-attending students also logged independent study hours.

The rates of change for attendance and completion were calculated by subtracting the 2007 rate from the comparable 2008 rate and dividing that difference by the 07 rate. This told us the rate of change between the two years. Although programs did not always define their counts the same way (for example, some programs count attendance from the first day of class, while others count from the first day the student shows up for class), the rates of change are internally consistent - each program used a consistent formula to calculate and compare their 2007 and their 2008 data.

CATEGORY OF PROGRAM ACTIVITY	PROGRAMS (AE= ADULT EDUCATION)	ATTENDANCE RATE CHANGE	COMPLETION RATE CHANGE
Intake and Orientation	Clinton AE, MA Franklin County AE, ME Nashua AE, NH Quincy Community Action Program, MA Vernon Regional AE, CT	+14%	+18%
Instruction	International Institute of Boston, MA Central Falls Library, RI RI Family Literacy Initiative, RI Genesis Center, RI Second Start AE, NH Sumner AE, ME	+16%	+22%
Counseling and Peer Support	Quinsigamond Community College, MA Higher Ed Resource Center, MA Middletown AE, CT SCALE, MA	+7%	+25%
Re-Engagement	Community Learning Center, MA Dover AE, NH EASTCONN AE, CT	Average # of students that re-engaged either by entering class or by independent study: 22	Average # of independent study hours: 30



In each of the three categories of persistence strategies (Intake and Orientation, Instruction and Learning Options, and Counseling and Peer Support) for which attendance and course completion rates were consistently documented, both rates increased. The attendance rate rose the most (16%) in the Instruction category, where strategies that affect the quality of the daily classroom experience seem to have had the greatest impact. The greatest increase in the completion rate (25%) was in the Counseling category. This may be because these strategies – problem-solving with students about their educational barriers, providing ongoing support and encouragement, etc. – were most effective in helping students find ways to stay in class until the end. The Intake and Orientation category, which focused on the initial welcome and orientation that students receive, helped students get a strong start and demonstrated a lasting impact on both attendance (14% increase) and course completion (18% increase).

Data on learning gains and independent study hours was collected where relevant and feasible. Learning gains were only reported for students who were in programs long enough to have been both pre- and post-tested on a standardized test. A student may have completed a course without yet having attended enough hours for a post-test (which varies by test and by state regulation).

Independent study hours were counted by programs implementing a re-engagement strategy, whereby at-risk and stopped-out students were offered the option of studying independently with the support of an instructor. A total of 2,734 independent study hours were reported for 56 students (an average of 30 hours/student). Programs, however, did not count these hours consistently. For example, one only counted contact hours with the teacher and another included hours self-reported by students.

Unique Data

For several programs, data collected that was unique to their program or to the question they were investigating was as telling as the cross-project data. For example, EASTCONN, despite a slight drop in their attendance and completion rates, saw a 66% drop in the number of students who earned no credits during the semester (a significant number, since the state requires enrolled students to earn at least four credits per year). Quincy Community Action Program (QCAP) saw a sharp increase in the number of non-completers who communicated with the program before stopping out (from 14% to 57% of those leaving), indicating that they had successfully increased students' feelings of connection and responsibility to the program. Other programs experienced increases in called-in absences, use of support services, or goal attainment, which is also evidence of the positive impact of their interventions.



FINDINGS *by* CATEGORY of PERSISTENCE STRATEGIES



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The quantitative findings discussed in the preceding section are brought to life by the qualitative accounts reported by the 18 programs throughout the spring '08 semester. While the project staff provided guidance in the form of workshops, online and print materials, and regular check-in meetings, each program's persistence team used its best judgment to design and implement strategies for their category. Most programs focused on one particular strategy, but some explored multiple strategies. In either case, the strategies had to lend themselves to implementation over a 4-5 month period and without substantial additional funding.

In the following section, we discuss the persistence strategies and their qualitative outcomes by four categories of program activities:

- 1) Intake and orientation
- 2) Instruction
- 3) Counseling and peer support
- 4) Re-engagement

We open this section with a list of the strategies and outcomes for each of the four categories.

A. STRATEGIES AND QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES AT A GLANCE

Intake and Orientation

1. **Make the first interaction one that welcomes students and builds community**
 - Increased connection to program and peers
2. **Offer clear and accessible information**
 - More informed decisions about learning
3. **Involve students in orienting peers**
 - Increased understanding of program
 - Increased confidence and self-efficacy of peer leaders



4. **Build student cohorts**
 - Less classroom turbulence
5. **Help students identify goals and make decisions about their learning**
 - Increased understanding and self-direction of learning

Instruction

1. **Provide learning options**
 - Increased self-direction of learning
 - Increased engagement in learning
2. **Provide opportunities for students to be included in decision-making**
 - Increased ownership of classroom processes
3. **Engage students in dialogue about their learning**
 - Increased metacognition
4. **Make connections to the real world and students' emotions**
 - Increased engagement in learning

Counseling and Peer Support

1. **Provide individualized counseling and follow-up with students**
 - Increased use of counseling and articulation of needs
2. **Involve students in mentoring peers**
 - Increased motivation to pursue learning
3. **Institute managed enrollment**
 - Increased engagement and productivity
4. **Discuss persistence, learning, and aspirations**
 - Broader aspirations and increased self-efficacy
5. **Offer tutoring**
 - Increased self-efficacy and motivation to pursue learning

Re-engagement

1. **Offer study options to at-risk or stopped-out students**
 - Increased motivation to reach graduation



B. PROGRAMS AND THEIR STRATEGIES BY CATEGORY

INTAKE AND ORIENTATION				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
<p>Clinton Adult Learning (MA) What will happen to retention of newly enrolled students if we revamp our orientation process?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rearrange office Revise student handbook and translate Hold small group orientations, followed up by meeting with counselor Orientation: review handbook and policies; tour space; intro staff; Q&A Give students magnet with call-in script Develop student tracking system No new students after April break 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in absence calls Increase in questions and use of program services Students have clearer expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student handbook needed in other languages Staff time for orientations Students didn't like being pulled from class for follow-up meeting # enrolled dropped because of better screening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Translated handbook Assign a person to orientation role Buddy up new students in a class 	YES
<p>Franklin County Adult Education (ME) If we provide an orientation packet, expand the student goal setting process, and introduce students to staff, will learners develop a sense of responsibility and ownership resulting in increased learner persistence?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve orientation packets Provide student handbook with staff bios Offer group orientation: goal-setting in small steps, discuss stopping out, introduce staff, tour space, meet with counselor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students more engaged Increased staff communication and teamwork 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large geographic area and small #s for group orientation No time for follow-up calls Stress of initial assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add info about assessment and its purpose to handbook More in-class assessment 	With individual orientation



INTAKE AND ORIENTATION				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
<p>Nashua Adult Learning (NH) How will learner persistence in ABE programs be affected by modifying the registration process to include orientation and goal-setting (to include revisiting goal-setting periodically throughout the term in the classroom)?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls to stop-outs • Track student progress • More flexible attendance policy • Stopping out discussed with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased ability to set realistic goals • Increased comfort, peer support, and interaction • Increased awareness of life goals • Increased focus • Increased sensitivity of staff • Increased staff connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular student conferencing too time consuming • Staff resistance to moving math test to class time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student portfolios • Use videos at orientation • Furnish snacks and free pencils (with the Center's phone number). • A student handbook • More field trips and speakers • Refine the goal-setting piece • Refine attendance reporting to account for self-study students • New students come to first class early to meet the teacher and tour facility • Simple schedule posted at registration to help students through the process • Revise GED testing schedule • Ask students why they stopped or dropped out to inform planning • Study the use of drop-in study hours and/or refresher courses 	<p>YES – Intake process and orientation; staff meetings</p>



KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
<p>Quincy Community Action Program (MA) What will happen to learner persistence if we provide a thorough orientation and begin the goal-setting process with prospective students at intake?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey ESOL and ABE/GED students about information needs • Monthly orientation: logistics, expectations, support services, Q&A, final quiz • Use student ambassadors to help orient new students • ESOL orientation: Interactive and introduces curriculum; GED orientation: learning styles, past learning experiences, supports and barriers • Meet with counselor for referral or placement test schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More informed decisions • More comfort and use of counseling • Increased counselor understanding • Increased absence calls • Increased communication about stopping out • Empowering for student ambassadors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff turnover • Student lack of readiness – drugs and alcohol • Difficulty recruiting student ambassadors • No seats available for ESOL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will meet with ABE counselor after orientation to address readiness and barriers to persistence • Monthly thematic units coordinated with cohort entry • 30 minutes additional paid time for teachers for weekly attendance meetings • Address study skills and learning strategies within the curriculum 	<p>YES</p>
<p>Vernon Regional Adult Education (CT) What will happen to GED persistence rates if we institute a structured intake and orientation process for incoming students at the Manchester High and Rockville High School sites?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update marketing materials; put orientation schedule on website • Make reminder calls for orientation • GED Orientation includes: Information packet, PPT, icebreakers, goal-setting, staff introductions, refreshments, services described • CASAS appraisal the last hour • Appt. with counselor made; test scores shared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased #s at orientation • Students take more resp. for learning, make choices, and see connection to their goals • Increased access to counselors • Increased sense of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff concerns about orientation being a barrier to participation • Youth not ready to study • Time for follow-up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed enrollment will be incorporated at all sites. • Orientations will be instituted at all sites. • Develop orientation materials kit 	<p>YES</p>



INSTRUCTION				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
International Institute of Boston (MA) What will happen to learner persistence if we apply multiple intelligence techniques to our thematic unit on food?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-sensory interactive lessons Paired classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased engagement Increased sense of community Increased communication from students about learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study buddies not effective 		YES
Central Falls Public Library Literacy Program (RI) Will a self-study option using <i>English for All</i> increase student persistence?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EFA offered in Resource Center EFA modeled in class Database to track student paths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased listening comprehension Increased computer skills and comfort Increased sense of community and peer support Increased self-directed learnings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limitations of software accessibility Institutional paperwork Time to support resource center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EFA available for home use Institutionalize the resource center Build cross-program network to support resource center Create instruction materials for EFA self-study 	YES
Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RI) What will happen to high beginner and intermediate ESOL learner persistence when supported self-study packets are offered?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study packets of high-interest readings with related activities Link study activities to state standards Provide regular feedback to students Discuss self-study in class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased reading skills Increased engagement in learning and study skills Increased sense of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to develop packets Funding cuts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand within program Build cross-program network to support resource center Develop study packet to accompany public radio programming 	YES

MAKING IT WORTH THE STAY:



INSTRUCTION				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
Genesis Center (RI) Would learners be more likely to persist and overcome day-to-day obstacles if they felt curriculum and instruction were closely aligned to their immediate needs and objectives?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly survey of student needs and interests; shared results Posted syllabus Daily reflection on learning Attendance chart and award 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased metacognitive understanding of own learning and metalinguistics Increased punctuality and engagement as community Increased self-study Increased language learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicating in a beginner ESOL level class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disseminate internally Student portfolios Revised learner handbook Introduce EFA 	YES
Second Start Adult Education (NH) What will happen to learner persistence if students are offered optional online learning activities that go beyond regular classroom and tutorial instruction?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop Quia pages to supplement instruction in three classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased confidence and ability to assert needs Increased comfort with computers Increased staff communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time Tracking student use Limited student use at home 		YES
Summer Adult Education (ME) What will happen to learner persistence if we use our website to support our instruction?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Moodle to engage students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural access to Internet (dial-up) Maintaining website Scheduling computer lab for student use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a distance GED program 	YES



COUNSELING AND PEER SUPPORT				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
<p>Quinsigamond Community College Adult Education (MA) What will happen to the persistence, attendance, learning gains and goal accomplishment of our “at risk” GED students if we provide extra supports for them?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and meet with at-risk students. Counselors talk with them about risk factors and barriers and make a persistence plan. Train staff to guide stopping-out students to counselors. Conduct “persistence orientation” for new and current GED students. In-class discussions of barriers and supports. Follow-up with students who have several absences to discuss strategies and options. Call stop-outs to discuss options (return, DL, other programs with fewer weekly hours, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthened relationships between students and counselors Increased problem-solving and planning with students Increased communication and questions from students Increased ability and interest in setting goals Increased staff understanding of student needs Increased staff teamwork and communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to meet and follow-up with at-risk and stopped-out students Difficulty contacting students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold bi-monthly meetings of counselors Adopt a modified managed enrollment model. Revise orientation to include discussion of persistence and program and student expectations Rework attendance policy to be “flexible” and responsive to student needs Create a list of options for students who need to stop out Develop progress checklists for students 	YES
<p>Boston Higher Education Resource Center (MA) Will increased counselor/coordinator presence in classrooms, classroom persistence activities, and individual tutoring increase student persistence?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistence activities in classroom Group and individual tutoring “A Night to Dream” event Perseverance award 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased sense of community and connection to program Development of new life goals and increased confidence Increased use of counseling services Staff more aware of student needs Tutored students increased their language skills and confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteer program; all tasks fall to the paid coordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult with students More DL options Add a “Transition to GED” class Expand “A Night to Dream” to explore additional pathways related to careers, education, community organizing, healthy family dynamics, or other topics 	YES

MAKING IT WORTH THE STAY:



COUNSELING AND PEER SUPPORT				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
Middletown Adult Education (CT) What will happen to student persistence if we implement student peer mentoring?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer mentors to encourage new diploma students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased confidence of mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentor recruitment difficult (esp. male) Young population Lack of student interest in having mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a senior support group New student orientation 	NO
SCALE (MA) What will happen to learner persistence in the intensive math class if we provide peer mentoring support to a cohort of new students?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer mentors for new intensive math class students Cohort-building activities for new students Mentor training and support Counselor check-ins Managed enrollment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased sense of community and connection Student leadership development Increased motivation and engagement in learning Increase in study time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to develop supports Needing SS#s to pay stipends to mentors Difficulty recruiting mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand model throughout program Involve mentors in orientations Counseling about supports and barriers Build mentor pool 	YES
RE-ENGAGEMENT				
Community Learning Center (MA) What types of alternatives to classroom instruction for stop-out students will increase their persistence and allow them to either meet their goals or return to our program?				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructor contacts ABE and GED students at-risk or recently stopped-out Offer class, on-line, drop-in, or independent study options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased staff understanding of student issues Reconnection for individual students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low return call rate Few actual study hours Time to develop tailored materials Limited self-study skills 		NO



RE-ENGAGEMENT				
KEY STRATEGIES	QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES	CHALLENGES	NEXT STEPS	CONTINUE?
<p>Dover Adult Learning (NH) What will happen to student persistence if we re-engage the stop-outs and offer structured alternatives to classroom instruction?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact GED stop-outs • Offer structured independent study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased absence calls • Reconnection for individual students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low follow-through by students • Drug, alcohol, and mental health issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address topic of stopping out in class • Collect student e-mail addresses • Offer drop-in hours • Counselor does structured planning process with independent learners 	<p>NO on independent study;</p> <p>YES on contacting stop-outs</p>
<p>EASTCONN Adult Education (CT) Will creating a senior class in our Credit Diploma Program and providing extra supports to seniors make a difference in their persistence, and their academic goal attainment (e.g. earning diploma)?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and provide support for senior cohort: calls, recognition, independent study learning plans • Early discussions of stopping out • Database to track student persistence • Incentives to meet with counselor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased communication with counselors • Increased staff understanding of issues • Students appreciate recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling stop-outs not effective • Timing of project • Policy capping # of independent study packets countable for credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase use of online tools • Develop orientation for diploma students • Institute appeal process for credits 	<p>YES</p>

MAKING IT WORTH THE STAY:



C. INTAKE AND ORIENTATION

What is this category?

The strategies included in this category focus on providing students with a welcoming, informative introduction to the program so that they can make informed decisions about their readiness to study and their learning options, understand the expectations the program has of students, and become a part of the learning community.

What is the connection between intake and orientation and persistence?

Research suggests that the first three weeks are key in terms of forming bonds between students and their learning programs (Quigley, 1987). If effective persistence strategies are implemented during this period – building relationships, providing information so that students understand their options and program expectations, helping them identify the steps in their learning journey – students are more likely to persist. Programs that do not connect effectively with students early may experience attrition after orientation or after pre-testing.

Findings

In this category, data was collected for all new students enrolled after orientation: 310 students were impacted. Programs implementing strategies in this category averaged a 14% increase in the attendance rate, and 18% increase in the completion rate.

INTAKE AND ORIENTATION										
	Attendance Rate					Completion Rate				
PROGRAM	07N	07%	08N	08%	%Δ	07N	07%	08N	08%	%Δ
Clinton	48	32	29	46	44	48	40	29	55	38
Franklin*	37	66	20	71	8	37	54	20	75	39
Nashua	51	52	62	61	17	51	63	62	74	17
QCAP	132	63	163	63	0	132	68	163	42	-39
Vernon	31	32	36	33	2	31	65	36	86	33

*Franklin's 07 data is from Fall07 (not Spring 07)

OTHER DATA	07N	07%	08N	08%	%Δ
Clinton: completed 12hrs or less of class time before separation from program	48	40	29	24	-40
Vernon: obtained GED	31	13	36	17	33

When interpreting attendance and completion data rates in this category, it is important to note that the impacted students are often dispersed into many classes (such as at Vernon) and, therefore, the intervention may not have a strong effect initially on attendance and completion rates in any particular class. In addition, providing clearer and more accessible information during orientation may actually lower enrollment rates (such as at Clinton), as students are making better informed choices about whether or not the program is a good match for their needs. This should yield higher persistence rates, as entering students are more likely to be ready to participate successfully. This was the case, for example, at Clinton Adult Education, where staff noted a sharp *decrease* (40%) in the number of students who left the program before completing twelve hours of instruction. This is significant because research shows (Quigley, 1987) that if programs can keep students through the first three weeks, they are more likely to persist.

The notable dip in Quincy Community Action Program's (QCAP) completion rate is likely attributable to the turnover of key staff during the project - the pre-GED instructor, the ESOL instructor, and the ESOL counselor all left, either due to illness or new jobs. In adult education programs, attendance often drops when a teacher leaves. Also, the rates at QCAP differed by class type. The attendance rate for the ESOL classes increased from 69% to 83%, which was offset by a decrease in the ABE/GED classes from 52% to 44%. The completion rate for the ESOL classes went down from 68% to 64%, while the similar rate for the ABE/GED component of the program dropped much more precipitously from 68% to 15%. One promising statistic is that the numbers of students returning after orientation for placement testing increased during the project (from 71% to 100%).

Vernon attributes the significant increase in their course completion rate (33%), as well as a comparable increase in the percent who obtained their GEDs, to the fact that their new orientation process helped students make more informed choices about which high school completion option would work best for them, so that more students were able to successfully complete their goals. The program attributes the somewhat flat attendance rate to the fact that students leave class before semester's end because they are ready to take the GED test.



What strategies were explored?

1. Make the first interaction one that welcomes students and builds community

All of the programs in this category implemented strategies designed to put entering students at ease from the start by establishing a welcoming environment. They enhanced their welcome activities by taking the time to have new students tour the facilities and be introduced to staff and each other. Strategies included staff wearing name tags to make themselves more identifiable as they greeted new students and their families, providing refreshments, and having a counselor on hand to establish a personal rapport with each student and become a recognizable contact and resource.

At Clinton, establishing a welcoming environment meant rearranging their office space to create a student reception area. In the past, when students came to the door it was a guessing game as to where to go for assistance. Clinton also involved bilingual staff member Adelisa Phipps in welcoming and providing information to students as they entered and began the orientation process.

Four of the five programs in this category implemented or enhanced their group orientation sessions and used these sessions to build a sense of community among students and staff. The natural cohort groups that form when students are brought together for orientation and then move into classes together provide on-going support for new students entering a program alone.

Nashua also decided to delay their math placement testing until after students had attended the first few classes. This shortened the registration process and removed math anxiety as one deterrent to students persisting through the orientation. As well, on the first night of class, each of the teachers used team building/ice-breaker activities to help students and teachers get to know each other and start to form trusting relationships. The persistence team teachers were enthusiastic about the responses they had and wondered if the less stressful and more welcoming registration process paved the way for a more relaxed and mutually supportive group of students.

Key outcome: Increased connection to program and peers

Programs reported that one of the greatest impacts of these welcoming activities was that relationships among students and with staff were established early on. These relationships are the foundation of better communication with program staff, greater peer support in and out of class, and more willingness to participate by asking questions and expressing needs.

At Quincy Community Action, staff reported that students who participated in the orientation appeared to be more relaxed and interested in the range of programs offered, asked more questions, and socialized more. Another positive result was an increase in communication from students who needed to stop out. In spring 2007, a total of 13 students informed the program about why they were stopping out of the program (14% of the non-completers). In spring 2008, 39 students communicated before they left the program (57% of non-completers). According to Education Director Liz Hughes, "This is another indication that even though our students still face barriers to persistence, our program was able to increase the feeling of connection students have with the program."

Nashua Adult Learning Center also noted that students showed a stronger connection to each other and the program as evidenced by an increase in calls by students who were going to be absent. Nashua teacher Vicky McIver observed that,

One change I have noticed is that the students are becoming more connected to each other. . . . I have a large class (24 students) with all levels of ability. Sometimes it is difficult to get to all of the students who may be struggling with a new concept. Without prompting, I am seeing the more proficient students take on the role of tutor and helping the others until I can get to them.

I have also noticed that students are developing more connections with each other outside the school setting. When a student is absent, . . . it is not unusual for two or three other students to tell me the whereabouts of that student. . . . I believe these changes are due to the "icebreaker" activities I do with the class whenever new students arrive. This has made the students more comfortable with each other.

Early attention to a welcoming, supportive first experience in these programs resulted in students communicating more, providing more mutual support, and returning the consideration they felt they had received (for example, by calling in when absent).

2. Offer clear and accessible information

Almost every program in this category implemented or enhanced group orientation sessions as a way to convey clear information about the program offerings and expectations.

Quincy Community Action Program's orientation grew out of focus groups with ESOL and ABE/GED students to find out what kinds of information the students felt would have been useful to know before enrolling in the program. They discovered that there was a considerable amount of misunderstanding among the ESOL students and unanswered questions for the ABE/GED students. So they created two new supports: a new student handbook and ESOL- and ABE/GED-specific orientations. The student handbook covered the logistics of the



program (meeting days and times for classes, calendar, location), program requirements for attendance and participation, and support services available at QCAP. The orientations were used to not only reinforce this information verbally, but to give students a sense of what being an adult student would be like. They included experiential activities to model classroom-like activities, and a quiz on the information presented so that staff could both assess what had been understood and open up a conversation about how it “felt” to be tested. In addition, students were given time for questions and answers with a diverse array of “Student Ambassadors” (see strategy 3), current students who could answer questions in a variety of languages.

Other programs in this category also provided written materials to reinforce and elaborate on the information shared during orientation. Franklin’s student handbook included staff bios and a step-by-step goal-setting process. Vernon’s student packets included an agenda, letter from the education supervisor, general program information, a student goal worksheet, the student handbook, contact information, and notes of the PowerPoint presentation. Clinton provided a Spanish version of their handbook and other student-friendly materials, such as a magnet with the school’s phone number on it and a short script for ESOL students to use when calling in an absence.

Vernon’s orientation for Adult Secondary level students focused on providing a clear understanding of their three high school completion options so that students could evaluate and choose the one that best fit their needs. They also discussed the purpose of placement and progress testing and reviewed program logistics.

Franklin attempted to offer group orientations but found it unworkable in a rural county that stretches 70 miles and where work and family schedules make it difficult to pull together a group at any one time. They nevertheless used their improved orientation materials with the individuals who came when they could.

Key outcome: More informed decisions about learning

Providing clear and accessible information to students resulted consistently in more informed decision-making and allowed them to take more responsibility for their learning.

At Vernon, program director Christine Howard reported that, at their first orientation for new Adult Secondary Education students, the eight students who attended

arrived at the orientation convinced that the GED was the only option available to them for high school completion. After . . . describing all of the options available to them (high school credit diploma, external diploma, GED), and after informal, individual counseling sessions, three students opted to enroll in the high school credit diploma program because they were one or two credits short of high school completion. One student decided on the EDP (external diploma program) because it was the pathway that provided him with

the opportunity to include his many years of work and life experience, and the remainder of the students chose to pursue the GED. By the end of the orientation, students seemed less anxious about high school completion because they were able to explore options not previously considered.”

The staff at Vernon also noted that although students typically resist the mandated state testing, once they were provided with clear information about its purpose they were positive about the testing and anxious to get their results. At times, clear information may lead a student to delay enrollment or choose another route. At QCAP, one student “decided that a GED program with an academic focus was not the right place for her at this time in her life (she was 65 years old) and instead decided to enroll in a computer class at a local community center.”

Students may also learn about and take advantage of other services provided by an agency, such as child care and educational counseling. Clinton Director Christine Cordio described one student who, “indicated that when she attended school the previous year she had to stop coming because she suddenly needed child care. Had she known that we offer it in the program she would have been able to continue classes. This year, by hearing it at the new orientation, she did not have this problem and continued classes until May.”

3. Involve students in orienting peers

Quincy Community Action Program focused on a peer support strategy that involved students acting as “Student Ambassadors” during orientation. As Education Director Liz Hughes describes, the program recruited five ESOL and two ABE Student Ambassadors,

... current students who at orientation could give their perspectives on the program. Prospective students were able to ask the ESOL Ambassadors questions in their own languages and to get the ‘inside scoop’ on what our program is like. The ABE Ambassadors spent time in the orientations talking about the challenges they each faced in attending classes on a regular basis, how they overcame those challenges, and how their lives have changed for the better since enrolling in the program.

Ambassadors also provided some much-needed translation for the beginning level students. Having the Ambassadors there enabled them to ask questions they might not have felt comfortable asking or lacked the vocabulary to articulate in English. As well as having an impact on new students, this strategy had a strong effect on the confidence of the Ambassadors themselves.

**Key outcome: Increased understanding of program**

Especially for the beginning level students, being able to ask questions and access information in their own languages, and from adults with whom they could identify, was a valuable orientation strategy. In both the ESOL and ABE orientations, staff left the room for this portion so that questions could be asked in privacy and answers could be completely honest. The results of the post-orientation quizzes showed that there was better understanding of program supports and expectations.

Key outcome: Increased confidence and self-efficacy of peer leaders

Involving students in expanded roles, such as peer ambassadors, built their confidence and willingness to use their skills inside and outside the program. Although not the primary target of the persistence intervention, these students were positively impacted by the public recognition of their strengths and ability to help others. QCAP ESOL Counselor Christina Liu describes the types of benefits from program participation the Ambassadors shared with new students:

Some Ambassadors discussed feeling more comfortable in their jobs as a result of being in our program. With more vocabulary and fluency, they are able to converse with customers as well as friends and strangers. Several of our Ambassadors are mothers. They spoke of helping their children with schoolwork, even surprising them on occasion with more sophisticated vocabulary words, such as procrastinate! . . . Our Albanian ambassador expressed that she is glad to be given this opportunity, especially since she is now able to speak with our program director in English. She feels more important now, and senses that her presence in the classroom – and hopefully in this country – is needed, welcomed.

The Ambassadors provided an important bridge into the program for new students and, in turn, felt like valued members of the program. This strengthened their connection to the program and their own persistence.

4. Build student cohorts

The cohort model connects a peer group of new students so that they can learn about the program and begin their studies together. Cohorts provide a sense of security and are a resource to those who would otherwise be entering a new program alone. They also reduce classroom disruption, as students are oriented and integrated into classes in groups rather than one at a time. At Vernon, the new group orientations served as a means to cluster students into cohorts and to begin a managed enrollment process. The orientations punctuated the semester at regular intervals, providing predictable entry points around which teachers could plan instruction. At Clinton, small group orientations created natural cohorts of students who could enter class together and provide mutual support. The program also stopped enrolling students after the April school break, in an effort to reduce turbulence.



Key outcome: Less classroom turbulence

Vernon Coordinator Christine Howard reported that because of the orientations, the entry of new students into classes was less frequent. In most classes, they entered in small groups and there was not as much coming and going throughout the semester. “The teachers are feeling much better about having a true cohort of students. They are able to move forward and don’t have to stop to address the needs of a new student entering the class.” Teachers reported a similar experience at Clinton. (See also Strategy 3 in the Counseling and Peer Support section)

5. Help students identify goals and make decisions about their learning

At each program in this category, the counselors were at the forefront of implementing the orientations and following up with students individually to help them process the information, clarify their purposes for learning, and make educational decisions. This individualized attention was key to making sure that students understood their options and received the support they needed.

In programs implementing group orientations (QCAP, Clinton, Vernon), individual meetings with the program counselor followed the orientation. At these meetings, counselors would help students process the orientation information, make decisions about their educational paths, schedule placement tests or discuss test scores, and make referrals.

In programs where the counselor provided individual orientations (Nashua, Franklin), counselors also reported that they helped students plan how to manage the positive and negative forces that support or hinder their persistence (such as building a support network of family and friends), facilitated a goal-setting process (see the Counseling and Peer Supports section) and discussed ways to continue with their studies in the event that students needed to “stop-out.” Counselors also provided phone support, calling to remind students of counseling sessions or following up on repeated absences to provide support, encouragement, or materials needed to continue their studies from home.

Key outcome: Increased understanding and self-direction of learning

Talking about both academic and life goals helped students clarify their purposes for being in school, make connections between what they were learning and what they wanted for their lives, and evaluate the relevance of instruction.

Vernon staff made this connection between goals and educational choices: “The students are benefiting from the process of thinking through their goals. Initially, students come into the orientation and say they want their GED. They rarely have any specific knowledge of the program choices (Community Diploma Program, GED, and External Diploma Program). Through the goal setting exercise, they begin to make the connections about the differences



between the programs and matching their goals to these to see which best meets their needs.” At Nashua, several teachers commented that they felt their students were being more persistent in pursuing their GEDs, and saw the number planning on taking the GED tests go up. One teacher observed that her students began talking about schooling beyond the GED or getting a better paying job. And at the end of the academic year, a student in Vicki McIver’s GED class,

...came up to me and asked if she could sit with me and talk about setting goals for the summer months. . . . We talked for about 10 minutes about what she wanted to do, time frames, etc. Then we wrote out a plan she was very comfortable with, and I made a copy for her portfolio. She returned to her seat, but a few minutes later another student approached me, asking for my help in planning summer educational goals. Again, we talked and wrote out a strategy she could follow for the summer. Before I knew it, every single student in the class approached me for the same reason. They all wanted help and suggestions on how they could continue learning over the summer.

Intake and Orientation-Specific Challenges

Two unique challenges emerged in this category. The first relates to trying to schedule and implement group activities in programs that serve large, rural areas. The Franklin program serves a county 70 miles wide and its student population is small. Many students have schedules that conflict with the group orientation times, so the program has traditionally met with new students individually. After several attempts at bringing people together for pre-scheduled, group orientation, Franklin concluded that their context does not lend itself to this model and that they need to continue working with students at their convenience.

The second challenge, in two programs, was staff concern about the proposed interventions. At Nashua, teachers were reluctant to delay the math placement test until students were in class because it is time-consuming for the classroom teacher to administer and then track who has or hasn’t taken it. Nashua will continue to monitor this. At Vernon, program counselors were concerned that a new orientation would become a barrier rather than a boost to participation. After observing the orientation and meeting individually with students, however, the counselors recognized that orientations could help students be better placed in academic programs of their choice – not simply in a GED class because they thought it was the only available option.



D. INSTRUCTION

What does this category include?

The instruction-related interventions had a common focus on offering students more learning options inside and outside of the classroom. Most of the students were enrolled in regular classes.

What is the connection between instruction and persistence?

Instruction that fully engages students is a critical component of the persistence “puzzle.” Instructors have the most contact with students and thus carry perhaps the greatest responsibility for meeting students’ academic needs that brought them to the program in the first place.

Findings

In this category, data was collected for the classes in which the program was introducing new instructional strategies as part of the persistence action research.

I N S T R U C T I O N																						
	Attendance Rate					Completion Rate					Learning Gains					Goal Attainment					Indep. Study	
PROGRAM	07N	07%	08N	08%	Δ%	07N	07%	08N	08%	Δ%	07N	07%	08N	08%	Δ%	07N	07%	08N	08%	Δ%	08N	08#
Central Falls	31	48	17	85	77	31	94	17	100	6											17	142
Genesis	38	52	37	59	13	38	71	37	68	-4	38	37	37	68	84							
IIB: 5E	17	76	17	73	-4	17	68	17	80	18	10	80	14	86	8							
IIB: 6E	18	67	20	74	10	18	64	20	53	-17	15	73	13	77	5							
RIFLI - Hall	17	37	19	43	16	17	82	19	84	2			19	84		3	18	19	42	133	19	34
RIFLI - Auburn	13	57	7	60	5	13	54	7	100	85			7	100		4	31	7	86	177	7	33
Second Start	57	50	48	52	5	57	54	48	79	46											12	232
Summer	78	67	69	72	8	78	58	69	83	44												



Programs implementing this category of intervention impacted 234 students and averaged a 9% increase in the attendance rate and a 20% increase in the completion rate. Not all programs tracked learning gains or goal attainment. The independent study hours recorded in this chart pertain to study by students outside of class time and not as part of assigned homework.

At the Central Falls Public Library's ESOL program, the 17 students who opted to supplement classroom instruction by studying in the Resource Center computer lab had a 100% class completion rate. Using the additional computer-based learning option yielded an automatic increase in the hours of instruction, totaling 142 hours for the 17 students. The number of hours that each student spent in the computer lab ranged considerably but their attendance in the regular ESOL class was 85% as compared to 54% for the overall class. However, as the program coordinator pointed out, strong "persisters" may have self-selected for using the Resource Center. Nevertheless, the qualitative data suggests that the particular computer-based learning option employed by Central Falls engaged the 17 students beyond the program's expectations and more than what they had observed in the classroom.

The Genesis Center's participating beginning ESOL class recorded a dramatic learning gains rate increase of 84%. As a publicly funded program in Rhode Island, Genesis measures learning gains with a CASAS test. An increase of one level of proficiency measured by the CASAS test is defined as a learning gain. The 13% increase in the attendance rate does not capture a significant increase in student punctuality throughout the semester that was noted by the teacher.

At the Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RIFLI), a supplementary reading packet strategy contributed to a significant increase in the goal attainment rate at both sites where this strategy was employed: from 18% to 42% for one class and from 31% to 86% for the other class. The attendance and completion rates for those classes also improved. A total of 33 and 34 hours, respectively, of independent study was logged over 5 months by the participating 26 ESOL students, most of whom worked more than full-time. At one site, almost all students were restaurant workers who worked six days week, 10-12 hours a day.

Second Start in New Hampshire reported that their completion rate increased by 46%, despite several ESOL students in one class leaving for jobs. The participating GED class of 12 students logged 232 hours of independent study using the web and the computer-based learning resources created by the teacher; the beginner ESOL students and ABE students reported fewer independent study hours.

While the participating Sumner Adult Education teachers in Sullivan, Maine did not track the students' usage of the Moodle website, the program's central persistence strategy for this project, the program's overall attendance and completion rated increased.



What strategies were explored?

1. Provide learning options

The common theme that runs through the instructional strategies that the six programs in this category chose to explore is expanding the students' learning options with or without computers, as part of regular classroom instruction or as a supplement.

The Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative (RIFLI) provided a new learning option to their ESOL students in the form of a take-home packet. Packet 1 was a mix of workbook activities with teacher created extensions, Easy English newspaper with a quiz, and a graphic organizer activity to accompany student selected reading material. Packet 2 was similar but did not include any workbook activities. The reading packet strategy was implemented by ESOL Teachers, Amy Hanson and Chris Bourrett, at two sites. What apparently appealed the most to the students was, in fact, having choices within the reading packet. Chris notes, "I think the most successful part of the implementation at Hall was having students choose their own story for the graphic organizer. Students spent quite a lot of time looking at stories and really enjoyed looking for a book for their level or for a title that seemed interesting."

Amy and Chris modeled the use of graphic organizers in class and invited students to choose their own reading from the selection they provided. They emphasized that the packets were not homework, but supplemental, so that learners could practice their English outside of class. They checked with students regularly about whether they were completing the self-study packets, corrected their work and gave them feedback. They found that the hardest part to implement in the packet was the workbook-like material that was difficult for beginning level students to grasp on their own. Consequently, the teachers had to provide additional guidance to many students during class breaks. Given their experience and feedback from Packet 1, Amy and Chris decided not to include workbook pages in Packet 2.

Three programs chose to investigate computer based strategies to expand learning options for their students: Central Falls Public Library Literacy Program (Rhode Island), Sumner Adult Education (Maine), and Second Start (New Hampshire). Many of the computer based learning applications they used provided instant feedback to students. The web, and the many learning options it offers, mediated a more collaborative approach to selecting learning materials, allowing students to assert their interests and pursue distinct learning preferences.

Central Falls used the English For All (EFA) distance learning curriculum [www.myefa.org] as a supplement to existing classes that met 3-4 hours week. EFA is a pre-packaged, low-cost learning option on the web and DVDs consisting of five stories introduced by a friendly wizard who guides students through 20 episodes and provides simple explanations of the basic points of grammar that are presented. This learning option was available to students at a new drop-in Resource Center at the library 10 hours a week, staffed by a combination of program staff and volunteers.



At Sumner Adult Education, three teachers (Trudy Martin, Lynne Witham and Rodney Dayton) learned how to develop supplementary, web-based learning material using Moodle [www.moodle.org] for students enrolled in two college transition classes and a math class. As part of it, the teachers set up discussion forums and posted discussion prompts. They demonstrated for students how to access and use the resources they developed or put on Moodle. Unlike the pre-packaged English for All, Moodle is a course management system that requires teachers to put together the learning package for students. Moodle is free of charge.

Second Start went through a similar process using Quia (Quintessential Instructional Archive) as a supplement in three classes: beginning ESOL (Emily Karmen), ABE (Lisa Geer) and GED (Karen McRae). Quia [www.quia.com] offers templates for educators to develop online educational games, quizzes, web pages, and different types of learning activities. Similar to Moodle, it requires teachers to create the learning package for students. They can also pick and choose from among activities developed by other teachers. Quia costs \$49 a year per educator.

Using Quia, the students in Emily's Beginner ESOL class discovered that they could have some fun and practice English at the same time. They learned to click on video clips and take a simulated driving lesson, watch how to make a stir fry, and read lyrics while listening to popular songs. Students in Karen's GED class learned how to use the computer to research information.

The teachers at Sumner and Second Start found that the process of putting together their own web-based learning packages lent itself to soliciting and responding to student feedback. Trudy from Sumner wrote,

This one tool is allowing me to get feedback from students that I may not otherwise have gotten. My goal for this week is to put some of the information they requested onto the class website and see how they use it. . . . It allows students to have some ownership in the class.

Key outcome: Increased self-direction of learning

The paper and computer-based learning options resulted in observable instances of students taking more ownership over their learning. At least in two programs (RIFLI and Second Start) students also began to extend their learning beyond what was covered in the planned curriculum and to request tips, websites and resources to do so.

RIFLI's supplementary reading packet strategy stimulated student motivation to read and study on their own. The teachers observed that the self-study packets tended to bring out the strengths of each student while achieving their primary purpose of building students' reading and self-study skills. In addition to the increased interest in reading, students became more

involved in their own learning outside of class. Some students stayed late after class to check their answers to the quiz in the packet.

As the RIFLI students gained familiarity with the format of the packets, the teachers observed them doing more reading on their own. They began to request more information or tips on how to study on their own and for their own purposes. One person wanted to concentrate on understanding TV news and the newspaper, while some other students studied to enter the External Diploma Program. Two students studied for the US Citizenship exam.

The web-based instructional strategies explored by the participating teachers at Sumner and Second Start motivated some students to use the websites the teachers had created on their own. As with RIFLI, the more advanced students were better able to use the web independently. Second Start's GED Teacher Karen writes,

I hoped to help them realize they were not solely dependent on a teacher or program, but had the ability to independently access practice materials for their present learning as well as future, life-long learning goals. Over time, all of the students in my class with computer access have, indeed, utilized this knowledge and worked to further their own learning outside of class time. This is a huge accomplishment in and of itself.

However, these expectations were not met by Second Start's beginning ESOL and ABE students. ESOL Teacher Emily Karman writes,

Despite the very positive experience that day, however, I have noticed that only a few of my students have since taken advantage of our Quia website on their own time. . . . I realize that it may take considerable time for some of my students, particularly those who are computer novices, to use the Quia website as an integral piece of their learning. I know that it will be impossible for all students to have easy access to a computer outside of the classroom.

The Central Falls ESOL program staff documented some instances of students doing more self-directed learning, including an 81-year-old student who convinced her son to buy her a new laptop after one session of using English for All. However, their efforts in this regard were hampered by delays in their ability to purchase English for All DVD's for students to take home.

Key outcome: Increased engagement in learning

In every program where a new learning option was introduced, the teachers observed a high level of engagement and enthusiasm by the majority of the participating students. Having the added option to learn through web-based activities, English for All episodes on DVD, or take home packets of readings of students' own choosing was motivating for these learners. It is not



clear whether it was the novelty of the approach or the content, or having a choice that was the prime motivator.

RIFLI's Chris Bourrett writes about student writing, "Their responses were well written. It was obvious from correcting them that students had put some quality time and effort into their reading and writing. Students also seemed very enthusiastic with the stories they read. From oral student feedback, I gathered that they liked reading the material at home and said they would enjoy reading interesting material again." Another indicator of student engagement was that students rallied around each other to complete the packets. They congratulated each other when someone finished a packet, and quizzed and teased each other about doing the packets.

The Central Falls ESOL program staff observed a consistently high level of engagement in the English for All program, including a woman in her mid-30s who was often shy in class but completed all EFA episodes at a quick pace; and a woman in her 50's with dyslexia for whom the visual, auditory and narrative techniques used in EFA worked better than classroom instruction.

Emily from Second Start documented about her ESOL students,

There was no doubt in my mind that each student found the experience valuable; they all sat glued to their computers, laughing, helping one other, and recommending particularly enjoyable games and sites to one another. There was fantastic energy and exchange in the computer lab that day. When I asked them if they would like to spend more time using our Quia website in the future, they enthusiastically answered 'yes!' and said that it was 'very good'.

Sumner's Reading/Writing teacher, Lynne, wrote that

"the students who were prepared [for the book discussion] were very enthusiastic about using the online forum and made sure that I knew they wanted to use the online resource more and more."

2. Provide opportunities for students to be included in decision-making

The Genesis Center's ESOL teacher Barbara Al-Sabek integrated a new feedback strategy into her teaching routine with her beginning level students. Every Friday she surveyed students about which classroom activities they felt had benefited them the most the preceding week and what they wanted to learn the following week. She tabulated the surveys and shared the results with the learners on a pie chart or orally. She then provided learners with a daily syllabus to allow them to see that their survey choices were being heeded and implemented.

As students began to assert their learning preferences in Barbara Al-Sabek’s ESOL class, Barbara realized she could and should include students in other decisions that she had previously made on her own, such as asking the students to decide whether new students should be admitted into the class, and asking the students to run a class instead of getting a substitute teacher when she had to be absent.

Key outcome: Increased ownership of classroom processes

Barbara’s students at the Genesis Center became more vocal about their learning preferences as they saw that their preferences were taken into account and were, to a large extent, shaping the class. For example, Barbara received requests to reverse the sequence of activities, suggestions for other curriculum adaptations, changes in the class routine and duration of activities. Barbara also observed a “marked improvement in punctuality” when she decided to start class each day with the pronunciation practice, the top vote-getter skill-building activity. By honoring the preferences of the majority of students, she was able to motivate them to make an extra effort to get to class on time.

As students became used to reflecting on their own learning, they became more assertive about Barbara’s learning. They quizzed her about what she had learned in her Spanish class and when she was absent for professional development. One day when Barbara was delayed in getting to class, a student stepped up to lead the daily opening ritual for the class. This had never happened before in Barbara’s experience.

Barbara’s students also exceeded her expectations for sharing responsibility for making thoughtful decisions about whether new students should be admitted into the class and for orienting new students. She explains,

They unanimously answered in the affirmative. Then I asked how many – they discussed it and replied four or five. I advised them that they would be responsible as well as I for integrating the new students. . . . The “old” students have done a great job integrating the new. . . . They do not need to be asked to explain or demonstrate. They are taking that initiative.

3. Engage students in dialogue about their learning

Two out of the six programs (Genesis and RIFLI) in this category explicitly aimed to increase students’ metacognitive skills by engaging them in regular dialogue and reflection about learning preferences and learning a language in general. Barbara Al-Sabek’s feedback strategy at the Genesis Center engaged students in regular dialogue about their learning preferences. In Barbara’s class this dialogue was codified in the weekly surveys and asking learners at the end of each class what they had studied and/or learned that day. The fact that the survey results were public exposed the students to diverse learning preferences.



When the RIFLI ESOL Teachers, Amy Hanson and Chris Bourret, shared with students that it takes on the average 150 hours to advance a level of English, according to research, they set the stage for the students to begin reflecting on their own learning. They invited students to keep track of their own hours and to keep a log. Chris began to ask about students' progress as part of his daily class routine. He observed,

I think the biggest effect of the packet project has been seeing how much more students are connected to the idea of their own learning, or how they have started exploring how to learn on their own. Some students may not have considered this at all before the packets, seeing class participation and involvement itself as a “be-all” and “end-all” for their learning. Others seem to have thought it important, but didn’t know how to go about choosing what they should study.

Key outcome: Increased metacognition

The Genesis and RIFLI teachers recorded increases in students' metacognitive skills, meaning their interest and ability to think about how they like to learn and to monitor their own learning and comprehension. The data does not tell us whether the students also took self-corrective actions as a result.

The fact that Barbara's dialogue with her students about their learning was a daily and weekly classroom routine, and that the results of the survey were discussed in class, promoted the growth of students' metacognitive skills. Barbara observed that her students became better able to talk about the language strategies they were using and needed to learn. For example, students began suggesting more 'test taking strategies' and 'listening for detail'. This ability to track their own language and learning development helped motivate students to persist.

At RIFLI, the teachers observed that more students signed up for Reading Packet 2 and understood its purpose. In his April journal, Chris wrote, “I feel the most significant change is that students have expectations now about what the packet is and what it is for, plus they can cite their own reasons for doing it.”

4. Make connections to the real world and students' emotions

The International Institute of Boston (IIB) chose to investigate project-based learning and multiple intelligences based teaching methods around the theme of food with ESOL levels 5 and 6 classes studying together once a week. The two participating ESOL teachers (Sayyora Nurmatova and Terri Kasper) chose this intervention because they hypothesized that it would make classes more interesting and relevant to students, and would thus promote persistence.

The unit on food included a series of lessons, including: 1) discussion and writing on 'What smells and tastes from your home country do you miss the most?'; 2) silent demonstration

by the two teachers about how to make a pizza where students were told to write down what they were doing, step by step; 3) learning food related idioms; 4) a writing assignment, 'I am going to your country for the first time. What advice can you give me about the food and the food customs in your country?'; 5) class visit to a book store where students perused cookbooks; and 6) a culminating international dinner where each student explained what their dish was and how it was made.

Interspersed among the food related lessons were multi-sensory lessons that drew on the students' multiple intelligences and emotions, such as a painting activity where students painted how they were feeling or shapes they liked. In another class, students watched and discussed a movie about immigrants. These activities took place in a special class where the two classes were paired every Wednesday.

For the three programs using computer-based options, several of the options students could pursue, and requested, involved real-life purposes, such as drivers' education and looking for jobs. Each episode of the English for All curriculum used by the Central Falls Library program had an adult relevant theme, such as Job Advancement, Support Systems for Injured Workers, Managing Family Life and Dealing with Taxes, while it also covered specific grammar points.

Key outcome: Increased engagement in learning

The International Institute's combination of teaching strategies stimulated student engagement by respecting students' lived experience and drawing on students' emotions and multiple intelligences. Terri and Sayyora chose food as a theme because "food is central to any culture, and people love sharing stories about food." They found the food theme to be engaging, particularly when they approached it based on memories and sense of taste and smell rather than their initial plan of creating a cookbook with the students. (Cookbooks are not necessarily all that relevant in the lives of students even though for teachers they might appear to make a good connection to the real world.)

Many of the activities the two teachers developed, whether about food or painting, were emotionally evocative, which reinforces memory and learning. One student evaluated an activity this way: "Last week, we were drawing in class. We heard music and we tried to draw something. I chose one picture and I tried to make something. I remembered my childhood, some years ago. I felt happy. Before I drew I was very tired but after I drew, I was relaxed. That's a good way to participate in the classroom." His was one of several similar student commentaries.

The fact that the two classes were paired also appealed to the students. Those days became a special day when the teachers noted that students weren't tired and "there was a lot of positive energy. . . . Students in both classes told us that they really enjoyed combining



classes because now they had new people to talk to.” Students bonded with one another and even exchanged cell phone numbers.

The instances of high student engagement that stood out for the teachers at Sumner and Second Start involved real-life related learning activities. Staff at Second Start reported, “We have seen students, who would not do homework, find time to log onto the computer to get information that they think is important and interesting.” When GED Teacher, Karen asked for student suggestions, she learned that students wanted to use the Internet for their purposes:

One suggested posting links to online driver's education practice exams; another asked if I could provide them with job information websites. Still another requested guidance on resume writing. I was happy to receive such useful feedback, and realized that including more everyday life materials on the site, in addition to the more traditional grammar, vocabulary, and reading practice, could encourage more students to access the site.

One young male student at Sumner, who had been resistant to engaging with learning, became enthusiastic about using the freerice.com site that provides instant feedback. This interactive site develops vocabulary and for every correct answer, the sponsors donate 20 grains of rice to the UN World Food Program. His teacher reports, “He was fully engaged for the full period of the class and worked diligently trying to fill the rice bowl. I wouldn’t have guessed that he would be so interested in this site, but it seems to make a real difference that there is a goal (filling the bowl and donating rice) beyond the obvious goal of building his skills.”

As well, adult learners tend to be motivated by the opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet. They know using computers is a valued and marketable skill in the real world. For the Central Falls ESOL students, working with the mouse and the website was a new experience that was met with enthusiasm. They learned both computer skills and English. Students got 80 -100% right on the first graded activity. The Central Falls teachers found the student response was very positive:

Students laughed on cue, expressed disappointment at characters’ actions, and gave accurate feedback indicating comprehension. Although the level of comprehension varied, there was a surprising amount of understanding across measured CASAS levels. Some of our lowest level students gave accurate explanations of characters’ motives and feelings, and gave advice to the characters. This indicated to me that the program engages successfully with students’ emotional intelligence, in ways that our classroom instruction is less equipped to provide.



Instruction-Specific Challenges

Three types of challenges emerged in the course of programs' implementation of strategies in the instruction category:

1. *Time to develop tailored materials.* The teachers at Sumner and Second Start had to learn how to develop material for Moodle or Quia and thus faced the challenge of the time it took and the overall learning curve. Barbara spent extra time to tabulate student survey results every week and develop lessons that responded to them. The IIB teachers spent extra time planning their multi-modal unit on food.
2. *Many students do not have access to computers and/or high speed Internet.* The enthusiasm students exhibited in the program did not translate into widespread use of these resources by students outside of class time, partially due to students lacking access to computers and/or high speed internet and to their skill level. Sumner, a rural program in northern Maine, found that most of their students did not own computers.
3. *Technical and bureaucratic difficulties.* Strategies that required approvals to purchase products or modify school district websites were hampered by delays and bureaucratic difficulties. At the Central Falls Public Library, the self study option was limited to the Resource Center due to technical difficulties in burning copies of the English for All DVD.

E. COUNSELING AND PEER SUPPORT

What does this category include?

This category is about providing counseling and other non-instructional supports that help enrolled students feel more connected to the program and each other, better understand the supports and barriers to their learning, and build confidence in pursuing their life goals. Programs may focus, in particular, on students at risk of stopping out. See, also, the "Intake and Orientation" section for related work.

What is the connection between counseling and peer supports and persistence?

Adult education students have many competing priorities and life challenges to deal with in order to persist with their learning. Without ongoing support and reminders of the resources available to them, many lose their way. Counseling and peer networks can provide the support students need to address barriers and stay motivated and focused on their learning.



Findings

In this category, each program collected data on the set of students that were receiving additional support: 147 students were impacted. Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) documented its GED population, Boston Higher Education Resource Center (HERC) tracked its entire student population, SCALE focused on one class, and Middletown counted only the students receiving peer mentoring. Programs implementing this category of intervention averaged a 7% increase in the attendance rate, and 25% increase in the completion rate.

COUNSELING AND PEER SUPPORT										
	Attendance Rate					Completion Rate				
PROGRAM	07N	07%	08N	08%	%Δ	07N	07%	08N	08%	%Δ
QCC	93	72	71	76	6	93	46	71	65	41
HERC	63	81	63	83	2	63	71	63	71	0
Middletown		87	2	87	0		90	2	100	11
SCALE	16	75	11	84	12	16	56	11	82	46

OTHER DATA	07%	08%	%Δ
QCC: number of students that obtained a GED	25	28	12

The data on the relationship between counseling and persistence is somewhat inconclusive, as three of the four programs in this category implemented counseling in conjunction with other strategies. Middletown calculated its data based on the two students who received the extra support of peer mentors, both of whom had high attendance and completion rates. At Quinsigamond Community College, the steep improvements in learning gains and goal attainment were due not only to their counseling intervention, but also to program initiatives to enhance goal-setting and do more post-testing. They attribute the '08 drop in number of students to the fact that their intervention contributed to lower student turnover (and

therefore fewer individuals enrolled). At SCALE, the lower number of students in the '08 class was due to a new managed enrollment policy, which closed enrollment after March. Partially due to this change, participation in the class was more stable and SCALE's attendance rate increased.

Finally, it should be noted that the essentially flat rates of change for Boston HERC were largely due to their high starting rates. HERC began the project ('07) with an 81% attendance rate and 71% completion rate – a very strong starting point for an adult education program. They also tracked unique data to highlight that 83% of individually-tutored students continued working with their tutors beyond the end of the program cycle.

What strategies were explored?

1. Provide individualized counseling and follow-up with students

In all four programs in this category, counselors played a key role in communicating with students about their needs and options, checking in regularly with them, and matching up mentors with new students or tutors with students in need of extra help. At Quinsigamond Community College, the counselors played a role at every phase of the students' participation in the program. They

- conducted “persistence orientations” for new and current GED students;
- trained staff to recognize the signs of students at risk of dropping out and to refer them to counselors;
- checked in regularly with students who had several absences to discuss their challenges and options;
- encouraged class discussion of barriers and supports to persistence; and
- called students who had stopped out to discuss learning plans.

QCC counselor Janet Hedlund described a significant change in the programs' approach to attendance. She noted that the program moved from a strict attendance policy (“where we almost took unexcused absences personally”) to one that appreciated the real needs and barriers in students' lives. For instance, Isis was a GED student who had had inconsistent attendance over the course of six years in the program. Because of a seasonal family business, she would stop out mid-spring and not return until the fall. Every year the program would re-enroll her thinking about this “problematic student” and her lack of commitment. This spring, however, staff listened to her attentively, saw the pattern in her life, and decided to assist her; the program was willing to accommodate Isis's schedule and the work of her family. They re-assured her that she would have a place in class in the fall and that if she had to stop out they could continue to work with her at a distance.



By maintaining a closer connection to students, QCC and the other programs were able to attend to student needs and questions before they turned into problems, and were able to provide the on-going encouragement many students need to persist in their studies. In addition to its impact on programs in this category, counseling played a large role in programs focused on enhancing their orientations or re-engaging stopped out students.

Key Outcome: Increased use of counseling services and articulation of needs

The impact of counseling and individualized attention was clear and explicitly articulated by many students. Staff reported that it enabled them to learn more about student realities and facilitate better communication and deeper relationships. Moreover, the persistence of staff in checking in with students helped students take their own learning and persistence seriously.

The relationship between the students and the counselors, especially, became stronger and friendlier. Counselors noted that students responded positively to the increased attention to their needs, asked more questions, and were more proactive in communicating about the possibility of stopping out. At QCC, Isis passed her GED, participated in the cap and gown graduation, and entered a “Transition to College” program. Another student anticipated a change in his work schedule and went to the counselor to talk about it, noting that if this change had happened in the past he would have stopped coming to class without saying anything. Another told the counselor that if it were not for her persistence in keeping in touch with him, he would have never come back and gotten his GED.

Through forming closer relationships with program staff, students also came to see the program as a resource that could help them in their broader educational journey. As the Coordinator of HERC describes,

Many students thanked HERC for taking such an interest in their goals and their lives beyond the English classroom. . . . The students understood that HERC’s goal is to help them persist over time in their learning; they understood that we exist for more reasons than to just teach English classes. As a result, the number of students who took advantage of career/education counseling grew.

2. Involve students in mentoring peers

Peer mentoring was investigated in two programs. At SCALE, it was used as a strategy to support the new students entering an intensive math class. Mentors were matched with partners based on age, gender, family role, and life experience. All parties – the peer mentors, the new students to be mentored, and the remaining students in the class – were oriented to this initiative and engaged in discussion of its purpose and its benefit to them. Throughout the semester, support was offered to the mentors and the mentees through meetings and counselor check-ins, and their reflections and suggestions were solicited at the end during a project evaluation meeting.

At Middletown, a program that offers a primarily young (16-24) population a variety of pathways to a high school diploma, the project team attempted to improve persistence by matching new Credit Diploma Program students with peer mentors. Six students expressed an interest in mentoring and four were selected. They met to discuss the mentoring role (to encourage attendance, not solve problems), receive some coaching, and address questions and concerns.

The counselor recruited two new student mentees who agreed “to help us carry out the mentorship program.” In one pair, both the mentor and mentee said the mentoring program was very good. When a new term began, this mentor graduated and her mentee was reassigned. Program staff reported, “The new mentor was enthusiastic, friendly and took her responsibility very seriously. The mentee said she thought the program was a good idea and could be helpful to new students who may feel uncomfortable in a new environment. She said she didn’t mind being assigned a mentor, but that she would have been fine without one.”

In the second pair, the contact was minimal but friendly. The mentee thought the program would be good for someone who needed or wanted help as a new student. She said, however, that she didn’t want to talk to anyone and was in the program to work on earning her high school diploma, not to make friends. She was not matched with another mentor. In the end, program staff generated several ideas for how both mentees and mentors could have been more successfully recruited, screened, and supported in their partnerships. The effort yielded two mentored students, both of whom completed their terms with full credit.

Both Middletown and SCALE provided stipends to the mentors, but reported that it didn’t seem to have much effect on their recruitment or participation.

Key outcome: Increased motivation to pursue learning

At SCALE, staff believe that the transparent sharing of information and discussion of the mentoring project’s rationale built early buy-in from students by providing a sense of inclusion and shared ownership. Both students and the teacher described a strong sense of community and mutual support. If a student was absent, other classmates would either call the student at home or acknowledge their return. In addition, many students arrived early or stayed late on a regular basis and requested additional time with the instructor and volunteers. Several requested to work with volunteers during the summer. SCALE’s completion rate jumped by 46%.

In both programs, staff noted that peer mentoring clearly built confidence and self-esteem in the mentors. The mentors were pleased to be involved and to have their input valued by staff. At SCALE, the mentors originally agreed to participate through April vacation but remained through the end of May. This positively affected the attendance of the entire class, with an overwhelming majority staying at a time of the year when it would normally drop off.



3. Institute managed enrollment

Before this project, classes at SCALE received new students on an open entry basis. One aspect of their intervention was to form a cluster of new students that entered class together as a cohort. Entry was then closed. In preparation for this change, the class discussed the possible (positive) impact on learning that would result from limiting new student enrollment and reducing the turbulence of continual entry. Staff also did community-building activities with the new cohort so that they could develop relationships before entering the established class. By laying this foundation, all students understood the purpose and benefits of the new model and participated fully in making it work.

Key outcome: Increased engagement and productivity

At SCALE, both the mentoring and the cohort model received overwhelming support from students and the teacher, who reported a significant increase in student engagement, study time, and teamwork. The project team attributed this to the elimination of the continual turnover of students (turbulence), which allowed the development of a learning community and stable learning groups. Tom Glannon, the math teacher at SCALE, observed that the students in the cohort/mentor class had higher productivity, social interaction, and engagement than students in his regular math class. He also noted that he was better able to manage the class because of reduced turnover and increased communication with students.

4. Discuss persistence, learning, and aspirations

Two programs in the Counseling and Peer Support category facilitated explicit discussions with students about the supports and barriers that impact their participation and progress. HERC found these conversations to be effective in building community among students and instructive for staff in terms of learning things about the lives of their students that would allow them to better focus their instruction. Similar discussions at Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) yielded input from students about classroom factors that affected their persistence. One class requested more regular assessment and feedback so that they could gauge their progress.

HERC Coordinator Erin McNally visited each classroom to discuss supports and barriers with the students and engage them in charting the class's collective attendance (in competition with the other classes). This brought students' attention to their own attendance and how it impacted the class. At the end of the cycle, a "Perseverance Award" was presented to a student who had persevered despite challenging circumstances. The students and teachers gave her a standing ovation and spoke of how inspired they were by her example.

Both HERC and QCC also talked with students about their goals and purposes for learning. QCC helped students set short-term, achievable goals that allowed students to see clear progress in a cycle. This became a motivator for many students to set and work toward

new goals. HERC engaged students in discussions of their long-term dreams and aspirations. 'A Night to Dream' was an event that invited students to cast a vision for their future and be inspired by others. It included

- A panel presentation by community members and students who had achieved professional, home-buying, and leadership goals
- Life visioning activities in small groups
- Q&A with community members from whom students wanted to learn.

Key outcome: Broader aspirations and increased self-efficacy

Many of the students at HERC, as a result of being invited to consider new possibilities, developed a broader and more ambitious set of goals for themselves. After hearing others' aspirations and achievements during the 'Night to Dream,' several wrote on their evaluations that they realized attending college or a training program was possible for them. HERC staff report that, "when asked about his vision, 'Pablo' used to say he was unsure. Now, he says 'I want to go to a trade school for carpentry, help train others in my home country to build, and lead volunteer trips. And I also want to teach English.' Many have gained the tools to verbalize and have confidence in those visions." As well, Erin noted that invitations to think beyond short-term academic goals demonstrated to students that the program was interested in them "as people, not just students." This helped students connect their learning to a long-term vision for their lives and for their families.

At HERC, both 'A Night to Dream' and tutoring increased students' self-efficacy - confidence in their ability to reach their goals. One student explained that she realized after speaking with a member of the informal mentoring "Dream Team" that her goals were attainable over time.

On-going discussion of persistence and goals was motivating to the students at QCC, as well. Staff reported that student interest in goal-setting grew as they set and achieved concrete goals. "Once this happened, they wanted to set another goal." Seeing clear signs of progress and feeling successful in their efforts boosted student persistence.

5. Offer Tutoring

This strategy was implemented at HERC, where twelve students were selected for individual or group tutoring. This enabled the program to actively engage stopped out students, or those at risk of stopping out. Individual tutoring worked particularly well for students who couldn't attend class or who had a particular interest in study, such as citizenship or occupational vocabulary.



Key outcome: Increased self-efficacy and motivation to pursue learning

HERC Coordinator Erin McNally noted that she hears “again and again” from the twelve students who received tutoring about how important this additional support was in their learning and life in general. She added that most tutoring students reported that “having a ‘key supporter,’ such as a tutor, allowed them to achieve their goals and gain more confidence” in using English. One student, who had never spoken to the Coordinator in English before in her two years in the program, started speaking in English after starting her tutoring sessions. Another, who continued with a tutor after stopping out, focused on workplace self-advocacy during her sessions. After a few weeks, she felt comfortable enough to ask her supervisor for a planned work schedule and class nights off, and her employer honored her request; she was able to re-enter class.

Erin also noticed that individual tutoring seemed to be an especially promising practice; individually tutored students had a higher rate of completion than students in group tutoring, and 83% of them continued with their tutors after the cycle had finished.

Counseling and Peer Support-Specific Challenges

Two challenges surfaced most prominently in this category. First was the issue of staff time. Although this was a concern across the board, it appeared most often for counseling because this strategy requires one-on-one time with students over and above the time counselors can normally provide. It also involves a significant amount of time following up with students who may be difficult to reach. QCC staff noted, “It takes a great deal of time to provide on-going counseling and attention to individual students, coordinate services, and track progress.”

Second was the challenge of recruiting peer mentors. Neither Middletown nor QCAP (a program using peer “Student Ambassadors” to help orient new ESOL and ABE students) was able to find as many mentors as they’d intended. Middletown’s efforts yielded only female mentors, limiting the pairings they could make. At QCAP, many of the ESOL students they approached felt that their English was not good enough. As a result, they did not have any Student Ambassadors for the first ESOL orientation, although they were eventually able to persuade five students to participate at the second orientation. Two ABE students agreed to be Student Ambassadors and attended all of the ABE orientations, but many others could not make the time commitment and the program had to scale back its original plan.



F. RE-ENGAGEMENT

What is this category?

The strategies in the re-engagement category entail contacting students who have stopped out or are at risk of stopping out to offer support and help them make a sustainable learning plan that takes into account their current life circumstances. The plan might result in re-entry into the program or independent study through on-line work, study packets, or drop-in to a study/resource center.

What is the connection between re-engagement and persistence?

Programs are finding that the risk of dropping out increases when students approach completion of their studies. Students often leave programs after passing four of five parts of the GED test, or just a small number of credits shy of achieving an adult high school diploma. Programs that intervene with these students, before or after they have stopped out, are able to coach them through the final phases of earning a credential. Others, who have stopped out because of any number of possible persistence barriers, may need encouragement, problem-solving support, or an opportunity to do independent study.

Findings

In this category, programs collected data on the number of study hours that resulted from calling and “re-engaging” students who had stopped out of the program. Eighty students were impacted. Since this was a new program practice, two of the programs had no '07 data to compare to. EASTCONN did have a comparison point, as they had independent study data for both years.

RE-ENGAGEMENT 2008 DATA								
PROGRAM	# CONTACTED	# RETURNED TO CLASS	# INDEP. STUDY	# INDEP. STUDY HOURS	AVER. # STUDY HRS/ STUDENT	COMPLETIONS	LEARNING GAINS	GOAL ATTAINED
CLC	11	7	3	20	7			
Dover	30	3+	14	164	12	50%	64%	50%
EASTCONN	39		36	2550	71	41%		



EASTCONN	N	ATTENDANCE RATE: ACTUAL-TO-PLANNED HRS	COMPLETION RATE OF GRADUATES	NON-ACHIEVER RATE: EARNED NO CREDITS	HOURS OF INDEPENDENT STUDY COMPLETED
Spring 07 Seniors	45	71%	44%	24%	2805
Spring 08 Seniors	39	70%	41%	8%	2550

At the Community Learning Center (CLC), two thirds of the 11 contacted students eventually returned to class, and three (27%) participated in independent study with the support of a teacher. Dover Adult Learning re-engaged 14 independent students. They did not track the numbers that re-entered classes (there were at least 3). Of those that participated in independent study, 50% completed all or part of the GED.

EASTCONN re-engaged a greater number of students (36), and yielded a much higher number of study hours per student. This is likely because their one-credit independent studies typically require a significant number of hours (about 50 hours) to complete (as well as attainment of passing grades on assignments and tests). Failure to fulfill these expectations can result in no credit and, therefore, no progress. At CLC and Dover, any additional study time can help move students toward learning gains and attainment of their high school credential.

EASTCONN also documented that the percent of students that failed to earn any credits for the semester dropped from 24% to 8% during the intervention.

What strategies were explored?

Offer study options to at-risk or stopped-out students

At Dover, the key intervention was to reconnect with stop-outs and offer a structured independent program of study. The counselor contacted roughly 30 students who had stopped out for various reasons, targeting students who had completed one or more parts of the GED exam. She explained the independent study options, which included one-on-one instruction at flexible times, drop-in instruction, and independent work. Many students were excited about the idea and agreed to meet to develop a plan. The plans for these students varied greatly depending on their needs.

At the Community Learning Center, students who had stopped out of the program were contacted and invited to re-engage through several options. ABE teacher Wendy Quinones then interviewed them to establish how each relationship would work. Students had the option

of working online or with print materials. All students were expected to be in contact with Wendy weekly, in person, by phone or by email. They were also invited to attend drop-in classes.

Of the two students who persisted longest, Maria received homework packets both by mail and in person. She was in contact with Wendy primarily by telephone, augmented by one face-to-face meeting/tutorial session. Sonia met weekly with Wendy and wrote that it was this one-to-one aspect of the program that was most beneficial for her. No students used the drop-in class option.

At EASTCONN, Credit Diploma Program students work independently and need to take responsibility for getting through their high school requirements. EASTCONN's strategy was to identify Credit Diploma Program students who were 2.75 credits short of graduating in June as "seniors." As counselors met with students they told them about the "senior" status, helped them determine whether they qualified, reviewed their outstanding requirements, and guided them in developing an action plan and timeline for their completion. The new seniors were excited to know that they were almost done and embraced that identity. Students who came in to meet monthly with a counselor or made adequate progress were promised a gift card (although these arrived late in the process).

EASTCONN also developed an extensive database to track weekly attendance and progress toward goals. This alerted guidance staff to individual students whose progress might benefit from immediate intervention.

Key outcome: Increased motivation to reach graduation

At the Community Learning Center and Dover, the majority of students contacted either engaged in self-study or returned to class. Although a large number were either unreachable or unready to return to their studies, the effort did manage to reconnect many students to classes and help others establish individualized study plans. While self-study does not work for everyone, with appropriate guidance it serves well a population of students that have problematic schedules or unique learning needs. According to the staff at Dover, all students who reached their goals felt that having a person to guide them in their independent learning was very helpful. One recent GED graduate said, "The independent study program gave me a sense of direction when working alone. I knew I could ask for help over the phone or email, or I could show up at the drop-in time to get the help I needed. . . . I know I would not have finished without this option."



Dover Teacher Pam Shaw describes her experience with one student this way:

Bob was a role-model for our independent study. Bob had been working on finishing his GED for several years, attending classes infrequently and trying to work on his own without much success. Bob works full time, lives about 40 minutes away from our learning center, and has a three-year-old child. He decided that meeting once a week right after work worked best for him. Bob met me religiously for six weeks. He even called to confirm our meeting time! Bob and I worked together for an hour to an hour and half, and then I gave him homework for the week. He was motivated and has passed his GED. For Bob, the flexibility of the independent study really worked.

Re-engagement-Specific Challenges

Programs working in this category had the most difficult challenges to face, as they were trying to re-engage students who already had at least one foot out the door:

1. *The difficulty of establishing and staying in contact with students.* Many students were hard to reach because of difficult work schedules or lack of phones; others were unavailable at agreed-upon calling times. This occupied many hours of counselor time.
2. *The reality of students' lives.* Students are often dealing with multiple barriers and complex life issues, including drug, alcohol, and mental health issues which go beyond motivational factors related to school. Moreover, many students who have left school have turned their attention elsewhere. As EASTCONN's Program Coordinator noted, re-engaging students is "like trying to get toothpaste back in the tube."
3. *Few actual study hours.* It was difficult for many students to do a significant amount of study. Some gave assurances that they had many hours available for study, but on the evidence used few.



FINDINGS *by*

ADULTS' AFFECTIVE NEEDS



In this section, we cast the persistence strategies and their outcomes into a bigger frame of needs that they fulfill in adults:

- A. Sense of belonging and community
- B. Clarity of purpose
- C. Agency
- D. Competence
- E. Relevance
- F. Stability

We believe that ultimately, the persistence strategies derive their power from the fact that they meet these affective needs of adults. Adult education providers can boost learner persistence by intentionally addressing these needs through all facets and phases of the program. They can do so by employing multiple strategies. Conversely, one strategy often addresses several needs. For example, an informative and welcoming student orientation that begins the goal-setting process and that involves enrolled students as presenters can begin to address adults' needs for a sense of belonging, clarity of purpose, competence, relevance and agency.

In the following section, we discuss the persistence strategies used by the NELP programs in light of the affective needs they address and of supporting research. While we do not claim that this is a definitive list of adults' affective needs, these needs underlie the strategies used by the NELP programs. Like the strategies, the needs are interconnected and reinforce each other. We open the section with a chart that shows how the strategies, their outcomes and the needs are connected.

EFFECTIVE PERSISTENCE STRATEGIES AND THEIR OUTCOMES

Persistence strategies that . . .	and lead to these outcomes . . .	addressing adults' need for . . .
Show interest, support, consideration, and caring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the first interaction one that welcomes students and builds community • Provide individualized counseling and follow-up with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased connection to program and peers • Increased use of counseling and articulation of needs 	Sense of belonging and community
Enhance the ability to make informed decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer clear and accessible information • Involve students in orienting peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More informed decisions about learning • Increased understanding of program 	Agency Sense of belonging and community
Provide learning options and opportunities to be included in decision-making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer tutoring • Offer study options to at-risk or stopped-out students close to graduating • Provide learning options • Provide opportunities for students to be included in decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-efficacy and motivation to pursue learning • Increased motivation to reach graduation • Increased self-direction of learning • Increased engagement in learning • Increased ownership of classroom processes 	Agency
Engage students in dialogue about their learning and goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students identify goals and make decisions about their learning • Discuss persistence, learning, and aspirations • Engage students in dialogue about their learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased understanding and self-direction of learning • Broader aspirations and increased self-efficacy • Increased metacognition 	Clarity of purpose Competence
Expand student roles and responsibilities in the program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve students in orienting peers • Involve students in mentoring peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased confidence and self-efficacy of peer leaders • Increased motivation to pursue learning 	Competence Agency
Make learning relevant and engaging <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make connections to the real world and students' emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased engagement in learning 	Relevance
Provide consistency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build student cohorts • Institute managed enrollment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less classroom turbulence • Increased engagement and productivity 	Stability



A. SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY



Many students talked about how isolating life in the United States can be and explained they would come to HERC even if they weren't learning English for the social aspect of the program and connections they've made with other students. I hadn't realized how important this was for our students before. Students affirmed many times throughout this semester that the sense of community in the program is an important factor in their consistent attendance and motivation.

~ ERIN MCNALLY, PROGRAM COORDINATOR, HERC



It is human nature that when we feel welcomed, respected, and develop a sense of belonging, we are more apt to return to the setting or endeavor than when those factors are not present. When adults decide to resume their education after years of being out of school, they usually bring with them the expectations and connotations of whatever their previous educational experiences were like. For some adult learners the decision to go back to school can be anxiety provoking. They are stepping into unfamiliar territory, possibly without an expectation of belonging there. For that reason, cultivating a sense of belonging from the moment a prospective adult learner comes through the doors or calls is an important persistence strategy.

While not the only way to promote a sense of belonging in adult education, group learning (cohorts) has been found to foster it. In studying the stages of development of adult literacy learners at three sites, Robert Kegan and his fellow researchers found that adult learners benefited greatly from a group learning environment. "Although our sites presented three very different cohort designs, most participants valued highly their sense of belonging in the group and benefited substantially from their cohort experiences. . . . Our participants show us that cohort experiences seem to facilitate academic learning, increased feelings of belonging, broadened perspectives and, at least by our participants' report, learner persistence" (Drago-Severson, Helsing, Kegan, Popp et al. 2001).

Research from both higher education and K-12 also affirms the importance of building community and a sense of belonging in students. Vincent Tinto's research with community college students provides strong evidence of the connection between persistence and

community: “The research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty, staff, and other students is one of the strongest predictors not only of student persistence but also of student learning” (Tinto 1994). In his view, effective retention consists of “an enduring commitment to student welfare, a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of students, and an emphasis upon the construction of supportive social and educational communities that actively involve students in learning.”

Studies with middle and high school students by Voelkl (1995, 1997) and others (Goodenow and Grady, 1993) also point to a strong relationship between academic achievement or school leaving and students' sense of belonging to the school community. Voelkl found that “students' feelings of belonging have been associated with levels of engagement, persistent effort in school work, expectations for success, and general school motivation and success.”

In the New England Learner Persistence project, 11 out of the 18 action research program staff made specific observations about a greater sense of community in the group where the persistence strategies were implemented. At some sites, the strategies were intentionally aimed at community building, such as icebreakers during the first night of class at Nashua Adult Learning:

These were fun, low-pressure activities designed to let students and teachers get to know each other and start to form trusting relationships. The . . . relaxed and supportive atmosphere carried through to the end of term. . . . The feeling of community was confirmed when students showed concern for their fellow students' absences.

The SCALE program reported that their students “appreciated the opportunity to have a mentor who made them feel part of the class immediately.”

At the most basic level, building community calls for fostering connections among people. Activities and processes that help students and staff to get to know one another build trust and camaraderie. This is especially important for new students. Numerous instances of this were documented by the participating programs. When group activities were not possible, taking time to introduce individual students and staff to each other made a positive impression on students, as the Franklin County Adult Education staff discovered.

Introductions and icebreakers set the stage for more ongoing community building. A sense of belonging can be cultivated in multiple ways that reinforce each other: activities that help staff understand and appreciate students' barriers and supports to persistence, conveying caring, and showing appreciation and recognition. The data shows recurring comments by many students about their appreciation for the caring the program showed them. The HERC program Coordinator reported that, following the ‘Night to Dream’ event, “many



students thanked the volunteers and HERC for taking such an interest in their goals and their lives beyond the English classroom.” The Quinsigamond Community College project team “saw and experienced a huge difference in the student behaviors, attitudes, relationships and sense of community. Most of the students opened up with us and discussed potential problems with us. . . . One of them, upon returning to his class after a leave, hugged the counselor and thanked her repeatedly; another student told the counselor that if it were not for her persistence in keeping in touch with him, he would have never come back and get his GED.”

The Central Falls Public Library and Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative both noticed a sense of community among students who availed themselves of the self-study options. These students bonded as a learning community even though most of the work was done individually. The very fact that the program made the effort to offer such a learning option was interpreted as a sign of caring by students.

In addition to direct comments by students about sense of community and caring staff, program staff noted certain indicators that they attributed to students' sense of belonging and connection to the program. They reported an increase in the number of students who

- ◆ let staff know the reasons for their absences;
- ◆ communicated with staff about their need to stop out;
- ◆ noticed and expressed concern for fellow classmates' absences and sometimes called them;
- ◆ showed interest in and support for classmates meeting their goals;
- ◆ had lively conversations before class and during breaks;
- ◆ stayed late after class to do school work together; and
- ◆ showed appreciation for each other.

B. CLARITY OF PURPOSE

One of the basic tenets of adult learning theory is that adults tend to be goal-oriented (Knowles, 1975), seeking to use their learning to achieve specific ends. Notwithstanding challenges to the theory based on claims that it does not recognize cultural differences in regard to goals or explore community (vs. individual) goals (Brookfield, 1986), current studies do show a relationship between having goals and persistence.

As they followed adult learners over time, Comings, Parrella and Soricone (1999) found that adults who were able to clearly identify their learning goals were much more likely to persist

than those who either mentioned no specific purpose or simply said that they were learning for themselves. According to this study, learners who establish concrete goals and are given the opportunity to see that they are making measurable progress toward them are more likely to persist in their studies.

Demonstrating this point in a program setting, Meader (2000) incorporated goal-setting activities into two math classes, with a review of goals after four and eight weeks and reflection at the end of each course. She compared these classes to two non-goal-setting math classes of similar size and makeup. The course completion rates were similar for the two night classes, but in day classes the class that utilized goal-setting had a completion rate of 71% compared to 45% for the class without the goal-setting. Meader stresses that, in order to be effective, goal-setting needs to be on-going.

Following up on the Comings, Parrella and Soricone study (1999), Comings, et al. (2003) tracked the persistence patterns of students in five library programs. They found that short-term students usually have clearly defined goals that motivate them to stick with their learning until the goal has been achieved, while long-term students tend not to have such specific goals – they more generally value the learning and community aspects of participating in the program. The researchers distinguish between instrumental (specific) and broader, transformational goals, such as improving one's life, and recommend that programs “tap into such aspirations” by not restricting goal-setting to only short-term, immediately achievable aims.

Moreover, research in higher education shows that having long-range goals is a predictor of success in college (Sedlacek, 2004). In addition, researchers using goal “redirection” as a way to help college students persist note that “long term goals are . . . important to establish for two main reasons: they help shape the kinds of learning activities the learner engages in and they provide an important source of motivation for the learner” (College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, 2000).

The NELP programs explored various approaches to goal-setting and found that all of them helped students focus on their studies and evaluate their progress. At Nashua Adult Learning, teachers focused on helping students set clear, achievable goals. This was motivating for students, such as those in Vicki McIver's class who asked for her guidance in setting goals for their summer months away from class. Similarly, staff at Quinsigamond Community College observed that “students [began to approach] the program from the goal achievement stand-point. With all the discussions regarding persistence and goals, they felt very proud when they achieved one of them Once this happened, they wanted to set another goal.” At HERC, the program invited community mentors to talk with students about how they met important life goals, such as buying a house or getting into a particular field of work. This helped HERC's students reconsider their own personal and family goals, and to place



their learning in the context of reaching their long-term “dreams.” And at Vernon Regional ABE, staff credited goal-setting exercises with helping students figure out which high school completion program would be best for them so that they could make informed choices.

Goal-setting is a way to help adults clarify their purposes for returning to school. It is also important, however, for students to understand the purpose of the instruction and to see the relevance of one to the other. Describing the research that underlies the Equipped for the Future framework for lifelong learning, Gillespie (2002) highlights the need for transparent alignment between learning purposes, instruction, and assessment. She notes that an “intentional and purpose-driven approach to planning creates the conditions for teachers to make explicit both what will be learned and what good performance will look like. In this way, the process and goals of learning are transparent to everyone involved.”

Where clarity and transparency are lacking, students are often confused about the purpose of instruction and how it supports their academic goals. In Ramirez’s study of managed enrollment at MiraCosta College in California, one of the issues identified as problematic for students was that there were no clear entrance and exit criteria for a class. Some instructors said it was “just obvious” which students were ready to be promoted. The purpose and objectives of the course, or how one could be promoted, were undefined. This lack of clarity of purpose from the program and instructor was unsettling for students. Through a process of identifying clear exit criteria for each level, instructors articulated the skills and knowledge expected. Student response was very positive. Most instructors felt their students were excited about having clear priority outcomes and understanding how assignments, assessments, and promotion were connected. Ramirez noted that, “The most astounding difference between the original student survey and the follow-up survey was how well students could articulate their progress through program levels.”

Transparency of purpose was emphasized in several NELP programs. Throughout orientations, counseling sessions, and classes, practitioners made efforts to clarify and explore why the instruction or the programming was designed as it was. Where the design did not fit the purpose well, policies and practices were reconsidered. For example, Quinsigamond Community College Adult Education program re-examined its strict attendance policy when the program saw that it was discouraging the persistence of students who had intractable life barriers that required more flexible options. In classrooms, teachers were attentive to explaining why they were organizing instruction in a particular way. SCALE set aside meeting time to make sure that entering cohort students, mentors, and other students in class all understood the purpose and format of the peer mentoring project and, specifically, how it would benefit them. And in regard to the learning packets that were implemented at RIFLI, teacher Chris Bourret noted, “I feel the most significant change is that students have expectations now about what the packet is and what it is for, plus they can cite their own reasons for doing it.”

Finally, goal-setting is a social and developmental process. With more information and confidence, students frequently change their goals (Precure, 2000). They also expand their notions of what is possible by hearing the goals and aspirations of others. At Boston HERC, hearing from peers bolstered students' sense that they could reach their goals. "One student explained that she realized after speaking with a member of our informal mentoring 'Dream Team' that her goals were attainable over time. Other students set new goals for themselves, with the help of their peers. After hearing spontaneous testimonies, a lot of students wrote on their evaluations that they realized attending college or a training program was possible for them."

In sum, dialogue and reflection – about aspirations, goals, and dreams – helped students gain clarity about their own purposes for learning and about the program's intentions and approaches to helping them. This clarity provided motivation, relief, and the possibility for adults to make informed decisions and take responsibility for their own learning.

C. AGENCY

Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make things happen through their actions. Adult learning theory has long held that adults strive for agency – that as individuals mature they move from dependence toward self-direction, and that adults want to be treated as responsible individuals with the capacity to determine things for themselves (Imel, 1988). When adults are encouraged to become self-directed, they begin "to see themselves as proactive, initiating individuals engaged in continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, work worlds, and social circumstances, rather than as reactive individuals, buffeted by uncontrollable forces of circumstance" (Brookfield, 1986). More recent work in cognitive theory suggests that, "learners of all ages are more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning and when they can use that information to do something that has an impact on others" (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000).

Bandura's social cognitive theory is rooted in a view of human agency which holds that people strive to control events that affect their lives and are proactively engaged in their own development. Key to this notion of agency is the idea that individuals' self-beliefs affect their motivation and actions - that "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, adult educators should be attentive to building students' beliefs that they are capable, creative agents. Adult learning should be structured to nurture the development of self-directed, empowered adults. This concept is discussed in greater detail within the 'Competence' section.

The NELP data is replete with examples of students who took more initiative in making decisions, advocating for themselves, and asserting their needs as a result of persistence interventions. Much of this occurred in counseling, classroom, or tutoring sessions that invited



student participation, decision-making, and problem-solving. In addition to the many examples provided in the strategy sections, we note some specific illustrations here:

In the past few weeks, the learners have begun looking at the daily schedule with a more critical eye. One student looked at the syllabus and requested an activity be done earlier that day because she had to leave early for an appointment and didn't want to miss it. . . . Learners have opinions and preferences, and are expressing them (Genesis Center).

During the term, learner willingness to suggest curriculum adaptations, changes in routine, duration of activities, and even discussion on whether new classmates should be enrolled became more evident. . . . The classroom functioned as much more of a democracy by the end of the term (Genesis Center).

A student who continued with a tutor after stopping out focused on workplace self-advocacy during her sessions. After a few weeks, she felt comfortable enough to ask for a planned work schedule and class nights off, and her employer honored her request; she was able to re-enter classes (Boston HERC).

After learning about program services at the orientation, "a student from the advanced ESOL class came into the office for college program information. He came in without 'fear' and knew exactly who to talk to regarding his concern (Clinton).

One ABE student decided that a GED program with an academic focus was not the right place for her at this time in her life (she was 65 years old) and instead decided to enroll in a computer class at a local community center (QCAP).

At our first orientation, two young ladies were questioning their options for a diploma. . . . One of the young ladies responded that we were wasting her time, that she didn't need a diploma, and that she was leaving. It sounds like this would be a negative side of the orientation, but in fact, it's not. This student in the past, would have signed up for the class, started it, probably would have been a problem in the classroom, and then would have dropped out. The negativity would have impacted many more than just herself. The program served its purpose in educating her about her choices and making her responsible for that choice (Vernon).

Adults who were given information and opportunities to use their agency to impact decisions that affected them demonstrated greater persistence and took greater responsibility for learning. They effectively assessed and asserted their needs, even if this meant postponing or redirecting their learning. Again illustrating the interconnectedness of adults' affective needs, those whose agency was respected seemed to develop a stronger connection to their program, demonstrate greater self-efficacy, and participate more fully in the life of the program.



D. COMPETENCE

All adults have a need to feel competent in key aspects of their lives. A decision to return to school as an adult bespeaks of adults' desire to build their competence in domains which more schooling can address, for example reading with their children, navigating life in an English-speaking environment, or getting a better job. In that process, adults' beliefs about and realistic assessment of their competence in these specific areas can have a profound effect on their persistence and achievement. Such beliefs reflect their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs in their capabilities to learn or perform specific tasks at designated levels, and to meet specific goals.

Unlike the more general concepts of self-confidence or self-esteem, self-efficacy is context or domain specific. Adult learners, for example, may have a high level of self-efficacy in non-academic domains such as to fix a car, build a house, sew an outfit, play baseball, fix hair and so on, while their self-efficacy in reading or writing English can be low. However, a positive self-concept, i.e. an overall feeling of self-worth aids self-efficacy and vice versa.

A wealth of research findings indicate that self-efficacy correlates with achievement and outcomes and, by extension, persistence (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995). Albert Bandura, who originally articulated the theory of self-efficacy in the late 1970s, states, "Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs of personal efficacy." People who have high self-efficacy visualize success whereas those who doubt their efficacy typically visualize failure. These beliefs affect motivation and the types of aspirations and goals people set for themselves, which in turn, affect persistence and ultimately, academic achievement. Students with more self-efficacy are more willing to persist in the face of adversity and reach their goals. The more they are able to build their perception of self-efficacy with the help of teachers, counselors and other program staff, the more motivated they become to persist.

Even though none of the 18 programs in the New England Learner Persistence Project articulated a specific goal for building self-efficacy or an overall sense of competence, the data is replete with evidence that many strategies, in fact, served that purpose. According to Bandura (1995), the most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences. The key persistence strategies used by several programs in the instructional category did just that. They developed students' study skills and metacognition, which in turn enabled them to achieve a sense of mastery or competence. When Barbara Al-Sabek's students learned to identify and articulate the specific language learning activities that they felt they would benefit from the most, they were making "judgments of one's capability to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" to quote Bandura. When her students took over opening the class or deciding whether new students should be admitted, they demonstrated efficacy as leaders and decision-makers in the classroom.



When RIFLI's ESOL students began to master independent study skills, and asked for tips for how to study for their own purposes over the summer, they too were making judgments of their personal capabilities to successfully study English on their own. Key in this process was the "guided mastery" provided by the RIFLI teachers who made sure the material in the take-home reading packets was at a reading level the students could master, modeled the use of the self-study materials, and provided ongoing support and feedback. Without this kind of scaffolding, the reading packets may well have had an adverse effect on students' self-efficacy.

The Central Falls Public Library ESOL program found that the self-paced English for All (EFA) computer program gave many students a sense of mastery in learning English that the staff had not observed in the regular classroom setting. Different features of the EFA program made it an "overwhelmingly positive" experience for the students according to the staff: For shy students, it removed performance pressure; for a student who is hard-of-hearing, it boosted her listening skills; and for a dyslexic student, it resulted in "an achievement that an observation of her classroom performance wouldn't indicate was likely."

Other programs that found engaging and educationally appropriate uses of computer-based instruction also observed an increased level of mastery in using computers and the Internet. The Second Start staff reported that, "Students who developed better computer skills generally also developed greater confidence, and they said so." Such confidence likely translates into self-efficacy around using similar computer programs and tools, such as the Internet and the web.

The programs that supported students in assuming new roles as peer mentors or "ambassadors" also observed that the mentors were more self-confident. Staff at Middletown reported that "Through participation in this program, the self-esteem of our mentors was increased. The mentors were pleased to be involved and have their input valued and respected by the staff." It is reasonable to assume that the students who volunteered as mentors already had a healthy level of self-efficacy related to their ability to guide their classmates that was further boosted by the experience of peer mentoring. As well, the SCALE mentors and mentees completed and discussed a learning styles inventory that included suggestions for best learning strategies. This type of activity would likely impact both the mentors' and mentees' self-efficacy and overall sense of competence.

Programs that engaged students in conversations and activities about their goals and purposes for learning and helped students set achievable short-term goals tied to long-term aspirations, built self-efficacy through what Bandura calls "social persuasion." Counselors and teachers tend to be agents of "social persuasion" by helping people believe in their own capacity to learn and meet their goals, and by helping them set achievable goals.

Finally, HERC's 'Night to Dream' activity is a perfect example of the third way to develop self-efficacy through role models or vicarious experiences. The fact that students realized that their dreams could become attainable goals is evidence of increased self-efficacy.

In summary, several persistence strategies were consistent with three ways Bandura recommends to create a strong sense of efficacy: 1) through mastery experiences; 2) social persuasion; and 3) vicarious experiences provided by social models. Helping adult learners improve their self-efficacy is a powerful persistence booster, and feeds the adult need for feeling competent.

E. RELEVANCE

The process of helping adult learners articulate their dreams and aspirations as long and short-term goals, as discussed under 'Clarity of Purpose', needs to connect to the curriculum and ongoing counseling in order for the program to meet the test of relevance in the learners' eyes. The degree of perceived relevance of the instructional program to the adult learners' goals, interests and life experience is a key factor in adults' motivation to persist in their studies even if they need to stop out for a while. Most adult learners juggle many competing priorities that may take precedence if the instructional program is not meeting their needs or engaging their interest. As has been noted by many adult education theorists, adults are by and large pragmatic learners. Relevance of class materials was one of six most frequently mentioned attributes mentioned by community college adult learners in a study conducted by Donaldson, Flannery and Gordon-Ross (1993).

Nevertheless, relevance is a subjective construct. Obtaining a GED or learning English may feel relevant enough for one person whereas another may need to see more specific real life connections in every lesson to feel motivated to continue learning. However, instruction that draws on students' life experience and interests is more likely to engage both types of learners. Acknowledging and building on adults' life experience is a broadly recognized tenet of adult education dating back to Dewey (1916) and Lindeman (1926). Both Dewey and Lindeman, followed by numerous social action theorists, believed that adult education should be relevant to adults' role as citizens in a democracy, with adults' experience as the starting point.

More recent findings in neuroscience underscore the importance of experience and relevance to learning. Neuroscientists define learning as a process of continuous modification of what we already know because comprehension depends on the association between new information and past experience (Zull, 2008). "People learn from experience in a way that is simply not possible from instruction or information delivery alone. . . . It is only through a substantial range of relevant experience that the entire [psychophysiological] system can be adequately engaged" (Caine and Caine, 2008). This stems from the fact that the brain is a pattern-seeking organ, always scanning the environment and looking for a match to what it already "knows."



According to Wolfe (2006), “If there is no match, then the information is, from the brain’s perspective, nonsense.” Such information can stay in the short-term memory so that a student may remember it in a test if they crammed for it the night before. However, for that information to move to the long-term memory, it needs to be coded by the brain as something that makes sense, that is, in other words, relevant.

There are two factors that have been shown to greatly influence the kind of connection made in the brain that can lead to future recall and greater understanding. They are whether or not the information has meaning and whether or not it has an emotional hook. According to Zull, “Emotion is the foundation of learning. . . all regions of neocortex are enmeshed in networks of other neurons that secrete emotion chemicals.”

Thus, strategies that connect learning to students’ emotions and real life draw their power from neuroscience. In his review of effective ESOL teaching strategies, Chisman (2008) observed that programs that include real life situations outside of the classroom appear to “have higher retention and learning gains than programs that do not incorporate authentic learning components.” In their study of authentic learning, Purcell-Gates et al. (2000) found that use of authentic teaching material resulted in a more effective transfer of learning from the classroom to adult learners’ daily lives in terms of frequency of reading and writing and/or types of texts read and written. While their study did not address persistence, it implies that adult learners found authentic teaching material more immediately relevant to their lives.

The International Institute of Boston’s implementation of the unit on food is an example of instruction that connects to students’ lives outside the classroom and has “emotional hooks” even though it is not necessarily related to specific life goals beyond learning English. ESOL teachers Terri Kasper and Sayyora Nurmatova considered that, “food is central to any culture, and people love sharing stories about food.” By eliciting students’ memories, including taste and smell through writing assignments and discussions, they helped students draw on their emotions in order to learn English. By sponsoring a class visit to a bookstore to look at cookbooks and by doing a cooking demonstration followed by eating pizza they connected the learning to the real world that went beyond students’ memories from their native countries.

Likewise, computer-based instruction that drew on real-life simulations or websites with authentic material, such as job information or how to get your driver’s license honored students’ need for relevance that expressed itself as observable engagement in learning.

Outside of the classroom, counselors too share the responsibility to remind students of the relevance of persisting with the program to their lives and aspirations. Practices such as HERC’s Night to Dream panel of community members who had reached educational, career and life goals such as buying their own home are also effective in reminding students of the relevance of the daily struggle to learn English to the changes they seek in their lives.

F. STABILITY

Learning is difficult in an environment that is chaotic or unstable. Yet many adult programs are designed, out of the best intentions to meet the needs of every individual, to allow students to enter and exit classes at any time. This constant coming and going has been termed “turbulence,” (Sticht, 1998), and a growing body of research is showing that it disrupts learning and decreases retention (Sticht, 1998, Bialek, 1977).

In a survey of 17 teachers at San Diego Community College, Sticht (1998) found that open entry/open exit policies made it difficult for teachers to know who would be in their classes from day to day, and therefore to plan extended or innovative instruction. Povenmire, in her review of the literature, adds that turbulence is a challenge to classroom management, curriculum development and teaching, and community building and trust. “In an effort to ‘catch up’ new students on previously covered material, teachers repeat lessons over and over again, which 1) discourages learners who have already participated in those lessons and would like to move on, and 2) prevents teachers from actually completing an entire lesson unit with a cohort of learners” (Povenmire, 2006).

In Ramirez’s study of ESOL students in open enrollment, non-credit classes at MiraCosta College in California, she found that “25% of the students left the program after one week of instruction and only 8% were promoted to the next level of instruction.” Students often complained that they couldn’t see progress and blamed that lack of progress on the constant turnover and repetition in their classes. In this study (Ramirez, 2005), managed enrollment was instituted at the main campus site in five 8-week sessions. The results indicated that the average retention rate went up to 80% per session and 35% of students were promoted or graduated each session. During the second year of managed enrollment, almost 50% of students were promoted or graduated after one session.

Given the timeframe of the NELP project, most programs that did not already have managed enrollment in place did not have the time to plan for and implement it as their persistence strategy. However, several programs began to serve students in cohorts – small groups that would enter a class together. At Vernon Regional ABE and the Clinton Adult Learning Center, their new group orientations created natural cohorts as students were no longer registered and placed in class one at a time. SCALE’s peer mentoring model also relied on a cohort model to bring a small group of students into the advanced math class together, so that they could benefit from the peer support of both the cohort and their new mentors. SCALE teacher Tom Glannon credits the cohort model with creating the opportunity for students to “work their way through the class syllabus in a more organized, cohesive way.” All of these programs are continuing or expanding policies that manage the movement of students in clusters, as they were well-received by students, teachers, and counselors alike.



And some programs, such as Quinsigamond Community College, whose own intervention had nothing to do with cohorts are moving toward managed enrollment after seeing the impact it's having at other programs.

In addition to the turbulence that may result from program policies, many adult students experience turmoil in their daily lives due to a variety of poverty-related issues. Kair and Prins (2007) researched the relationship between poverty, residential mobility, and persistence in Pennsylvania family literacy programs and found that in twelve out of twenty programs practitioners estimated that the typical participant moved once a year or more. This transience was due to displacement caused by poverty, domestic abuse, employment instability, and other disruptions that disproportionately affect the poor. Residential instability then affected persistence because families needed time to get resettled and transportation often became more difficult.

Other forms of instability affect adult students, as well. Perry (2006) notes that “nearly one-third of the adult population bring to their classroom a history of abuse, neglect, developmental chaos, or violence that influences their capacity to learn,” as well as those who have acquired cumulative trauma from past stress-inducing experiences in school. According to Perry, “The key to understanding the long-term impact of trauma on an adult learner is to remember that he or she is often, at baseline, in a state of low-level fear. . . . The major challenge to the educator working with highly stressed or traumatized adults is to furnish the structure, predictability, and sense of safety that can help them begin to feel safe enough to learn.”

And yet it is not only those who have experienced turmoil or trauma that benefit from stable learning environments. Drago-Severson, et al. (2001), in a study of using cohorts with different kinds of adult learners, found that all students need supports and challenges from their surrounding contexts in order to grow. “We refer to such contexts as ‘holding environments.’” One aspect of a good holding environment is that “it ‘sticks around,’ providing continuity, stability, and availability to the person in the process of growth.”

Several programs implemented interventions that added elements of predictability, continuity, safety, and stability to their students' experiences. On the program level, student orientations provided a safe, welcoming introduction to the program and built a connection among the new students that supported them through their first classes. Clinton Director Christine Cordio observed that “students bonded with each other as ‘new students’ and the . . . teacher mentioned she could literally see the look of relief on their faces because they knew someone in the class from attending the orientation.”



Counselors increased their attention to new and at-risk students so that they received regular, predictable support calls. Several students mentioned that it was this consistent support that got them through their GED exams. And on the instructional level, many students responded to regularly scheduled activities in the classroom. At the International Institute of Boston, students commented on looking forward to their Wednesday night combined class, and students at the RI Family Literacy Initiative eagerly awaited their next reading packets. Ritualized activities were an explicit element of Barbara Alsabek's strategy at the Genesis Center. Students were so accustomed to the regular opening and closing activities that they could step in to lead them. For example, Barbara reported that, "One day I was late in getting the daily syllabus on the board . . . and one of the students of her own volition walked up to the front board and wrote the date at the top where the syllabus is always scribed. She then wrote the word 'activities' under it and asked me what we would be doing that day. I dictated the syllabus to her and was fairly overcome that this daily syllabus had become so much a part of the classroom ritual that a few minutes' lateness led to this student participation."

Overall, offering students predictable, consistent programming enabled them to participate more fully and with greater ease. More attention could be paid to their learning, as they were not distracted by the anxieties and other affective barriers that arise when dealing with constant change.

CROSS-CATEGORY CHALLENGES

8

Individual and Social Factors

Programs in all categories noted that social factors such as poverty, unstable employment, transportation and housing, and unmet mental health needs presented insurmountable barriers for many students. No matter what promising strategies the program might implement, these powerful social forces can be overwhelming and insurmountable by an individual program.

Dover noted that a common occurrence in their independent study “re-engagement” program was mental health issues and how they were a hindrance to students.

It seems that the students with these types of issues often have the hardest time attending classes, making an independent study an attractive alternative. However, this option has not been as successful for these students as we had hoped. Students come once or twice and then they miss a week. Phone calls are often not returned. E-mail correspondence has not proven to be effective with these students.

Programs often first learn about students’ personal and social barriers during intake and orientation and need to decide how to counsel students about enrolling in the program. Adult students are not always as prepared as they think they are for the challenges of returning to school. The Quincy Community Action program staff noticed that

... sometimes, students try to take on too many new things at once in their lives. For example, we have learned that if a prospective student says they have recently overcome an addiction problem, we have to ask them how long they have been clean and sober and possibly tell them that they should give it more time before they try to add a GED class to their new sobriety. We plan to spend more time in the orientation letting people know that getting a GED can be a long-term process, to help them readjust their expectations about the time needed to reach their goal.

Limited Self-Study Skills

Many students lack the study skills or self-motivation to work effectively on their own. Beginning level ESOL and ABE students, in particular, need a lot of guidance and modeling in order to use school-like learning material such as workbooks, graphic organizers, quizzes,

or computer programs on their own. The experience of programs working on re-engagement strategies was that many would commit to a self-study plan but not fulfill the commitment. Some didn't have the discipline to learn on their own, and some didn't have strategies (such as calling the teacher when they're stuck or finding quiet study space) to work effectively.

The Community Learning Center found that materials and activities designed for the classroom are not necessarily appropriate for self-study without the immediate and regular support of a teacher to clarify and explain. This limits the applicability of independent study and distance learning strategies. Conversely, as noted in the section on "Competence," students who receive support and modeling in a classroom and do self-study as a supplement to guided instruction can make gains in learning to navigate study materials on their own.

Time

Most programs noted the great deal of time it required for them to provide ongoing individualized counseling to students, coordinate services, and track persistence. Upon completion of this project, several programs needed to scale back their activities because the amount of time required to build community and provide attention, information, support, and follow-up to students was prohibitive on current budgets.

Young Adults

Programs with a high percentage of young adult enrollment found that some of the persistence strategies were difficult to implement, at least without redesigning them for this population. For example, Vernon found that during their orientation sessions, older students were better able to think about the high school completion model that would best accommodate their work, family, and postsecondary goals. The younger students (17-18), however, were not particularly sure of their goals or interested in goal-setting. Middletown experienced challenges trying to match their young adult students as peer mentors due to the students' discomfort working with the opposite sex and the vulnerabilities they generally feel revealing what they don't know.

IMPLICATIONS *for* POLICY, PRACTICE *e* RESEARCH



9

A. POLICY

The NELP project is a good example of how programs can be supported to change their practice through an intentional learning community of peers that draws on existing research. Academic research alone, no matter how compelling, does not necessarily translate into changes in practice. Program practices that optimize learner persistence need to be cultivated through professional development, adequate funding, and policies instituted by programs and their funders.

The seemingly simple concept of learner persistence, which was the unifying focus of the 18 action research projects, turned out to be quite complex, especially when measured across programs and states. Without common definitions, it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of system-level efforts to increase persistence. This project raised a multitude of issues related to how persistence is defined, calculated and even undermined by certain practices and policies, most notably the following:

Attendance: Policies regarding how to calculate attendance vary: some count it from the first day of class, others begin counting from the day the student actually shows up for class, and yet others count enrollments starting at 12 hours of attendance.

Completion: How or even whether the completion of a class or level is defined also varies greatly. Completion is most clearly defined when students obtain a credential such as the GED or high school diploma. Short of that, it may be defined based on assessment of skills, seat time, or simply by the fact that the student is present the last week of class.

Open enrollment: Perhaps the thorniest issue when calculating attendance rates is the common practice of open entry and exit. When there is no common entry point, it makes it difficult for programs and funders to calculate attendance and completion rates. Some states' funding formulas are tied to the number of hours a slot was filled rather than the retention of individual students. This unfortunately means that in high demand classes and areas, such as ESOL, a program that fills its empty seats rapidly could show a high attendance rate and still be a "revolving door." At best, a system that penalizes programs for having empty slots makes institutionalizing managed enrollment financially risky. It puts a high premium on effective

persistence strategies. While managed enrollment reduces turbulence in the classroom, aids persistence, and also prepares students for a college schedule, it needs to be instituted with other persistence strategies in order to yield optimal results.

Self-study: Research by Reder and Strawn (2004) indicates that self-study is a “widespread mode of basic skills development among adults who did not complete high school.” The NELP experience was that stop-out students did not follow this pattern. By and large, many stop-outs did not study on their own even when learning support was offered in various forms and options, as discussed in the section on Challenges. Also in contrast with Reder and Strawn’s findings, both ESOL and GED teachers in the NELP study found that students who did self-study had difficulty using workbook-like material without modeling and guidance by teachers. The policy implication is that policy-makers should invest in more research and piloting of different approaches to promote and support self-study, and how to track independent learning, before institutionalizing program designs or performance expectations.

Working conditions: Finally, while some persistence strategies are relatively low-cost to institute, many others require additional funds, particularly to increase counseling and case management. Poor working conditions, including insufficient paid hours, salaries and benefits translate into staff turnover, which also has a negative impact on student persistence.

B. PRACTICE

Many, if not most, of the strategies explored by the NELP programs are supported by the literature and research on persistence by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy and many others. The recommendations for many of these strategies date back 10-20 years. Nevertheless, our experience in the NELP Project suggests that they have been inconsistently adopted by adult education programs, and that there is plenty of room for improvement.

For the NELP programs, it was the action research process, and the background reading they did as part of the study circles, that caused them to pay closer attention to what program policies and practices seem to support or hinder persistence. Observing their own practices, talking with students, trying out new strategies, collecting quantitative data, and documenting the significant changes guided the program improvements they were making. The process also gave them new ideas for how to make further improvements.

Many of the strategies that the NELP programs developed are adaptable and replicable at low or no cost. For example, it does not cost money to engage students in tracking their own and overall class attendance, and in supporting each other’s attendance. Transparency is also a low-cost strategy, but it may require changes in program policies, such as defining what constitutes course or program completion. Adult learners want and deserve to know



what the benchmarks are for completion. In fact, each of the policy issues mentioned above has a practice dimension that adult education programs would do well to consider, whether or not their funders require it.

Of all the strategies explored in NELP, the re-engagement of stop-outs yielded perhaps the lowest returns for the staff time expended. On the other hand, we learned that starting a conversation about re-engagement at entrance, during orientation, and through ongoing counseling is a viable strategy that all adult education programs should consider.

The fact that each NELP program customized strategies for its own needs and context, and that no two programs did exactly the same set of strategies the same way, suggest to us that there is no one cookie-cutter persistence approach that every program should follow. Rather, staff need time to assess program needs, plan program improvements, and monitor implementation and outcomes together as a team. This process also requires paid staff time to communicate with learners and each other about learners' needs, lives, feedback, suggestions, and potential interest in assuming new roles in the program.

In our view, more important than any one specific strategy is that programs ask themselves how they are addressing the fundamental affective needs of adults through all of their program activities, policies, physical environment, staff training and disposition toward adult learners. How are they cultivating adults' connection to the program and the program's relevance to the adults' lives outside of the program; providing community and stability; affirming adult learners' competence and agency; and communicating transparently?

Finally, we should not lose sight of the social barriers, most notably poverty, that underlie adults' ability to persist in their studies. While adult education cannot change economic inequities or discrimination, it can engage adults in discussing these social barriers, their root causes, and ways to address them, while also developing people's academic skills and critical thinking. As adult education advocates, we ought to advocate for funding and policies that can help people overcome social barriers such as affordable housing, transportation, health care, child care and living wages with benefits.

C. RESEARCH

The quantitative and qualitative outcomes from the NELP study validate this research-to-practice model of professional development. In keeping with what we advocate for adult learners, we provided practitioners options for different levels of engagement with the topic, for learning about persistence research, and then trying out research findings. At the action research level, this model can change practitioners' relationship to research.



We recommend using adults' affective needs as the principal guide for designing, revising, and testing specific strategies. Using adults' affective needs as the starting point, future academic and action research should test the most promising strategies, their cost, relative impact and ramifications. The NELP findings suggest that we ought to rethink re-engagement and self-study strategies, but more research is needed.

The adult education field would also benefit from research on the impact of social factors and individual barriers on persistence and ways to address them. For example, in a random assignment study by mdrc (2006), a combination of performance-based \$1,000 scholarships and counseling resulted in a significant improvement in persistence and academic achievement for low-income parents at a community college, in contrast with three other persistence strategies that did not involve scholarships. The scholarships were over and above financial aid and could be used toward child care, textbooks etc.. The students were entitled to the scholarship if they maintained at least a C grade point average and met with a counselor at the beginning and middle of each semester to discuss academic goals and progress.

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10

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A. PROMISING PRACTICES

Intake and Orientation

Practice: New ABE and ESOL orientations

Submitted by: *Quincy Community Action Program (QCAP)*

The QCAP orientations for prospective students were conducted by the ESOL and ABE Counselors and covered the logistics of the program (meeting days and times for classes, calendar, and location), program requirements for attendance and participation, and a review of other support services available at QCAP. There was also time for questions and answers with Student Ambassadors, veteran students who serve as liaisons to new students, answering questions in English or their native languages.

Both the ESOL and GED orientations were designed to be highly interactive, with pair work and group activities, so that prospective students could experience what it would be like to be in one of our classes. The ESOL Counselor described the ESOL curriculum. The GED orientation included discussions about learning styles and past school experiences, as well as some of the barriers that students face when deciding to return to school, so that prospective students could begin to think about how to address some of these challenges.

We developed a short quiz for prospective students to take at the end of both orientations to test how much of the information they had understood and retained. The questions included “What time does class begin and end?” and “What do you do if you can’t come to class?” The ESOL orientation quiz also included a question about why the student wanted to learn English, and the GED orientation quiz included a question about who in the student’s life might be a support for him or her while s/he took classes in our program.

After the prospective students attended an orientation, the program Counselor spoke with them about whether the program seemed like a good fit for their needs, and then either scheduled them for a placement test or gave them information about other programs that might better meet their needs.

Practice: New orientation for high school completion candidates

Submitted by: *Vernon Regional Adult Basic Education (VRABE)*

VRABE developed a three-hour structured intake and orientation process for new students interested in attending classes to earn a high school credential. This multi-site program offers three options: a Credit Diploma Program, an External Diploma Program, and a GED.

Marketing materials were created to announce the orientations, and staff was trained on the procedures to follow to register students. Orientation materials included student folders with an agenda, letter from the supervisor, general program information, student goal worksheet, student handbook, program contact information, and a PowerPoint presentation. One or two days before the session, a courtesy phone call was made to remind each student of the orientation.

To begin the orientation, the staff introduced themselves. The orientations were initially developed and run by the persistence project staff but other program staff at each site were invited to observe and, over time, become involved in presenting parts of the orientation. There were simple refreshments to make people feel at home, and an icebreaker activity to help the students introduce themselves and begin the process of defining goals. Then the staff described the three secondary completion program options. This usually became a very participatory and lively discussion, as the students realized that there was more than one program to choose from. Students were quick to start comparing the programs with their own needs and goals. They would later meet one on one with the Counselor to help them make a final choice.

The last hour of the orientation was the CASAS appraisal test. After completing the assessment test, each student was given an appointment time with the Counselor (or a phone number to contact the Counselor). Students left the session with the orientation packet, including the completed enrollment form, test scores, the completed goal sheet, and a copy of his/her photo ID. It was the student's responsibility to bring this information to the meeting with the Counselor. At the meeting with the Counselor, they talked through the student's goals and barriers, test scores, and best program placement options.

By changing from individual to group orientation, new students began entering classes at planned intervals. In this way, most classes became managed enrollments.



Practice: New registration and goal-setting activities

Submitted by: *Nashua Adult Learning*

Nashua created a new registration process which included a new orientation and goal setting component. They revamped their registration forms to include questions about the students' academic goals and potential barriers to reaching those goals. To create a more anxiety-free environment, they also decided to try skipping the Math testing and assign classes based only on the Reading scores. The students were then given a private office to sit and talk with the ABE/GED Coordinator to receive their class assignment and with the Adult Education Counselor to go over their goals and potential barriers. This took about 10 minutes.

The goal-setting activities were followed up in classes. In Susan Flanagan's opening class, after the usual rules and procedures review, there was an hour-long introduction/discussion of students' goals and the forces in their lives that may help or impede their attendance. This was followed by an activity to write about their goals, honing in on why they were in this class.

On the first night of Vicki McIver's class, the new and old students filled out a goals survey. Each section of the survey dealt with a different area of life goals: Work and Career, Life and Social Skills, and Personal Goals. One half of the students said they wanted to earn a college degree, 65% wanted to be able understand others better and be able to communicate well with others, and 80% wanted to feel proud of themselves. Students were surprised that so many others in the class felt the same way they did.

Practice: Peer Mentors

Submitted by: *Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences (SCALE)*

SCALE involved four math class members in mentoring a small group of new students entering the class as a cohort. This was a change in both student roles and the enrollment process, which had previously been open entry. This combination of strategies entailed several prep sessions and on-going support for both the cohort group and the mentors.

To begin, a meeting was held with all the students in the intensive math class in order to explain the intent of the project and the mentor training program. The group discussed the potential positive impact on student learning that would occur as a result of limiting new student enrollment in the class after the beginning of March. This spurred "buy in" by students and an understanding of how they would benefit from the managed enrollment model.



Four students committed to being trained as student mentors. The counselor developed a multi-session mentor training about the roles and responsibilities of mentorship. Each mentor signed a commitment of participation, which included submitting a regular log.

Two GED orientations were held, at which the new cohort group model was explained and students were advised that some of them would be contacted for enrollment in this intensive math class based on their scores from the math pre-testing. Five students were selected.

At the first cohort group meeting, students participated in icebreaker activities, learned about program policies (especially regarding attendance), and were introduced to the mentor component of the program. They also discussed the positive and negative forces which could affect their school experience, and strategized ways to overcome the negative forces.

Listening to the students discuss their positive and negative forces was helpful in determining how to match them up with their mentors. The counselor matched the pairs based on several factors: age, gender, family status (i.e. single parents, mothers), and life experience. In using these factors, the staff hoped that friendships would develop and that this would have a positive effect on learner persistence.

Here are examples of the careful mentor-mentee pairings:

- ◆ One of the new students was a teenager who expressed anxiety about coming back to school and insecurity about her low math skills. She was matched up with the mentor leader who is very personable, hardworking, and had a good relationship with all students in the class.
- ◆ A second student was a single mother who returned to school after she got laid off from her job. This student appeared very committed, but was somewhat shy during the orientation. She was matched up with a mentor who was also a single mother, and had overcome many obstacles to pursue her GED. This mentor was very insightful and eager to talk about her experiences at SCALE.
- ◆ A motivated, former ESOL student who struggled with work demands and had a long journey on public transportation to make it to SCALE was matched with a student who was around her same age, and had excellent attendance.
- ◆ A teenaged male student who had to travel across the city during rush hour to make it to class and had been expelled from his high school and was pressured by his mother to get his high school diploma was paired with another male student who was outgoing, motivated and had been a student at SCALE for two years.



- ◆ An older, mature male student, who was very motivated to obtain his GED so he could go to community college, had an 8th grade education, had not attended school in about forty years and was nervous about the math class, was paired with the mentor leader. Both he and his mentor were referred by Mass Rehabilitation, and both were older than most of the students in the class.

At the next meeting, students were introduced to their mentor matches and participated in group-building activities such as a GED trivia game. This was a great start because it created a fun atmosphere, and students were able to start conversations as they tried to figure out answers for the game. Next, students and mentors interviewed each other from a list of prepared questions which asked about such things as their long-term goals and their hobbies outside of school.

To help them transition into the class, students were given a learning style questionnaire, which allowed them to analyze their own learning style and gave them suggestions for effective learning strategies. The Counselor also checked in weekly with mentors and cohort members and contacted students who were absent, even when the mentor did so as well.

At the end, a learner persistence lunch meeting was held with the Program Supervisor, the Math Instructor, Counselor, some of the cohort group members, the four student mentors, and the Program Administrator. The purpose of the meeting was to evaluate the project and make recommendations to the program regarding the cohort group concept, the mentor system, and the possibility of expanding managed enrollment to other classes.

The consensus of both the cohort group and the mentors was that the program worked. The mentors felt empowered and more aware of themselves and the impact they had on new students. They reported a greater sense of community and caring within the classroom, and an overall feeling of self-satisfaction.

The cohort group appreciated the opportunity to have a mentor who made them feel immediately part of the class, and they felt that telephone calls and the opportunity to work with a “seasoned” member of the class reduced their apprehension about joining a class that was already in progress.



Practice: A Night to Dream

Submitted by: *Boston HERC*

The Boston HERC is a community and faith-based ESOL program that operates under the auspices of the Boston Higher Education Resource Center at a local church offering six levels of ESOL classes taught by volunteer teachers and tutors.

In the past, we've done career and education panel nights, where we invite Latino immigrants who have reached career or educational goals to come and share their journeys with our students. Through this, we've built a volunteer pool known as our 'Community Dream Team' who often volunteer at workshops, serving as informal mentors and encouragers. Some of these volunteers are current students, former students, or teachers in our program; others are church and community members. Their presence is really encouraging to everyone involved and informal mentoring relationships always form, so we decided to expand upon this event and invite more participation from this group. We designed 'A Night to Dream' to be a space and place for our ESOL students to dream about all areas of their future—not just about careers and education—and to gain tools to dream on their own time.

The students were told to arrive expecting a special evening and to dress up if they wanted to. It was really a priceless moment to watch students walk in dressed up and notice the transformed classroom 'dreaming' rooms, decorated elegantly for the occasion. There were sparkling tables with sparkling apple juice drinks, silver stars hanging from the ceilings, and "vision videos" playing from Google video on a big screen. One of the teachers was dressed up as a press representative from 'CNN en español' and was snapping pictures.

We started by explaining to them that this was a night for them to just have time to dream and to cast a vision for their lives, both in this moment and in the future. We used a world map with strings connecting each student's country to Boston as a visual prompt. We reminded students that every single one of us has a lot to contribute to this city, to our community, and to our home country, and that a lot of doors are waiting here for each of us to open. Throughout the evening, students were seated by class at round tables with their teachers and with members of the 'Community Dream Team' (one for every three students).

Part One: We began with whole group activities—a panel and a key note speaker. The panel was made up of two community members and a student who had achieved professional goals, home-buying goals, and leadership goals. They were asked: 1) What is an example of a vision that has come true in your life and what role did that vision play in your life? and 2) What little steps did you take to make that vision a reality?

Part Two: A series of small group 'dreaming' activities, facilitated by the volunteers at each



table, moved from ‘discovery questions’ to ‘future questions’ to ‘now steps’. A lot of sharing happened during this time, and facilitators helped students map out the steps in their plans.

Part Three: Students had time to hear a quick introduction from each Community Dream Team member and teacher and decide who they wanted to learn more from. Over dinner, they had a chance to ask questions and to seek advice. At this point, the event really took on a life of its own as people started sharing, encouraging one another, and challenging one another. Class time officially ended, but many people stayed an hour more.

Student response: We saw positive reactions from students and volunteers afterwards. ‘Community Dream Team’ volunteers and students exchanged phone numbers. Both students and volunteers were really moved by stories people shared with one another, and many renewed commitments to persevere. Many students talked about the importance of taking time to dream and having faith in those dreams. Many expressed new goals as well.

One student, for example, said she was thankful that the students in her class had helped her identify her talents and encouraged her to aim for a better career than what she had planned for herself. Another student was just returning to classes after a stop-out. The first night he returned was ‘A Night to Dream,’ and he spoke about the night being a reminder of why he had begun classes and why he needed to continue. From then on, with the support of his class, he maintained consistent attendance. Another student’s aunt ran into HERC’s director a few days later and tearfully thanked him for the difference the event had made in her nephew’s perspective.

Practice: Involving Students in Decision-Making

Submitted by: *Genesis Center*

At the Genesis Center, students were invited to give input into the content and format of lessons, and to participate in making a variety of classroom decisions. One key strategy centered on a weekly survey eliciting student feedback about what classroom activities they felt benefited them the most. The project was carried out in a beginning ESOL class and the survey was designed to gather feedback on lessons/skills taught and collect suggestions for future activities. The survey results were shared with students orally or through a pie chart.

Another strategy was to provide learners with a daily syllabus on the board to allow them to see that their survey choices were being heeded and implemented. The syllabus gave the learners the opportunity to see the direction of the day’s learning activities and understand that a curriculum is dynamic – planned and structured, but adjustable to the student needs.

The full list of strategies includes:

1. **Daily Syllabus.** Put a syllabus of the upcoming day's activities on the board so students can clearly see it.

EXAMPLE: **September 26 Activities**
 Pronunciation /s/ /z/
 Go over homework
 Vocabulary- the house and apartment
 Reading – The Coins
 Speaking – Answering and practicing with the verb “to be”
2. **Daily Learning Ritual.** At the end of each class, ask students what we did that day, or what we learned. The purpose of this ritual is to build metacognitive awareness of the learning process, as well as to articulate learning gains and goals. Even if the students can only respond with very short answers, it is okay. As they practice and progress through the ESOL levels, they will develop their ability to articulate what they've studied or learned.
3. **Weekly Survey.** At the end of each week, preferably as the last activity of the day, survey the students as to which activities they liked the best that week. Provide a place on the survey for suggestions. Ask them to order at least their two favorite activities.
4. **Curriculum Adjustment.** When planning the next week's lessons, try to allot more time to the biggest vote-getters. If there are requests that can be adapted to the whole class, try to do them as soon as possible and explain that they are survey driven (e.g., dictations in preparation for the citizenship test benefit everyone as they do use high frequency vocabulary).
5. **Feedback to students.** On the first day of class the following week, show the students the last week's survey results. This can be done with a very simple, roughly drawn pie chart showing that X amount of students asked for more reading, etc. The Genesis teacher found it useful to begin the day's activities with the most requested activity – this tends to get students in on time.
6. **Attendance Chart.** Keep an attendance chart on the wall for students to mark and monitor their attendance in some visible fashion. Give students with perfect (or a percent that students agree is “good”) attendance a commendation for a specific time period. Names of students with excellent persistence can also be posted school wide, as on a centrally located bulletin board.



B. NELP ACTION RESEARCH TEAMS

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C. NEW ENGLAND LITERACY RESOURCE CENTER

The New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) works to strengthen adult literacy services in New England through sharing and collaborative projects among adult literacy professional development providers, practitioners and policy-makers in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. To achieve this mission, NELRC:

- ◆ develops practical, state-of-the-art products
- ◆ encourages collaborations across state lines
- ◆ coordinates and manages projects for funders
- ◆ generates knowledge to improve practice
- ◆ implements practitioner-based projects that promote inquiry and innovation
- ◆ advocates for adequate funding and sound policies for adult literacy, locally and nationally

NELRC is part of World Education, a Boston-based non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the lives of the educationally disadvantaged through economic and social change. Founded in 1951, World Education works in over 50 countries in partnership with local organizations to develop assets such as, literacy, numeracy, good health, entrepreneurial and civic participation skills.

For more information on NELRC and its areas of expertise, see www.nelrc.org

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