

FAILURE TO FOCUS ON ECONOMIC IMPACTS DIMINISHES ADULT EDUCATION

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Adult education—formal structured activities designed to educate adults—occurs in schools, colleges, church basements, community centers, libraries, and workplaces. Adult education serves people needing high school completion, working adults, adults with limited work history, elders with a lifetime of work behind them, parents with small children, college bound individuals. The common denominator in these diverse settings and among these diverse populations is people motivated to build foundational skills in order to make a change in their lives.

Adult education as a profession, as a system, wastes far too much energy debating the most important purpose of adult education and bemoaning the fact that showing the impact of adult education on an individual's life is difficult. How do we measure self-efficacy? How do we measure an adult learner's involvement in support of a child? How do we measure civic engagement? As a consequence, the adult education system has defaulted to "Educational Function Level" gain as the demonstrable, reportable mark of success. The National Council of State Directors of Adult Education Legislator's Resource Book, "The Blue Book,"¹ lists state-by-state employment status of participants, state and federal investment, and enrollment by program area, but then tells the story of that investment only by 'Program Enrollment Performance' noting how many adults "left before completed" or "improved one or more levels or still enrolled." This, essentially, is the current state of the argument for adult education's value.

As a practitioner and program administrator, I understand what "Program Enrollment Performance" means. I also know that 'improved one or more levels' in adult education primarily means gaining points on a standardized test which could be an indicator of many things outside of knowledge gain, e.g., having had breakfast on post-test day, having had the experience of test taking recently, having external motivation to focus on that particular testing event. Every educator knows that the *real* value of adult education isn't measured by exams. And for nearly anyone outside of adult education, including most policy makers, "improving a level" is a complete mystery.

A decade ago, in my role as a program administrator of a large urban adult education school, I read an article that argued for dismantling the federal adult education investment and included this description:

1 <http://www.naepdc.org/Blue%20Book%2020160825.pdf>

The stereotype of adult basic education and ESL courses conjures up the image of adults, tired from a full day of hard work, meeting in stark classrooms in an otherwise empty primary or secondary school, and being led through skill drills by equally tired teachers. Sadly, this negative stereotype is uncomfortably close to reality. Of course, there are many shining examples of adult basic education that do not come close to this negative stereotype. But there is a big gap between best practice and common practice.²

New to the world of policy papers and angered by this (too close to home) argument, I tried to understand what kind of anti-liberal organization would make such a claim. Who was this Center for American Progress (CAP)? Imagine my chagrin when I discovered CAP is an agent of national progressive thought. If progressives were writing this about adult education, what could we do to prove the value of our work to the larger world of policy makers whose worldviews span the political spectrum?

Thankfully, during the first decade of 2000, leading adult education administrators and practitioners were stepping up to innovate in adult education design and delivery through career pathway program development. Over the past decade, adult education has become part of a national conversation initiated in part by the haunting ETS Perfect Storm³ research—responding to the structural reality that a high school credential is no longer the marker for self-sufficiency in our new economy and that, demographically, our growing populations are those we have historically served poorly in our education systems (not to mention the structural hurdles built into our society for many low-skill, low-income communities of color when accessing housing, healthcare, banking).

The conversation became even more critical as the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)⁴ research revealed the abysmal performance of American adults, including young adults, on literacy, numeracy, and Problem Solving in Technology Rich Environments (PSTRE) tests. In response, philanthropic investment supported adult education to build programs and policies to support bridge programs, transition programs, integrated education and training, and career pathways for people outside of the main educational pipeline who were seeking educational and economic mobility through adult education.⁵

2 https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2007/12/pdf/nes_lifelong_learning.pdf

3 https://www.ets.org/Media/Education_Topics/pdf/AmericasPerfectStorm.pdf

4 <http://piaacgateway.com/what-is-piaacupdated/>

5 Ford Foundation Bridges to Opportunity: <https://www.fordfoundation.org/library/reports-and-studies/bridges-to-opportunity-for-underprepared-adults-a-state-policy-guide-for-community-college-leaders/>; Multiple funders of Breaking Through: <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/breaking-through/funders-partners>; Joyce Foundation Shifting Gears: <http://www.joycefdn.org/news/2015-shifting-gears-report-released>; Multiple funders of Accelerating Opportunity: <http://www.jff.org/initiatives/accelerating-opportunity>.

While practitioners built pathways, researchers demonstrated adult education’s impact in new ways. Most revolutionary was the bold decision by Washington state leaders to bring about systemic change in its adult education system by first analyzing data on the outcomes needed for low-skill adults to achieve educational and economic success and then revealing how few basic skills students were achieving those outcomes:

“Ingrained Attitudes and Culture:” It almost goes without saying that efforts to bring about substantial changes in policy and practice are going to run up against an inclination to maintain the status quo. One strategy to help shift such attitudes and beliefs is to make data on student outcomes and on gaps in achievement by various student groups available to practitioners, and then to ask whether these outcomes are acceptable and whether there are efforts that they could make (along with students themselves) to increase student success. This was the approach that the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) used in presenting the research showing that students who attain the “tipping point” of at least a year of college and an occupational credential earn substantially more than those who do not—and yet very few students, particularly those who start out in adult basic skills, make it to that level. SBCTC used this research to rally educators throughout the system to the view that the tipping point is the minimum level of achievement that should be expected of students without postsecondary credentials and that concerted efforts had to be made to increase the rate at which students reach that point.⁶

This courageous step of acknowledging systemic deficits was coupled with affirmation that Washington state leaders knew a better way: Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST). Washington state and local practitioners have continued to lead the field with their groundbreaking strategy. In spring 2018, Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) is expected to release a gold standard evaluation of I-BEST and other pathway programs⁷ which will again build our field’s knowledge base on what works, for whom, and how.

Of great importance to practitioners working in the spectrum of adult education services outside of integrated education, Dr. Steve Reder’s 2014 research report *The Impact of ABS [Adult Basic Skills] Program Participation on Long-Term Economic Outcomes* was a breakthrough:

The results of this research are clear. Three different methods—treatment effects, difference-in-differences, and fixed effects panel regressions—all show statistically significant and financially substantial impacts of ABS program participation on earnings growth. Individuals who participate in programs have higher future earnings as a result

6 https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/press-releases/new_advocacy_publication_announced_bridges_to_opportunity_for_underprepared_adults_a_state_policy_guide_for_community_college_leaders_649.html

7 <http://dev.abtassociates.com/practice-areas/income-security-workforce/career-pathways.aspx>

*of participating, income premiums are larger with more intensive participation, and minimal levels of participation do not produce statistically significant premiums.*⁸

The story told through this research is of the economic impact of adult education, not illustrated in the reporting period of one federal program year but accrued through time. It's a story we, as a field, should embrace even as more longitudinal research reveals the critical importance of adult education's multiple impacts.

The immediate opportunity, however, is to better use adult education's mandated annual reporting to communicate our work's value to policy makers, investors, and our participants. The federal adult education investment, The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014's title II: Adult Education and Family Literacy Act,⁹ codified much of the learning from the past decade of career pathway innovation, allowing federal investment to support integrated education and training (Public Law 113-128, Section 203(29)) and career pathways (Public Law 113-128 Section 3(7)), and offering an opportunity for adult education to tell the story of its impact in new ways.

Outside of the still-being-defined "effectiveness in serving employers" metric, WIOA performance measures fall into three categories that are reported either during program participant or after exit: interim progress measures, credential attainment outcomes, and labor market outcomes.

New to WIOA is the performance metric for obtaining a recognized postsecondary credential (Public Law 113-128 Section 3(52)). State initiatives like WorkINdiana¹⁰ that emphasize obtaining career certifications in in-demand fields will optimize this metric. WIOA labor market outcomes shift the focus from job placement and retention to the percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter and fourth quarter after exit from the program, along with the median earnings of participants who are in unsubsidized employment second quarter after exit. While it is true that not all adult education participants are in the labor force, the majority is, both when they enter adult education and when they exit adult education, so overall these metrics will help adult education tell that story. The biggest change is in the interim progress measures now defined as Measurable Skill Gain. There are five measurable skill gain types:

1. Documented achievement of at least one educational functioning level of a participant who is receiving instruction below the postsecondary education level;
2. Documented attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent;
3. Secondary or postsecondary transcript or report card for a sufficient number of credit hours that shows a participant is meeting the state unit's academic standards;

8 https://www.pdx.edu/linguistics/sites/www.pdx.edu.linguistics/files/ABS_EconomicOutcomes_13.pdf

9 <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/pdf/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>

10 http://www.in.gov/dwd/adulted_workin.htm

4. Satisfactory or better progress report, towards established milestones, such as completion of OJT or completion of one year of an apprenticeship program or similar milestones, from an employer or training provider who is providing training; or
5. Successful passage of an exam that is required for a particular occupation or progress in attaining technical or occupational skills as evidenced by trade-related benchmarks such as knowledge-based exams.¹¹

And the National Reporting System further defines Educational Functioning Level achievement three ways: pre/posttest; Carnegie units; and transition to postsecondary education or employment. This new performance system is as large a seismic shift as when standardized testing first entered the federal adult education accountability world. For those of us who have been in this field long enough to remember when Educational Function Level gain was introduced, there can be no doubt that performance reporting metrics WILL drive service delivery and program design. The opportunity now is to use WIOA performance to design our services in a way that helps adults move farther faster, brings us into partnership with sector partners and providers of non-academic supports, and helps our system tell the impact of that collaborative work on our participants' lives.

In the classroom, that means career contextualized education. Julia Wilber, Academic and Employment Navigator at the International Institute of Minnesota, writes compellingly of the “false dichotomy” of choosing to deliver “school focused” or “work focused” curriculum. Even with a population of resettlement students, IIMN has realized “By deepening our commitment to career contextualized education, we not only give students the academic and career skills they need to succeed in the American workforce, but also remind them that they are welcome—that they have a job and a home here as well.”¹²

Outside of the classroom, that means partnering with local workforce development practitioners who, under WIOA, will operate with interim progress measures as well. Unlike the previous Workforce Investment Act (WIA), working under WIOA, local workforce development programs will be able to focus their services on participants who will *not* achieve a credential or employment within a program year. Workforce development participants who incrementally demonstrate skill gain through the full complement of WIOA Measurable Skill Gain metrics while still enrolled for career and training services will be performance wins for all the WIOA core programs, not just adult education.

In this service delivery model, the focus is not only on triaging the “most ready” candidates for immediate job placement, but also on developing a comprehensive service model to build skills over time, showing progress in multiple ways which will eventually result in educational

11 https://www.doleta.gov/performance/guidance/tools_commonmeasures.cfm

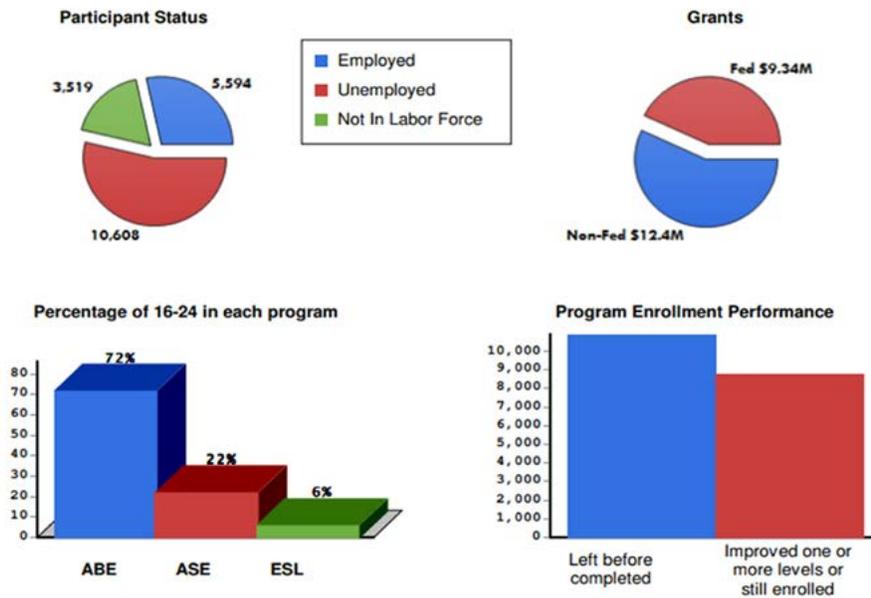
12 <http://atlasabe.org/mn-abe-news/welcoming-refugees-into-the-workforce-with-career-contextualized-basic-skills-instruction>

credentials and economic payoffs. Adult education is a crucial partner in helping low-skill people onto a pathway, and expanded interim progress measures can liberate adult education to play with new strategies to show skill gain. However, adult education participants have far more needs than academic skills, and the adult education system itself is not resourced or trained to do this work alone. At the local level, we need to leverage public benefits, community-based organizations, and workforce development. At the state level, we need policies that reward co-enrollment between WIOA core partners and build out administrative data capability to demonstrate the long-term impact of our work. By 2020, WIOA data collection may begin to tell this story, but only if state and local practitioners understand the performance metrics and the value of quality data collection.

Beyond federal reporting, WIOA performance metrics are showing up in state funded initiatives like California's Adult Education Block Grant and Strong Workforce programs as well as in TANF outcome design strategies (MO example). State and local investment in adult education dwarfs the federal investment. States can choose to add additional performance measures for their funds, but the more alignment we can build, the stronger the structure that will allow educators, workforce development professionals, and social service providers to co-enroll in order to co-invest and leverage one another's strengths while 'getting credit' for performance gains in each distinct funding stream.

Unfortunately, too many adult educators are still unaware of the changes WIOA performance brings to the federal investment and to aligned state accountability. And many educators resist these changes and remain skeptical of the ability of the WIOA performance measures system to tell the story of adult education's impact. I understand that skepticism, but I encourage adult educators to jump into the effort. Join the conversation on how we can show the value of education for those with the courage to enter our programs. And, yes, I mean economic value. The people who come to our programs are making a choice to spend their time and their energy with us, and they deserve to get something of tangible value for that expenditure. I believe quality adult education has economic value for an individual and a family. I believe quality adult education is an anti-poverty and an anti-*intergenerational* poverty strategy. I believe quality adult education builds career pathway education and employment opportunities. As a profession, let us set out to prove that value to all those who invest their time with us and those who invest resources to support us. ☘

ALABAMA, PROGRAM FACT SHEET 2014-2015



WIOA PERFORMANCE METRICS

