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“A Big and Excellent Opportunity for My Future”: Adult Learner Leadership in Education Services (ALLIES) Evaluation

Year 1 Survey, Assessment, Observation, and Program Information Findings

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Introduction

VALUEUSA, a national non-profit organization run by and for adult learners, believes that adult learner leadership can improve services in an adult education (AE) program and boost adult learner outcomes. VALUEUSA defines adult learner leadership as adult learner involvement in all components of the AE program. VALUEUSA leadership training encourages learners to lead in design of instructional services, mentoring, and evaluation.

In 2014 VALUEUSA and its evaluator designed a two-year study, Adult Learner Leadership in Education Services (ALLIES). The purpose of ALLIES is to evaluate how adult learners can benefit a program as they pursue learning and leadership goals. In the 2014-15 academic year, 21 programs in multiple states were randomly selected and baseline data were collected. Final first-year results from learner and staff surveys on educational experiences and perceptions of leadership and from learner critical thinking and writing assessments are summarized. Observation results from the first year are also presented. This paper includes results from all 21 programs in the study’s first year (i.e., Year 1), along with recommendations and conclusions. Data collection continues in 2015-16 to follow up on any changes that occurred with participating programs and learners in contrast with those in the control condition.

In its first year ALLIES evaluated 306 adult learners and 67 staff in diverse programs – from rural Florida and Kansas to urban New Jersey and Texas. Most striking about these findings are the similarities. When compared by condition, the similarities among adult learners or among staff far outweighed the differences. Participating and control learners did not differ significantly in Year 1 on most critical thinking and all writing assessment scales, nor were differences significant by condition for staff and adult learners in perceptions of program services and leadership.

The Role of Adult Learner Leadership

To serve adults needing to “upskill” along career pathways, the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) legislation requires alignment and integration of employment and education services (OCTAE, 2015). Providing aligned services implies collective and integrated action. OCTAE called for collective action of stakeholders (OCTAE, 2015). Although OCTAE’s report stopped short of listing them in collective action, it identified adult learners as stakeholders and consumers of services. Whenever adult learners take a place as stakeholders at the table, they have potential to show leadership to advance services they consume.

But once at the table, will adult learners have sufficient leadership skills to actively contribute? How can they develop leadership skills? A need remains to study “how adult learners have taken on roles of greater involvement” in programs (Smith, 2006, p. 3). Smith named VALUEUSA as the adult learner organization to work with in developing leadership. At its 2001 Adult Learner Leadership Institute, a former VALUEUSA president stressed learners having a voice in AE, citing “life experiences that only they can bring to the table” (Sticht, 2003, p. 6), to ensure awareness and continued funding.

What is meant by adult learner leadership? VALUEUSA’s Executive Director, Marty Finsterbusch, defines it as adult learner involvement in all components of the AE program and every phase of its organization and function. As examples, Jurmo (2010) cites programs that hire learners to serve as staff, establish roles for learners on program boards, and train learners to become spokespersons for the program. In practice, though, adult learners taking full leadership roles is rare (Jurmo, 1989; Toso, Prins, Drayton, Gnanadass, & Gungor, 2009). Some learners may be reluctant to speak out, especially publicly, because they have yet to find their voice.
or lack belief in their leadership capacity. Many learners, shared an adult educator in a national survey, “are afraid to talk because they haven’t finished their high school education and they don’t feel capable of [being] leaders” (Daniels & Gillespie, 2005, p. 19).

Shared decision-making is also an important component of learner leadership in AE programs. About 45 percent of AE programs “encourage student participation in program decision-making” (Daniels & Gillespie, 2005, p.10). Other leadership activities Daniels and Gillespie identified included: student government meetings, peer meetings on community issues, learner-sponsored advocacy, and leadership institutes.

Current VALUEUSA leadership training encourages learners to lead in design of services, mentoring, fundraising, and evaluation. Adult learners “bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and understanding” to AE programs (Greene, 2007, p. 412). Learners can also “be the most powerful and effective advocates for literacy. [They] need to develop critical capacities, research skills, analysis and comprehension skills, in order to clearly pose and solve problems” (Greene, 2007, p. 429). In practicing leadership skills in the program, learners build and prepare these transferrable skills for use in the workplace, family, and community (Black, Balatti, & Falk, 2006; Jurmo, 2010; Toso, et al., 2009). The little research on the benefits of providing adult learners opportunities to engage in supported and structured leadership activities indicates that they provide entrée into more formal positions of leadership and community activism (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Olivos, 2012; Toso & Gungor, 2012).

Developing leadership skills takes practice. Learners who practice leadership in the AE program “are then prepared to transfer those skills to their roles in the workplace, family, and community” (Jurmo, 2010, p. 7). Practicing leadership skills such as problem-solving, communication, and interpersonal skills is critical since “these same ‘soft’ skills are often ones that employers say are lacking ... We need additional research to help us develop models for teaching these skills” (Daniels & Gillespie, 2005, p. 25). Adult learners as leaders gain empowerment, voice, interaction with peers, the opportunity to “give back” and develop content knowledge and literacy skills (Toso & Grinder, under review).

**Evaluation Questions**

The following evaluation questions were developed for ALLIES’ baseline year:

1. In Year 1, how did adult learners and staff perform on the evaluation’s leadership-related measures (i.e., surveys, assessments, and observations)?
2. To what extent did Year 1 performance of adult learners and staff on measures differ by condition on leadership-related measures?
3. Which Year 1 findings inform next steps for the final year of the evaluation?

**Methods**

The design is a randomized control trial (RCT), and the study employs a mixed methods approach. Geographic representation (west, Midwest, south, and east) and no prior VALUEUSA training were factors for selecting states. VALUEUSA recruited through state literacy coalitions and explained study goals, RCT design, and how learners and staff would be involved. In each state programs were randomly assigned to either a participating or control condition.
Participating programs recruited 10-15 adult learners for an intervention and a leadership project lasting no more than 9 to 12 months. Before intervention, evaluators made a one-day visit to the program. After obtaining informed consent, evaluators collected baseline data via observation, surveys, assessments, and program documentation. Intervention consisted of VALUEUSA’s six-hour leadership training followed by development and implementation of a leadership project and as-needed mentoring phone calls to address any implementation issues. Each leadership project was unique and its development began during training. Example projects include raising community awareness, raising funds, recruiting tutors, and improving staff-learner communication. Participating programs were offered stipends and adult learners received incentives.

Control programs ran their programs as usual, with the only difference being the evaluative visit to collect baseline data. The same four types of data were collected from control programs as were from participating programs. Control programs received no training or mentoring and were asked to recruit 20-25 learners for the study. Control programs were offered stipends and adult learners received incentives.

Data Sources and Instruments

First-year data were collected in 13 participating and 8 control programs. Eight programs serve rural populations and 13 serve learners in urban areas. Program types include ABE/ASE, ESL, family literacy, and workplace literacy. Program settings are community-based organizations, libraries, public schools, community colleges, refugee organizations, an agricultural manufacturer, a ski resort, and a housing project. States involved in the study are: Colorado (4 programs), Connecticut (2), Florida (4), Kansas (3), New Jersey (3), and Texas (5). During the one-day visit, after informed consent was obtained and observation of learner-staff interactions occurred, learners took surveys and assessments. Evaluators were present to answer concerns and help with vocabulary. Administration generally occurred in small groups (5-10 adult learners).

Adult Learner Survey and Assessments

The survey was 11 pages and written at a sixth-grade reading-level equivalency. After field testing in Washington, DC, and Gettysburg, PA, it was revised. Survey items asked adults about their experiences with learning, perceptions of the program and of leadership, plans after completing the program, and demographic characteristics. Participating learners answered two additional open-ended questions: what they hoped to gain from a leadership project and what they expected to contribute to a leadership project. Otherwise surveys for learners in the control condition were identical. Nearly all items contained multiple-choice options, with responses on a five-point agreement scale and emoticons for readers with low skills. Three items required short answers. Two assessments, Critical Thinking and Writing, were administered, with Critical Thinking being administered first on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and Writing administered first on Tuesdays and Thursdays to minimize fatigue effects. Critical Thinking (CTA) is a standardized youth assessment (Mincemoyer, Perkins, & Munyua, 2001). CTA contains six scales with 31 total items. CTA asked how often learners did something in daily life: never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), or always (5). Actions included ways in which learners think, solve problems, or make decisions. Five items were re-worded slightly to minimize negative skew in responses. In the original assessment, with a population age 12 to 17 years, overall internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach’s α, was high at 0.88, and scale reliability ranged from 0.57 to 0.77.
The CTA scales were: Reasoning, Enquiry, Information Processing, Decision Making, Problem Solving, and Analysis. In ALLIES Year 1, Cronbach’s α overall was also high, 0.89, and scale reliability ranged from 0.71 to 0.75, with Reasoning (0.71), Enquiry (0.75), Information Processing (0.73), Decision-Making (0.74), and Problem-Solving (0.72), and Analysis (0.73) presenting reasonable scale reliability. Reliability was further assessed by gender, age group, and time in the program (newcomer with 0-1 years in the program vs. experienced with 2 or more years in the program). Reliability by subgroup exhibited the following ranges: 0.71 to 0.77 by gender, except Reasoning for males had an alpha of 0.63 vs. 0.74 for females; 0.68 to 0.77 by age group; and 0.69 to 0.78 by time in program, except Problem Solving for experienced adult learners was 0.65 vs. 0.75 for newcomers.

The Writing assessment (Boekaerts & Rozendaal, 2007) was developed at Leiden University for use in vocational training. This assessment also includes 31 items, which measure how learners write about their ideas. Its four scales (Cronbach’s α ranges from the original assessment in parentheses) are: Metacognitive Strategy Use (0.89 – 0.94), Writing Capacity Beliefs (0.83 – 0.86), Contextual Beliefs (0.89 – 0.92), and Checking Strategies (α not reported). Overall reliability for the original Writing assessment was not reported, but on the basis of scale reliability was believed reasonable. Four items were re-worded slightly to minimize negative skew in responses.

In ALLIES Year 1, Cronbach’s α overall for Writing was reasonably adequate at 0.72, and scale reliability ranged from 0.68 to 0.90. Reliability coefficients by scale were: Metacognitive Strategy Use (0.70), Writing Capacity Beliefs (0.68), Contextual Beliefs (0.85), and Checking Strategies (0.90). Reliability was further assessed by gender, age group, and time in the program. Reliability by subgroup exhibited the following ranges: 0.69 to 0.91 by gender, except Writing Capacity for males was 0.57 vs. 0.71 for females; 0.64 to 0.93 by age group, except Metacognitive Strategy Use was 0.61 for adults under 35 vs. 0.74 for 35 and above; and 0.74 to 0.92 by time in program, except newcomer scores were less reliable in Metacognitive Strategy Use (0.62) and Writing Capacity (0.61) than those of experienced adult learners (0.77 and 0.74, respectively).

**Staff Survey**

In addition, a staff survey was developed for electronic administration. The survey was piloted with instructors and administrators in Iowa, Maine, and Nevada. The staff survey was administered to staff online using QuestionPro software. The participating staff survey contained 22 multi-part items, and the control staff contained 20 items. Fifteen items were parallel to adult learner survey questions; these items were administered to cross validate adult learner responses and to determine how staff perceptions differed from those of adult learners. Participating program staff members were asked the same two additional open-ended questions as learners: what they hoped to gain from a leadership project and what they expected to contribute to a leadership project. Staff members received an invitation with an electronic link and two reminders across a three-week survey period. Of 94 staff members invited to participate in the survey, 67 completed it, for a response rate of 71%.

**Observation**

Adult learners and staff were observed interacting, generally immediately before adult learners took surveys and assessments. Observation occurred in both participating and control programs. Observers were trained in using an observation protocol developed for the evaluation. Staff members were informed in advance that two observers would be present, and that the sessions would be video-recorded if everyone in the room agreed to being recorded; otherwise observers simply took notes. Staff was asked to prepare to interact with
adult learners for approximately 45 minutes and could choose any format that allowed for interaction, such as group discussions, student council meetings, classroom lessons, or other formats.

Information on the physical setting and environment, as well as participant characteristics, were noted on the observation protocol. Each observer filled out a separate protocol form and noted whether his/her primary focus was on adult learners or on staff. During observation, evaluators described behaviors and cited quotations of adult learners and staff. Observers also noted the time at regular intervals (5 to 10 minutes) and whether staff members or adult learners initiated most of the interactions during that time interval.

**Program Documentation**

A final data source for the evaluation was program documentation. This documentation included aggregate program-level documents during the previous three academic years as well as attendance and assessment data on individuals. Program-level documents provided information on the scope of the program – annual enrollment size, attendance, learner characteristics, staffing information, and learner outcomes. Programs were asked about decision makers in the program, key stakeholders, funding sources, and recruitment methods. Participating programs were also asked for a brief description of the proposed leadership project. Collection of this documentation allowed evaluators to determine the scope of the program and identify program shifts that occurred across time.

At an individual level, data on adult learners who permitted access to their records were collected. These data included test scores from standardized reading, mathematics, and ELL listening assessments, as available during the past three academic years, and monthly hours of individual learner attendance during the prior year. Collecting these data allowed evaluators to ascertain individual growth in attendance and learning as a basis for comparisons between participating and control programs.

**Analyses**

Adult learner surveys and assessments and staff surveys were analyzed using categorical data analysis and means testing. The evaluator compared item percentages by condition, program phase, age, gender, and language status. Statistical significance (e.g., chi square) and effect sizes (e.g., odds ratio) are reported for nominal categorical comparisons (Grissom & Kim, 2005) unless the data involved multiple response procedures. When categorical relationships were linear by nominal, significance of the linear-by-linear association value ($M^2$) was reported instead (Agresti, 2007). Composite scores were created for items representing adult learner and staff perceptions or behaviors and were compared using Pearson correlations ($r$). Means for adult learner composite scores were compared by condition, program phase, age, gender, and language status. Means for staff composite scores, as well as grouped agreement percentages, were compared by condition, staff age, and staff language status. Mean differences were calculated to determine statistical significance (e.g., t-test) and effect sizes (e.g., Cohen’s $d$, with moderate effects ranging from 0.30 to 0.54).

Evaluators also hypothesized that ratings from some survey elements might correlate with adult learners’ scores on Critical Thinking or Writing assessments. Specifically, would an adult who reported high levels of being organized, collaborative, determined, or involved in the center (whether currently or willing to be after completing the program) tend to have high scores on Critical Thinking or Writing? Also how would the attributes of leadership (from the survey) correlate with scores on either assessment? Since survey ratings were ordinal and skewed, Spearman correlations were used, with expected minimum $r$ of 0.35.
Adult learner expectations and contributions were summarized qualitatively and organized by theme. Several themes on what participating adult learners hoped to gain and offer during the leadership project came from two open-ended questions in the adult learner survey: “What do you expect to learn or gain in a leadership project?” and “What do you expect to contribute to the leadership project?” The evaluators first organized responses by content, then reviewed responses for further thematic components within the theme, and identified relevant quotations to support the narrative. In the electronic survey staff members were asked what they expected to learn or gain from participating in a leadership project and how they expected to contribute to it, and their responses were organized and grouped in a manner similar to adult learner responses.

Observation data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. A qualitative researcher examined videos of the adult education programming, observer notes, or both from site visits. The analysis employed discourse analysis, an approach used by researchers to explore the nature and meanings of verbal interactions (Gee, 2011). The dynamic that occurred when staff and learners interacted was measured every 5-10 minutes and interactions were designated as staff or adult learner dominant. These data were analyzed using summary descriptive statistics.

Program-level information, including enrollment and attendance data, staffing types, learner outcomes, and learner workforce status data, was summarized using descriptive statistics. Program sources of funding and recruitment methods were tallied and organized descriptively. Monthly attendance and standardized test data in Reading, Mathematics, or ESL Listening for adult learners involved in ALLIES were analyzed quantitatively using an approach similar to that for survey and assessment data.

**Year 1 Results**

**Adult Learner Surveys**

*Key findings: In seven states 306 adult learners took part in ALLIES. Most were women (69%) and English language learners (67%). By condition 58% of adults were in participating programs and 42% in control programs. Adult learner responses to the survey tended not to differ by condition. Seven in 10 adult learners didn’t know who made decisions about or implemented changes in the program. The majority of adult learners want to be leaders. Nearly all adult learners reported comfort with adult learner leadership, and adult learners who felt comfortable tended to also perceive its benefits. Adult learners reported high levels of collaboration, involvement, and wanting to “give back”, but wanting to give back appeared to be stronger the closer proximity the recipient had to the learner. Post-program involvement correlated moderately with giving back and with the adult learner’s perceived involvement during the program. Adult learners reported extremely high levels of determination to learn, and adults who were more determined tended to feel more involved in the adult education program.*

By June 2015, 306 adult learners and 67 staff were involved in ALLIES. The study’s adult learners included 69% women and 67% English language learners (ELL); highest grade completed averaged 10th. Median age was 35-39 years. Adult learners attended programs in seven states during the baseline year of ALLIES (see Figure 1.
About half (48%) were employed or self-employed, 42% were unemployed, and 10% were out of the workforce. Eleven percent reported receiving an accommodation for a disability. For current progress, most adults had either just started in the program (31%) or were about halfway through the program (50%), as displayed in Figure 2. By condition 58% of adults were in participating programs and 42% in control programs.

As shown in Figure 3, the most prevalent way of learning about the program was through word of mouth (43%). Participating adult learners were more often referred by word of mouth (51%) than control learners (33%), who tended to be referred more often by employers or government agencies.
Participating and control adult learners did not differ significantly in Year 1 in the following areas:

- Perceptions of the adult education program in the community
- Program services that helped them learn best
- The extent of progress they made in the program (just started, halfway through, near the end, or already finished)
- Program provided information related to employment, diversity, external services, family needs, language skills, and computer use
- Awareness of funding sources for the program
- Knowing who made decisions about changes and implemented them
- Comfort with adult learners being leaders
- Perceptions of their own organizational skills
- Perceptions of the value of diversity
- How involved they felt with the program
- How determined they felt about learning
- Most personality attributes associated with leadership (outgoing, stable, open, flexible, supportive, and taking charge)
- Most critical thinking skills that were assessed (enquiry, reasoning, information processing, decision making, and problem solving)
- All writing skills that were assessed (metacognitive strategy use, checking strategy, capacity belief, contextual belief)

Participating adult learners perceived getting enough high school equivalency info at 2.4 times the rate of control learners. Participating adult learners also tended to receive information much more often than control learners about:

- college programs (4.8 times),
- applying to college (2.6 times), and
- financial aid (3.1 times)

Teacher/tutor support was high (see Figure 4). Nearly all participating adult learners (93%) and control adult learners (98%) counted on their teacher/tutor for support with learning problems. On all three measures
of teacher/tutor support, control learners perceived moderately higher levels (average 4.6 on a scale of 5) than participating adult learners (average 4.3 on a scale of 5), Cohen’s d = .41.

Figure 4. Adult Learner Ratings of Teacher/Tutor Support

No differences occurred in awareness of program sources of funding by condition or language status. However, being over age 44 was positively related to awareness of funding sources. Adult learners who just started in the program tended to be more aware of local funding (43%) and less aware of state funding (34%) than those who were at or near the end of the program (30% and 48%, respectively). Men were more aware of state funding (48%) and less aware of private funding (36%) than were women (37% and 44%, respectively).

Seven in 10 adult learners didn’t know who made decisions about or implemented changes in the program; 1 in 4 knew the name but not the title of the decision or change maker, and 1 in 20 knew both the name and the job title. Answers did not differ by condition.

While few adult learners had the opportunity for leadership as yet, the majority of them want to be leaders (regardless of condition). Still, participating adult learners had a much stronger sense of themselves becoming current and future leaders than did control learners. Of participating adult learners, 36% see themselves as current leaders, 35% used to be leaders, and 89% want to be leaders (see Figure 5). Participating adult learners saw themselves as a current leader and a future leader at three times the rate of control learners. In contrast, 15% of control learners see themselves as current leaders, 25% were, and 72% want to be leaders.

Participating

Control

Figure 5. Adult Learners’ Leadership Status by Condition

Participating adult learners rated themselves an average 7 out of 10 as leaders, as shown in Figure 6; control adult learners an average 6 of 10. Mean differences were small (d = .29) but significant (t = 2.2, p < .05).

Regardless of condition, adult learners who saw themselves as strong leaders already (i.e., who rated themselves an 8, 9, or 10 in leadership) did not differ demographically. Self-rated strong leaders were similar in
age, gender, language status, and employment status. Strong leaders tended to report being more organized \((d = .65)\) and collaborative \((d = .55)\) than adults with lower leadership ratings.

Adult learner comfort with leadership was very high and levels did not differ by condition: 90% of adult learners were comfortable with adult learners as leaders, and more comfortable than they thought staff (80%) or other learners (77%) would be. Nine in 10 saw benefits of adult learners taking a leadership role: to the adult learners (89%), to learning (91%), and to program services (90%). Scores on comfort with leadership correlated moderately \((r = 0.56)\) with leadership benefits scores; that is, adult learners who felt comfortable with adult learner leadership tended to perceive its benefits.

Concerning organizational skills, almost all adult learners agreed they plan their schedule ahead of time (89%) and prioritize activities or assignments by importance (92%). They were only a little less certain (79%) about organizing an activity or event from beginning to end. No differences occurred by condition.

Adult learners reported high levels of collaboration, which did not differ by condition except in mentoring. Nine in 10 believed they work well with others, let the group know when members are doing a good job, and involve others in making group decisions. Eight in 10 believe they look for answers that meet everyone’s needs. Seven in 10 mentored another learner; control learners mentored another learner almost twice as often as participating learners did.

Adult learners who mentor peers differ from non-mentors in important ways. First adult learner mentors tended to be older (42 years, on average) than non-mentors (average 35 years, \(d = .53\)) and rate themselves higher as leaders (an average 7 vs. 6 on a 10-point scale, \(d = .46\)). They have moderately higher scores in perceiving the benefits of adult learner leadership (average 17 vs. 16, \(d = .40\)) and in organization (average 12.6 vs. 11.9, \(d = .44\)). Mentors have much higher scores in collaboration (21.8 vs. 18.1, \(d = 1.47\)) and in post-program involvement (12.6 vs. 11.3, \(d = .59\)).

Perceived involvement in the program was very high. Nearly all adult learners agreed it was important to them to contribute in the program (96%). Nine in 10 felt truly involved in the program (87%), were determined to finish (91%), and agreed it would be a real loss if the program ended tomorrow (87%). Similarly, nearly all adult learners wanted to give back, as a sign of gratitude for what they gained in adult education. Wanting to give back appeared to be stronger when the adult learner was closer in proximity to the group to which he or she would give back: family or friends (92%), mentors (89%), and their adult education program (89%). Most adult learners were also interested in giving back to their community (81%) but not as much as to those in closer relationships. Involvement and wishing to give back did not differ by condition.

Post-program involvement, or the extent to which they would stay involved after completing the program, was covered in another section of survey items. The majority agreed they would keep in touch with staff (84%), volunteer to help out (83%), or stay on to lead an activity (72%). Post-program involvement correlated moderately with giving back \((r = 0.53)\) and to a lesser extent with the adult learner’s perceived involvement during the program \((r = 0.49)\).

Adult learners reported extremely high levels of determination to learn, regardless of condition. Nearly all adults believed they work hard to achieve learning goals (95%), continue learning despite setbacks (93%), and learn new things even when they are challenging (98%). Scores on determination correlated moderately \((r = 0.58)\) with involvement scores; that is, adults who were more determined tended to feel more involved in the adult education program (and vice versa).
Adults were asked what was next for them in life after the adult education program (see Figure 7). The top two goals were getting a better job (57%) and going to college or university (53%). Adults indicated they would get a better job (29%) or take an HSE test (27%) as a first priority after leaving the program.

**Figure 7. Overall and Initial Adult Learner Aspirations**

After completing, participating adult learners might go to college (60%), get a better job (59%), or take a high school equivalency (HSE) test (40%; see Figure 8). Control adult learners thought they might get a better job (55%), take an HSE test (38%), or go to college (44%). Control adult learners tended to experience feeling unsure about what is next more often (24%) than participating learners (10%).

**Figure 8. Participant and Control Adult Learner Priority Aspirations**

Adults over 44 tended to be sure about future goals (25% not sure yet) less often than adults age 25 to 44 (7%). Young adults (24 and under) planned to take an HSE test less frequently (29%) than middle-aged adults (45% for 25-44 and 37% for over 44 years). Although interest in postsecondary education was high regardless of language status, native speakers selected the goal of going to college or university at higher rates (62%) than did
ELLs (49%). Participating adult learners were more apt to consider college or university first (28%) than control adult learners were (16%). Control adult learners tended to more often want to keep their current job first (14%) or to be unsure about first goals (21%) than were participating adult learners (4% and 7%, respectively).

In the final section of the survey adult learners were asked to describe attributes of their personality. Nearly all saw themselves as conscientious (88%), open (87%), and flexible (90%). Most of them described themselves as outgoing (74%), stable (77%), supportive (84%), taking charge (74%), and proactive (84%). A small, positive correlation ($r = 0.25$) occurred between the adult learner’s leadership score and the composite score of the attributes; that is, the more adult learners saw themselves as having these attributes, the higher the leadership score (and vice versa). Two differences occurred by condition: participating adult learners are twice as likely to see themselves as conscientious (92%) or as proactive (88%) than control learners are (83% and 79%, respectively).

**Differences by Adult Learner Progress in the Program**

Overall community awareness of the center, from the perspective of the adult learner, was moderately higher when the adult learner was about halfway through the program (13.1 on a 15-point scale) than when near the end or finished (12.3), $d = .37$. Adult learners near the end or finished believed less frequently (52%) that adults in the community knew about the center than did adult learners who were just starting (70%) or halfway through (71%), $M^2 = 4.1$.

As adult learners progressed through the program (from “just started” to “halfway through” to “near the end” or “already finished), learner characteristics and knowledge differed. Adults who progressed further were more frequently:

- native English speakers (27% just started, 29% halfway through, and 54% at or near the end, respectively, $M^2 = 9.5$)
- young adults (24 or under) (16% just started, 15% halfway through, 37% at or near the end, respectively, $M^2 = 5.5$)
- aware of who had authority to make decisions in the program (20% just started, 32% halfway through, 40% at or near the end, respectively, $M^2 = 9.2$)
- aware of who had authority to make changes in the program (21% just started, 24% halfway through, 40% at or near the end, respectively, $M^2 = 5.7$)

The further an adult progressed through the program, the less frequently the adult perceived:

- accommodations helped them learn (81%, 75%, and 60%, respectively, $M^2 = 6.2$)
- the center gave them enough information to get a job promotion (79%, 73%, and 52%, respectively, $M^2 = 8.8$)
- the center gave them enough information to prepare for US citizenship (88%, 72%, and 68%, respectively, $M^2 = 6.2$)
- that diverse group members brought tools to fix conflicts that arose in a group setting (77%, 65%, and 61%, respectively, $M^2 = 4.9$)

Adults near the end or already finished perceived having moderately higher:

- teacher support (13.4 on a 15-point scale) than those just starting (12.8), $d = .36$
- awareness of the benefits of leadership (17.3 on a 20-point scale) than those just starting (16.6) or halfway through (16.5), $d = .33$
• organization skills (12.7 on a 15-point scale) than those just starting (12.0), \( d = .47 \), as did those halfway through (12.5), \( d = .33 \), compared with those just starting
• determination to finish (13.7 on a 15-point scale) than those just starting (12.9), \( d = .52 \), as did those halfway through (13.3), \( d = .26 \), compared with those just starting

Adult learners at or near the end also indicated being moderately less willing to stay involved after completing the program (11.7 on a 15-point scale) than those halfway through the program (12.4), \( d = .31 \).

**Differences by Adult Learner Age (Under 35 vs. 35 Years and Older)**

Overall community awareness of the center, from the perspective of the adult learner, was slightly higher for older adult learners (13.0 on a 15-point scale) than younger adult learners (12.6), \( d = .23 \). Older adult learners tended to believe that adults in the community knew about the center (77%), at almost triple the rate of younger adult learners believing so (54%).

Younger adult learners (vs. older adult learners) more frequently reported that they:

• get enough information from their adult education program about college or university programs (94% vs. 84%), 2.7 times
• are leaders currently (34% vs. 22%), 1.8 times
• want to be leaders in the future (88% vs. 78%), 2.2 times
• think about going to college or university first after completing (32% vs. 17%), whereas older adults (12%) would first keep their current job more than younger adults (4%)
• are male (42% vs. 23%), 2.4 times
• speak English as their native language (45% vs. 25%), 2.5 times

Older adults (vs. younger adult learners) were between three to four times more apt to:

• get enough information from their adult education program to stay at their current job (78% vs. 48%), 3.8 times
• get enough information from their program to get a job promotion (82% vs. 54%), 3.9 times
• get enough information from their program to prepare for US citizenship (84% vs. 63%), 3.1 times
• know who at the center was authorized to make changes (31% vs. 20%), \( M^2 = 4.3 \)
• agree having adult learners as leaders benefits program services (95% vs. 82%), 4.1 times
• agree they work well with others (97% vs. 88%), 3.8 times
• let the group know when they did a good job (92% vs. 78%), 3.3 times
• carry on with learning despite setbacks (96% vs. 89%), 3.0 times
• want to give back to family or friends (96% vs. 87%), 3.5 times
• want to give back to mentors (93% vs. 83%), 3.0 times
• want to give back to their community (89% vs. 72%), 3.1 times
• volunteer to help out after completing adult education (89% vs. 74%), 3.0 times

**Differences by Adult Learner Gender**

Overall community awareness of the center, from the perspective of the adult learner, was moderately higher for women (13.1 on a 15-point scale) than men (12.2), \( d = .44 \). Male adult learners were 2.6 times more
often native speakers of English (48%) than female adult learners (26%). Men tended to be employed (54%) more than women (36%), who were more often looking for work (45%) or out of the workforce (12%).

Female adult learners (vs. male adult learners) had higher frequencies of reporting they:

- get enough information from their adult education program to help their children learn (95% vs. 74%), 6.8 times
- get enough information from their program to increase their English language skills (96% vs. 88%), 2.9 times
- get enough information from their program to prepare for US citizenship (84% vs. 62%), 3.1 times
- know who at the center was authorized to make decisions (35% vs. 20%), $M^2 = 4.4$, and to make changes (32% vs. 15%), $M^2 = 10.5$
- plan their schedules ahead of time (92% vs. 80%), 3.1 times

Overall women (vs. men) had slightly higher scores on perceiving the benefits of adult learner leadership (16.9 on a 30-point scale, vs. 16.2), $d = .28$; on collaboration (20.9 on a 25-point scale, vs. 20.0), $d = .29$; and on attributes of leadership (32.1 on a 40-point scale, vs. 31.0), $d = .24$. Women also were moderately more inclined to give back overall (17.0 on a 20-point scale, vs. 16.3), $d = .31$, and to wish to be involved in the program after completing (12.4 on a 15-point scale, vs. 11.7), $d = .31$.

**Differences by Adult Learner Language Status**

Community awareness of the center overall, from the perspective of the adult learner, was moderately higher for English Language Learners (ELL; 13.2 on a 15-point scale) than for native speakers of English (12.1), $d = .54$. They saw four times greater awareness of the program among adults needing skills than native speakers did (78% vs. 47%), and had a five times stronger belief than native English speakers that other adult learners would be interested in coming to the center (97% vs. 85%).

Native speakers rated themselves slightly higher (7.3 on a 10-point scale) than ELLs as leaders (6.8), $d = .25$.

Native speakers (vs. ELLs) had higher frequencies of reporting they:

- get enough information from their adult education program to learn about college or university programs (100% vs. 82%)
- get enough information from their program to apply for college or university (94% vs. 77%), 4.9 times
- get enough information from their program to learn about financial aid (88% vs. 69%), 3.3 times
- are currently a leader (40% vs. 22%), 2.5 times
- are determined to finish the program (97% vs. 89%), 4.1 times
- after completing plan to first take an HSE test (34% vs. 23%) or go to college/university (29% vs. 20%)

ELLs (vs. native speakers) more often reported that:

- they get enough information from their adult education program to increase their English language skills (96% vs. 86%), 4.3 times
- they get enough information from their adult education program to prepare for US citizenship (83% vs. 57%), 3.6 times
- during group conflict, members from diverse backgrounds bring the tools to fix it (76% vs. 52%), 3.0 times
ELLs also had moderately higher scores in post-program involvement (12.4 on a 15-point scale vs. 11.7), $d = .33$, especially that they would stay on to lead an activity after completing the program (80% vs. 55%).

Assessments

**Key Findings: Adult learner scores on Critical Thinking and Writing assessments did not differ by condition.** Average CTA scale scores were (on a 5-point frequency scale): Reasoning (4), Information Processing (4.1), Enquiry (3.7), Problem Solving (4.0), Decision Making (4.4), and Analysis (2.9), indicating adults generally plan to get information and analyze it less often than to deal with decisions or tackle questions. CTA data provide credible statistical support for logical processes that connect to adults’ skills in reasoning and processing information, which in turn tie to their decision making and problem solving. On the Writing assessment, scale scores averaged (on a 5-point agreement scale): Metacognitive Strategy Use (3.5), Capacity Belief (3.2), Checking Strategy (4.1), and Contextual Belief (3.9). These scores indicate that adults tend to agree least often with a belief in their capacity to write about their ideas and most often that they employ strategies to check their writing. Adult learners who were aware of and could act on their strategies to write about their ideas tended to have stronger beliefs in their capacity to write ($r = 0.53$). At the same time, adults who employed strategies to check their writing tended to have stronger beliefs that their writing would improve if they had support of others ($r = 0.54$). Survey-assessment relationships indicate that adult learners who seek and process information and apply reasoning skills consistently when dealing with a task tend to be more organized, collaborative, and determined learners. Adult learners who aspire to be leaders in the future had moderately higher Information Processing ($d = 0.42$) and Decision-making scores ($d = 0.34$) than those who did not have the aspiration. Those who wanted to stay involved after completing the program also tended to seek and process information consistently and to have stronger Critical Thinking scores overall. Writing scores correlated with collaboration ($r = 0.39$) and post-program involvement ($r = 0.37$). Adult learners who aspire to be leaders in the future had moderately higher Writing Capacity Belief scores than those who did not have the aspiration ($d = 0.35$). Scores on attributes of leadership (from the survey) also correlated with scores in Information Processing ($r = 0.40$), Reasoning ($r = 0.38$), and Writing overall ($r = 0.33$), suggesting meaningful links of adult critical thinking and writing skills with leadership attributes adults saw in themselves in the baseline year.

In addition to surveys, assessments in Critical Thinking and Writing were administered to adult learners. Critical Thinking (CTA) contains six scales measuring ways in which learners think, solve problems, or make decisions: Reasoning, Enquiry, Information Processing, Decision Making, Problem Solving, and Analysis. Writing measures how learners write about their ideas in four scales: Metacognitive Strategy Use, Writing Capacity Beliefs, Contextual Beliefs, and Checking Strategies. It is important to point out that approaches to critical thinking and to writing are not specific to a particular language – that is, how learners think critically or solve problems, and how they write about their ideas, could occur regardless of whether they thought or wrote in English or any other language.

**Critical Thinking**

Nearly all adults (99%, $n = 302$) completed Critical Thinking. The total score for CTA in the baseline year had a mean of 120.5 ($SD = 13.6$). Adults in the lowest quartile scored between 78 and 111, and adults in the
highest quartile scored between 130 and 155. No significant score differences occurred by condition, progress in the center, age group, or gender. ELLs scored moderately higher on critical thinking skills overall (122.0), on average, than native speakers of English (117.6), d = .33. One explanation for this higher score is that ELLs tended to be older than native speakers, as noted earlier, and may have gained additional critical thinking skills through more life experience.

When CTA scale scores are considered, the average scale score was “often” (4 on a 5-point scale): Reasoning (4), Information Processing (4.1), Enquiry (3.7), Problem Solving (4.0), Decision Making (4.4), and Analysis (2.9). Adults tended to score lowest on Analysis and Enquiry. These median scale scores indicate adults generally plan to get information and analyze it less often than to deal with decisions or tackle questions. Adult learners did not differ significantly in critical thinking scale scores by condition, with the exception of Analysis, where control adult learners scored moderately higher (15.8 on a 25-point scale) than participating adult learners (14.0), d = 0.45. This difference indicates control learners tended to analyze information and potential choices more frequently than participating learners.

Correlations among five of the Critical Thinking scales are moderately strong and indicate key relationships within critical thinking, as shown in Figure 9. Planning to get information (i.e., enquiry) relates to processing the information and to reasoning. Information processing appears closely related to reasoning, decision making, and problem solving, with the strongest links between making decisions and solving problems. The baseline assessment data, then, provide credible statistical support that logical processes connect to adults’ skills in reasoning and processing information, which in turn tie to their decision making and problem solving.

![Figure 9. Correlations among Critical Thinking Assessment Scales](image)

Although adult learners did not differ meaningfully on critical thinking scale scores overall, score differences did occur. Adults who were near the end of the program or finished scored moderately higher in reasoning (25.0), on average, than did adult learners who were just starting (23.7), d = .37. Older adult learners scored slightly higher on enquiry (11.3) than did adult under 35 years (10.7), d = .24. The difference in enquiry scores for ELLs (15.7) was even stronger, compared with native speakers (13.0), d = .67.

Writing

The second assessment administered in Year 1 was Writing. Not as many adult learners (88%, n = 270) completed Writing, primarily because adults in a single control center could not write in any language. The total score for Writing in the baseline year had a mean of 114.7 (SD = 13.3), indicating that on average adult learners tended to agree with statements on writing about their ideas. Adults in the lowest quartile scored between 51 and 108, and adults in the highest quartile scored between 122 and 155.

As displayed in Figure 10, Metacognitive Strategy Use correlated moderately with Writing Capacity Belief (r = 0.53), as did Checking Strategy with Contextual Belief (r = 0.54). Adult learners who were aware of and
could act on their strategies to write about their ideas tended to have stronger beliefs in their capacity to write (and vice versa). At the same time, adults who employed strategies to check their writing tended to have stronger beliefs that their writing would improve if they had support of others (and vice versa). However the relationships were not as strong between the set of beliefs (r = 0.25) and between the types of strategy use (r = 0.38). The strength of these findings indicates that awareness of and belief in an adult learner’s approaches to writing about ideas does not imply the adult learner applies strategies to check writing or relies on the support of others to improve writing. Conversely, those who apply strategies to check writing or who rely on writing support from others may not have awareness of writing approaches they take or belief in their writing capacity.

![Figure 10. Correlations Among Writing Scales](image)

No significant differences in Writing scores overall occurred by condition, progress in the center, or age group. Women scored slightly higher on Writing (115.7) than men (117.6), d = .15. One explanation for this score difference is that women tended to be English language learners more often than men, who were frequently native speakers, so women may have learned additional writing approaches in their home language(s) or in English.

The differences noted by gender were most noticeable in Metacognitive Strategy and Checking Strategy Use; women had moderately higher scores in both (42.9 and 29.5, respectively), d = .34, for Metacognitive Strategy Use, and d = .38 for Checking Strategy. Men scored an average 41.1 in Metacognitive Strategy Use and 27.6 in Checking Strategy. These differences indicate female adult learners are somewhat more aware of the strategies they use to write about their ideas, whether planning, solving problems, evaluating results, or modifying approaches to writing. ELLs had moderately higher scores (43.1) in Metacognitive Strategy Use than native speakers (41.3), d = .34, but differences were not significant for Checking Strategy.

On the Writing Capacity Belief scale, a slight difference in scores occurred by age. Younger adults had a slightly higher belief in their writing capacity (16.4) than did adults age 35 and older (15.5), d = .25. A possible explanation for this difference might be that younger adults left school more recently, where they perhaps had opportunity to write more regularly than as adults. Alternatively, older adults may be slightly more realistic about the challenges they face or errors they make while writing than are younger adults.

**Relationships between Adult Learner Survey and Assessments**

Evaluators next looked at potential relationships between assessments and the learner survey. Did an adult who reported high levels of being organized, collaborative, determined, or involved in the center, whether currently or willing to be after completing the program, tend to have high scores on Critical Thinking or Writing? These survey scores correlated moderately with Reasoning and Information Processing (see Table 1). An adult learner’s organization scores (r = 0.43) and collaboration scores (r = 0.41) correlated best with Information Processing, as highlighted in yellow in Table 1. Information Processing also correlated with adult learners’ determination (r = 0.38) and willingness to be involved in the program after completing (r = 0.35), as highlighted in aqua in Table 1. These relationships indicate that adult learners who seek and process information and apply reasoning skills consistently when dealing with a task tend to be more organized, collaborative, and determined learners. Those who expressed willingness to stay involved after completing the program also tended to seek
and process information consistently and to have stronger Critical Thinking scores overall \((r = 0.37, \text{ not shown})\). Adult learners who aspire to be leaders in the future had moderately higher Information Processing \((29.0 \text{ vs. } 27.3, \text{ } d = .42)\) and Decision-making scores \((21.6 \text{ vs. } 20.6, \text{ } d = .34)\) than those who did not have the aspiration.

### Table 1. Correlations of Reasoning and Information Processing Scales with Four Learner Survey Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations</th>
<th>Organization Score</th>
<th>Collaboration Score</th>
<th>Determination Score</th>
<th>Post-Program Involvement Score</th>
<th>Leadership Attributes Score</th>
<th>Combined Reasoning Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spearman's rho</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Reasoning Score</td>
<td></td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Information Processing Score</td>
<td></td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Only two survey ratings correlated moderately with Writing scores overall: post-program involvement \((r = 0.37)\) and collaboration \((r = 0.39)\). Adult learners who agree more that they want to stay involved in the program after finishing tend to have stronger approaches to writing about their ideas. The relationship between an adult’s perception of working with others in group settings and approaches he or she takes to writing about ideas is intriguing. It is also worth noting that adults who tend to strategically check and revise their writing score higher on collaboration \((r = 0.36)\). Furthermore, learners who aspire to be leaders in the future had moderately higher Writing Capacity Belief scores \((16.0)\) than those who did not have the aspiration \((14.9), \text{ } d = .35\).

Attributes of leadership (from the survey) also correlated with scores on either assessment. Information Processing and Reasoning both correlated moderately with attributes of leadership \((r = 0.40 \text{ and } 0.38, \text{ respectively})\). A smaller correlation occurred between attributes of leadership and Writing overall \((r = 0.33)\). These statistics suggest meaningful links of adult critical thinking and writing skills with potential for leadership based on the attributes they saw in themselves in the baseline year.

### Staff Surveys

**Key Findings:** Staff in 21 programs \((n = 67)\) took online surveys. Most staff members were women \((85\%)\) and native English speakers \((79\%), \text{ typically with a bachelor or master degree and a median age of 50-54 years})\). Staff had worked with adult learners for an average 8 years yet collaborated with adult learners who are leaders less than one year, and a third of staff had never done so. To help them learn best, learners saw more of a need for computer instruction, mentoring, and accommodations than did staff. Participating staff tended to place more emphasis on self-directed learning than did control staff. Overall staff and adult learners agreed at comparable rates that adults had enough information from the program for work-related activities; however, compared with adult learners’ perceptions, staff agreed less that learners had enough information to organize a work project. Staff and adult learners appeared to have similar rates of agreement on programs giving enough information to do most education-related activities, except for taking an HSE test and getting postsecondary information – staff saw information in these areas as less adequate than learners did. Staff comfort with adult learner leadership was very high and levels did not differ by condition. As with learners,
comfort levels increased with closer proximity to the survey taker; staff believed they were more comfortable with adult learner leadership than their peers or learners would be. Compared with adult learner perceptions, staff tended to agree less often adult learners would be comfortable with leadership. Staff belief in adult learner post-program involvement is much lower than that of learners themselves. When asked about adult learner strengths, adult learner independence, and program/staff strengths, staff that recognized program strengths tended to also recognize adult learner strengths; staff ratings of adult learner independence were generally lower. More participating staff than control staff agreed that their role becomes stronger the more they “give up the driver’s seat when adult learners lead activities.”

As of June 2015, 67 staff members from 21 programs took ALLIES surveys. Staff surveys were taken online, and the response rate was 71%. Staff taking the survey comprised 85% women and 79% native English speakers. Highest education level averaged a bachelor degree (40%); 45% of staff had a master degree, 11% had less than a bachelor degree, and 2% had a doctorate. Median staff age was 50-54 years and ranged from 30 years to more than 80 years. Staff worked in seven states during the baseline year of ALLIES (see Figure 11). A greater proportion of staff than adult learners took surveys in Florida, and a smaller proportion of staff than adult learners did so in Texas. By condition 63% of staff was in participating programs and 37% in control programs, a comparable balance with adult learners.

![Figure 11. Geographic Representation (Percent of Learners and Staff by State)](image)

Staff tended to have substantial experience working with adult learners and to wear multiple hats in their roles. Staff had worked with adult learners for a median 8 years, ranging from less than one year to 40 years. The range for those who reported working with adult learners who are leaders was similarly broad, but the median was less than one year, and a third of staff had never done so. Reported primary staff roles included 45% instructional staff, 32% administrators, 6% volunteers, and 3% counselors. Secondary roles were administrative (23%), instructional (68%), and counseling (15%).

Stakeholder support of the program was a topic of interest in the staff survey. The top five stakeholders of programs were: adult learners (32%), a board of directors (26%), volunteers and tutors (26%), a local college (15%), and other staff (14%). Four of five staff had positive perceptions of stakeholders: 84% agreed the program increased stakeholder interest and 81% that stakeholders were champions for the program.

Both staff and adult learners were asked which center services helped adults learn best. In general both groups agreed on levels of small-group interaction, one-on-one tutoring, and self-directed learning, as displayed
in Figure 12. To help them learn best, however, adult learners saw more of a need for computer instruction, mentoring, and accommodations (for adults with disabilities) than did staff. One exception is that participating staff had a significantly higher level of agreement concerning accommodations (69%) than did control staff (40%). Participating staff also tended to place more emphasis on self-directed learning (71%) than did control staff (44%). Staff that were native English speakers tended to agree much more often about self-directed learning being best (71%) than did staff who spoke other first languages (21%).

Figure 12. Staff and Adult Learner Agreement on Center Services That Help Adults Learn Best

Both surveys asked staff and adult learners how much they agreed about the program providing enough information for them to do numerous activities in the workplace, in education, or in the home or community. Overall staff and adult learners agreed at comparable rates that adults had enough information from the program for work-related activities, as displayed in Figure 13. An exception is that staff agreed much less concerning learners having enough information to organize a work project from beginning to end (40%) than did adult learners themselves (80%). Staff that were native English speakers tended to agree much more often about giving adults enough information to stay at their current jobs (80%) than did staff speaking other first languages (50%).
Staff and adult learners appeared to have similar rates of agreement concerning adult learners having enough information from the program to do most education-related activities. Notable exceptions are taking a high school equivalency (HSE) test, getting accommodations for disabilities, and accessing information about college (or university) programs, applying to college, or financial aid for college – in all five of these areas staff agreed less often that the center provided adequate information (see Figure 14). Concerning providing adequate information for HSE testing, participating staff agreed three times more often (79%) than control staff, as did staff who were native English speakers (75%) compared with staff who spoke other first languages (43%). Participating staff had three times higher rates of agreement (67%) than control staff (36%) about programs providing adequate information on accommodations.
In addition, staff and adult learners agreed at comparable rates concerning adult learners having enough information from the program home or community-related activities. These activities included performing everyday life tasks, getting services outside the program, boosting children’s literacy / helping adult learners’ children learn, and preparing for US citizenship. Adult learners tended to agree more often than staff that they had adequate information from the center to help their children learn (see Figure 15). Even though staff and adult learners generally agreed on adequacy of information provided to adult learners to prepare for US citizenship, control staff tended to agree three times more often (88%) than participating staff (67%).

![Figure 15. Staff and Learner Agreement on Center Giving Enough Information to Do Home or Community-related Activities](image)

Like adult learners, staff was asked who made decisions about and implemented changes in the program; 85% of staff knew who made decisions about changes in the program, yet 30% were unable to identify who brought about changes in the center. Though much more knowledgeable than adult learners, a surprising proportion of staff lacks basic information about decision and change makers in adult education programs.

Staff comfort with adult learner leadership was very high and levels did not differ by condition: 95% of staff was comfortable with adult learners as leaders, and more comfortable than they thought colleagues (78%) or other learners (70%) would be. As shown in Figure 16, comfort levels increase with proximity to the survey taker, whether the person taking the survey was staff or an adult learner. Nearly all survey takers were comfortable with adult learners being leaders, but they thought staff and other learners would be less comfortable with the idea than they themselves were. Staff tended to agree adult learners would be comfortable with the idea less often than adult learners agreed (see Figure 16), and staff whose first language was English did so even less (63%) compared with staff who spoke other languages first (93%). Staff under 50 years agreed their colleagues were comfortable with adult learner leadership three times more often than staff 50 years and older.
Virtually all staff saw benefits of adult learners taking a leadership role: to the adult learners (99%), to learning (90%), and to program services (96%); agreement rates did not differ by condition. Scores on comfort with leadership correlated moderately ($r = 0.56$) with leadership benefits scores; that is, staff who felt comfortable with adult learner leadership tended to perceive its benefits. This correlation is as strong for staff as it was for adult learners.

Staff reported high levels of collaboration, which did not differ by condition. Nine in 10 believed they let adult learners know when learners are doing a good job (94%), look for answers that meet adult learner needs (94%), and involve adult learners in making decisions (86%). Eight in 10 staff mentored adult learners.

Like adult learners, staff was asked about post-program involvement, or the extent to which adult learners would stay involved after completing the program (see Figure 17). The majority agreed adult learners would keep in touch with staff (67%). Approximately half of staff thought learners volunteer to help out (49%), and a third that they would stay on to lead an activity (36%). As shown in Figure 17, staff belief in adult learner post-program involvement is much lower than that of the adult learners themselves.

Not all staff had low expectations for post-program involvement. Control program staff agreed adult learners would stay to lead an activity three times more often (52%) than participating staff did (26%). Staff who
spoke other first languages had higher rates of agreement on post-program involvement than did staff who were native English speakers:

- Keeping in touch with staff (93% vs. 59%), 9.1 times
- Volunteering to help out (71% vs. 41%), 3.6 times
- Staying on to lead an activity (71% vs. 26%), 7.3 times

A final staff survey comparison was of staff perspectives on adult learners. At least 9 in 10 staff agreed that staff can learn a lot from adult learners (99%), learners’ life experience enriches their learning (97%), staff gives adult learners tools to help themselves learn (92%), and adult learners have a lot to offer the program (91%). The majority of staff feels responsible for adult learners’ learning (82%), believes that learners come to the program with knowledge and skills (79%), sees learners as people who “just happen to need more skills” (72%), and believes that their program “tailors its teaching to take advantage of adult learners’ strengths” (77%).

Staff responses to remaining perspectives on adult learners diverged (see Table 2). More than three-fifths of staff agreed that their role becomes stronger the more they “give up the driver’s seat when adult learners lead activities” (63%). Fewer staff tended to agree that learners “would be lost without my help” (28%), and learners’ “achievements depend on me” (25%). Many staff tended to disagree, “there are some things adults just can’t learn” (66%) and “if adult learners do not succeed, it’s because they did not try hard enough” (57%). More than half disagreed: “this program is fine the way it is, there’s no need to change it” (55%).

### Table 2. Eight Diverging Staff Perspectives on Adult Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Perspective</th>
<th>Agree or Strongly Agree (%)</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree or Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff role becomes stronger the more they “give up the driver’s seat when adult learners lead activities”</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If it weren’t for programs like this one, adults who need skills wouldn’t learn them”</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In this program, adult learners take part in improving instruction”</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Adult learners have a lot to learn from me”</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learners “would be lost without my help”</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There are some things adults just can’t learn”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If adult learners do not succeed, it’s because they did not try hard enough”</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This program is fine the way it is, there’s no need to change it”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three differences in 17 items representing staff perspectives on adult learners were noted by condition, two by age group, and three by language status. Control staff (96%) saw themselves as highly responsible for adult learners’ learning compared with participating staff (73%). This perspective on responsibility was particularly strong for staff whose first language was not English (100%). Participating staff tended to agree three times more (73%) than control staff (46%) with the statement, “My role as staff becomes stronger the more I give up the driver’s seat”. Rates of agreement with this perspective were similar for older staff (74%) vs.
staff under age 50 (48%). Control staff agreed unanimously that “adult learners have a lot to offer this program”, significantly more than participating staff (85%). Younger staff (41%) agreed three times more often that “adult learners would be lost without my help” than staff 50 and older (18%). Staff who spoke other first languages agreed with this same perspective three times more (50%) than staff who were native English speakers (22%).

The 17 staff perspective items were combined into three composite scales: adult learner strengths, adult learner independence, and program/staff strengths related to adult learners. Scores on adult learner strengths averaged 25 on a 30-point scale, and scores on program/staff strengths averaged 22, indicating the vast majority of staff agreed with perspectives on strengths of adult learners and their programs, respectively. Staff who recognized program strengths tended to also recognize adult learner strengths (r = 0.43). Adult learner independence scores averaged 17 on a 25-point scale, which points to a lower majority of staff agreeing about adult learner independence. Scores representing staff perspectives in these composites did not differ significantly by condition, age, or language status.

Adult Learner and Staff Expectations and Contributions

Key Findings: Before beginning leadership projects, adult learners and staff appeared to have high hopes for their involvement. Adult learners and staff held diverse positive expectations and offered many contributions to the leadership project. Adult learners expected to gain general skills and make personal growth as well as gain confidence. They also hoped to gain specific leadership skills, to learn more English, and to help peers learn. In return they were willing to help other learners or benefit the program. Others sought to help in any way possible, or to contribute by simply participating. Staff expectations centered on gaining leadership skills, learning other skills, and helping students or the program. They, too, wished to boost adult learner confidence and gain additional skills that would support learners. Staff offered specific expertise, planned to coach learners, and expressed readiness to participate actively in the leadership project.

Before they participated in training or began a leadership project in their program, adult learners in participating programs were asked what they expected to gain from and contribute to working on a leadership project; 158 adults commented on their expectations. Their written responses about expectations ranged from gaining general skills or leadership skills to learning English, helping others, and performing better at work or home. Only seven adult learners (4%) were unsure about their expectations.

Learner Expectations

The largest single group (28%) of comments touched on gaining general skills and making personal growth. Adult learners wrote about expecting to gain knowledge and further learning as they practiced new leadership skills. “I expect to learn as much as I can,” wrote a young male adult learner from Florida. “By learning I expect to gain knowledge.” A middle-aged female English language learner from Texas stated, “I hope to learn and develop my skills to improve as necessary.” Another middle-aged learner, a male employee from Colorado, wrote, “I expect to learn many things such as abilities, skills, [development] and knowledge in most of fields.” Adults craved knowledge in “communication and social skills”, “people skills”, “how to handle responsibility”, doing “better in life”, making “smarter decisions in life”, teamwork, management, and “life experience.”

Gaining general skills, many adult learners expected, would lead to additional confidence. A young adult learner from Florida wrote, “I would like to gain confidence. And the know how so I can pass it on to my children.” Another adult learner, a young man from Texas, expected “to gain more confidence and learn more skills in solving problems.” In some instances gaining confidence meant releasing long-held fears. “Sometimes I
feel uncomfortable to speak in front of a group of people,” confessed a young female English language learner from New Jersey, “If I participating in a leadership program I can hone my conversation skill and gradually diminishing my fear to speak. I hope I will get more confident after this project.” A middle-aged female English language learner from Texas stated, “I want to learn more and more how to speak in front of people, I want to lose the fear of public speaking, and I want that my [children will] be motivated with [what] I do.”

Not surprisingly, a second expectation adult learners had (26%) was gaining leadership skills. A young female adult learner from Colorado wanted to know “how to become a better, stronger leader. How to persuade people in following your decisions as a leader.” A middle-aged female English language learner from Colorado expected to learn what “kind of leaders we can be.” A middle-aged female adult learner in Florida wondered, “Would I be good at leading?” A young male adult learner from Kansas added, “How to be a better leader. Better problem solving skills.” In Texas, a young female English language learner stated, “I expect so much from this program, because it’s a big and excellent opportunity for my future, because I’m going to be a leader. And I’m going to have more opportunities.”

Specific leadership skills that adults expected to gain included: methods of leadership, “dealing with co-workers properly”, integrity, organization, “group learning,” team leadership, deciding on “different [projects] and roles” on the team, self-expression, and motivating others. As with general skills, some adult learners hoped to gain greater confidence by gaining leadership skills. A young man from Kansas wrote, “I expect to gain knowledge and skills that will help me become a more positive, efficient leader.” A middle-aged female learner from Florida hoped to learn “how to [lead] properly and with [confidence] in leading.”

Additionally, 15% of adult learners expected to learn more English as a result of participating in a leadership project. As she looked forward to the project, a middle-aged female English language learner from Colorado wrote, “I am hope to learn [English] for to change my life and the other people in my community.” Another middle-aged ELL, a woman from Florida, hoped to “Get experience. Be more organized. Speak more English. Get [knowledge].” A young female ELL from New Jersey stated, “I think its better opportunity to being a leader... more learn to English and more confident.” A female retiree from New Jersey saw her purpose in the project as “to learn the English language... To feel more confident on my Speaking, Writing.”

Another expectation that motivated adult learners to participate (17%) was helping others, including family members, other adult learners and the community. For some adult learners, helping others was meant very broadly. “Satisfaction,” declared a female retiree in Texas. “I think it feels good when you can help others.” In Florida a middle-aged female English language learner wrote, “I want to learn something I can share with others.” A middle-aged female English language learner from Texas sought to “improve leadership skills such as motivate others and guide them correctly in order to help them to get [to meet] their goals...”

Helping others learn was a frequent expectation. A female Florida retiree expected “to learn personally from participating in this leadership project is to encourage others to continue with their education. Because it's never too late to start and follow your dreams.” In Texas, a middle-aged female English language learner hoped to “help raise awareness to the Latino [community to excel] academically. And I want to participate with my freedom time.” “I just want everyone to have the chance to read,” a middle-aged female adult learner in Colorado wrote, “If I can help I will.” A young mother in a Florida family literacy program sought to “help people not to be embarrassed to ask for help. To have people know this program exists.”

Performing better at work or home (or both) was an expectation of the smallest group of adult learners (9%). Adult learners expected to gain personal satisfaction, skills they could pass on to their children, workplace
skills, and even better jobs. An expectation “to be better with myself and my family” motivated a middle-aged English language learner in Colorado. A young male adult learner in Kansas hoped to become a model as a father, through making “positive [choices] in life... teaching kids right from wrong.” Another middle-aged female ELL from Colorado expected to “be better in my job and my personal life.” In Florida, a young female adult learner wrote, “It will help me be a better employee, it will give me more self-confidence, and it will help me become a better leader for my family.” “To get ahead in my job,” divulged a middle-aged female ELL from Texas who was eager for training to become a leader. “Working at the same job since 2009 and I love my job. [But the] only [reason] I want my GED is to go to college.”

**Learner Contributions**

When asked how they would contribute to a leadership project, many adult learners planned to benefit other learners or the program. Others sought to help in any way possible, or to contribute by simply participating. A small percentage (9%) was unsure.

The largest group of contributors (33%) wanted their contributions to the project to benefit other adult learners. “I like to help people and to make life easy for them,” admitted a young male adult learner from Colorado. “I will contribute all the Skills and Knowledge that I have learn[ed] so far to help improve other with learning difficulty,” offered a young female adult learner from New Jersey. A middle-aged female English language learner from Texas planned to focus on trying “to help others to improve the[ir] English or help them whenever the[y] need help.” In Kansas a young male adult learner expected to “give my all to this leadership project and hopefully motivate others.” A female retiree from Florida declared, “I would really love to be the one in the back pushing them on!”

To benefit their peers, some adults wanted to serve as a model for leadership and be leaders of others. In Florida, a young female adult learner wrote, “Well I Love to take charge... do the speaking or reading... I like to be able to give each person an [opportunity] to [do] what they think might help... I [listen] to any idea.” Another young female learner, from Kansas, offered, “To show others my success and hope they want it [too].” One of her middle-aged male classmates added, “Well, teach students to get ready for the [real] world or future.” In Texas, a middle aged female English language learner stated, “I think my experience of success and effort can help other people to decide to learn.” A middle-aged male ELL from New Jersey hoped to “become an example for other people and they can see that even if they are adults, [they] can [learn] new things.”

Approximately 30% of adult learners wanted to help the leadership project in general ways. Seven adults offered to help in any way possible. Others were more specific and offered organizational skills, being a team player, ideas, life experience, and volunteering for tasks, such as to “tell other people about the program.” Several adults wanted to contribute in straightforward yet behind-the-scenes roles. A young female adult learner from Florida admitted, “Anyway I am able to. I don’t like to speak to crowds but am good at one on one or small groups.” A middle-aged female ELL in Florida wrote, “by [help]ing to cook the food.” Another middle-aged female ELL, from Colorado simply offered “to compromise... to do my best.”

A last group of adult learners (21%) offered to contribute by simply participating – for example, wrote a middle-aged female ELL from Florida, by “coming to the meeting and the school everyday.” In Texas, a middle-aged female ELL offered to “work and cooperate with the group, and participate in all the programs.” Two female Florida classmates offered specific ways they could participate effectively. The younger stated, “Make sure that I show up on time.” Her middle-aged classmate wrote, “Put [attention] doing [the] best I can.” A young
female ELL from Texas summarized, “[As an] adult learner it can benefit programs [and] services for people that just [start] coming or attend school. [They] can see that one day [they] can be that leadership too.”

**Staff Expectations**

Staff expectations centered on gaining leadership skills, learning other skills, and helping students or the program. Of the 45 staff with comments, 9% had no expectations. Approximately 40% expected to gain skills in leadership for themselves and their adult learners through training and the project. “Becoming a better leader in my role” expected a Florida instructor. A Texas administrator wrote, “Our organization has just launched a leadership initiative... The timing of this opportunity is perfect, as it will help us develop and improve strategies for developing leadership skills among our students and the staff.” In Colorado, a tutor said, “I expect to learn new ideas and gain an even broader and bigger perspective on learners and how leadership affects their learning. I always learn from [our] students and expect to be enriched by their participation as well as my own.”

A Florida administrator was eager to “learn from the students and see the dynamics of how students, tutors and staff interact. I can't wait to see how the group bonds and provides leadership skills to all of the individuals.”

For many staff members, leadership skills they hoped to gain would help them encourage learners in gaining leadership skills, voice, and confidence. “I expect to learn how to help student learners to become leaders in their community,” wrote a Colorado instructor. In Florida a tutor looked forward to “seeing how this program plays out--how the program will encourage adult learners to take leadership roles and tutors to support them in these roles.” A Florida administrator wanted new insights “into encouraging our adult students to develop the skills to lead, first, in their own education, second, in project development, and, third, in their own lives.” From Texas, and administrator hoped to “learn ways to teach learners how to incorporate their needs and desires into the GED/ESL program; to make it possible for them to have a say in their own learning. I would love to see the learners excel in leadership skills. I hope to be able to guide them into leadership roles.”

An instructor from another Colorado center sought “ways to help our students desire to stand up and be leaders and tools to use to benefit the students more so that they will desire to service and volunteer. Also ways to help the students feel comfortable and confident enough to try new things.”

Staff preparing for the leadership project hoped to gain additional skills as they worked with adult learners. This hope was particularly prevalent among instructors and tutors. Other skills staff expected to pick up as part of the leadership project included:

- “New ideas about how I can let students lead classroom discussions” (Colorado instructor)
- “Ways to improve my tutoring. I would like to work with the students to improve the student input into learning needs.” (Florida tutor)
- “Better ways to partner with each adult learner in order to empower them to continue learning outside of my classroom” (Kansas instructor)
- “learn to improve my teaching skills” (New Jersey tutor)
- “learn more about how to help adult learners take a more active role in program decision-making or activities” (Florida tutor)
- “Ways to engage learners in a more community oriented perspective” (Kansas instructor)
- “What it takes to get students motivated to take charge of their learning goals and go achieve them.” (Texas administrator)
- “Better ways to tutor and work with my adult learners as [they] learn English and American culture” (Florida tutor)
• “the experience of observing a diverse group of adult learners cooperating to improve a program that they have a vested interest in” (Kansas instructor)

Lastly, some staff had expectations of gains their adult learners and their programs would make during the project. Administrators and instructional staff alike focused on broad experiences and interactions among learners, staff, and the community as they described their hopes. These expectations included:

• “an experience which they will be able to transfer to their work and school life as well as improve the center in which they are learning” (Kansas administrator)
• “satisfaction gained from encouraging adult learners to become mentors” (Florida tutor)
• “for students to create an ongoing mentoring or training project for other adult learners” (Colorado administrator)
• “improve the student input into learning needs” (Florida tutor)
• “I hope the word gets out into the public that we can and do help each other out and that it can be fun at the same time.” (Kansas instructor)
• “have student create a project/product that helps our community understand and support adult learners and our center more fully” (Colorado administrator)
• “Most students need one on one tutoring at some point but rarely explore options that the community has available … I want to gain the key to students taking that leap.” (Texas administrator)

Staff Contributions

Staff believed they had much to offer in the way of skills and expertise. About 3 in 10 administrators and instructional staff offered specific knowledge and skills. Examples are:

• “I will be the chief champion and will lead the effort to measure the effectiveness of this project, and implement accountability measures. Most importantly, I hope to develop inclusive and informed key messages to keep everyone engaged and motivated” (Texas administrator)
• “By being a highly-qualified teacher” (Texas instructor)
• “I can help the project understand the students' reactions and needs” (New Jersey tutor)
• “I am creative and a good problem solver” (Florida tutor)
• “I would anticipate my role being primarily related to fund raising” (Colorado program board member)
• “My expertise in training future leaders of tomorrow” (New Jersey instructor)
• “I plan to teach business skills such as negotiation, planning, scheduling, advertising, and the power of good ideas” (Texas instructor)
• “The data and knowledge gleaned from studying my program and its learners” (Kansas administrator)

Most often staff wanted to contribute by mentoring and coaching adult learners; 35% of staff offered to take on this role. In Texas, an administrator hoped to give leadership experiences “to the students, to empower them to make changes, voice their opinions, see their weaknesses, understand the system that both provides for them and yet lets them down.” A New Jersey administrator proposed, “To encourage all participants to attend training, transfer knowledge, and follow up through the completion of the project.” A Colorado instructor offered to “give our students encouragement to let their leadership skills shine and develop even more.” A Colorado tutor proposed, “I hope to be a mentor and help students learn how to lead their peers and serve others.” A Colorado administrator planned to organize students to start the project and also expected to “host many more meetings and help learners when they get stuck.” A Florida administrator planned, “To encourage, to be a resource for the adult learners such as helping with child care, materials etc., [and] to be a listener.”
Like adult learners, some staff hoped to contribute by simply participating in the process (17%). They agreed to come to meetings, participate as fully as possible, and actively lend a hand to adult learners. Others were open to helping in any way possible (8%) or helping to get adult learners involved (2%). Only a few staff members were unsure how they could contribute.

Observations

Key Findings: In observations of staff and adult learners, staff initiated interactions much more overall (69%) than did adult learners (31%). Adult learners in participating centers (41%) spoke more often than those in control centers (20%). When they were in centers where adult learners were primarily newcomers, learners tended to initiate more (39%). Adult learner responses and initiations generally increased as time went on during an observation session. When staff would initiate an exchange, it was usually in the form of asking questions. Adult learners were rarely asked for their opinions. Usually in classes, adult learners who initiated an exchange would primarily interact with staff, but on occasion they would directly engage with other learners. Adult learners usually expressed liking staff and would smile and laugh at jokes. Staff appeared to express genuine caring for adult learners and about their day-to-day lives.

Observations occurred of interactions between adult learners and staff in all 21 programs. According to observers, most settings were judged to be adequate in terms of lighting, room for adults to sit, and attractiveness. One notable exception was an English language class where 48 people crowded into one room without enough adult-sized chairs. Furthermore, an observer noted that the room was very warm and maps were placed high on the wall. Another setting was a tutoring session, where tutors and adult learners sat at round tables. The round tables were pushed together to make a square and the room seemed crowded. Nonetheless, in most settings, adult learners and teachers seemed comfortable and appeared to feel safe, physically and emotionally.

Staff-Initiated Time Versus Learner-Initiated Time

During observation, staff and adult learners interacted from 25 minutes to 115 minutes per session (see Table 3). The balance of staff- and adult learner-initiated speaking time varied considerably, but staff spoke most often in 14 of the 21 centers. Overall, staff initiated much more (68.6%) than did adult learners (31.4%). As displayed in the sixth column of Table 3, in 9 of 21 observation sessions adult learners spoke throughout the session and generally did so at least as much as staff. Adult learners initiated speaking at the beginning of the observation session in four of 21 sessions, at the end of the observation session in six sessions, and did not initiate interactions at all in four sessions.

Table 3. Amount of Time Staff and Adult Learners Spoke during Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Condition (Participating or Control)</th>
<th>Total Minutes Time</th>
<th>Minutes Staff-Initiated Time</th>
<th>Minutes Learner-Initiated Time</th>
<th>When in Session Learners Spoke</th>
<th>Center Adult Learners Are Generally Newcomers (0-1 yrs in AE) or Experienced (2+ yrs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session</td>
<td>Condition (Participating or Control)</td>
<td>Total Minutes Time</td>
<td>Minutes Staff- Initiated Time</td>
<td>Minutes Learner- Initiated Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>beginning</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>beginning</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>throughout</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>end</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>Newcomer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adult learners in participating centers (41%) spoke more often than those in control centers (20%). Adult learners tended to initiate more (39%) when they were in centers where adult learners were primarily newcomers (i.e., on average adult learners had been in adult education for less than two years) than in centers with experienced adult learners (i.e., two or more years in adult education, 25%).

**Staff Initiations Versus Adult learner Initiations**

Not surprisingly, most interactions were initiated by the teacher or staff member. Usually staff initiations outnumbered the adult learner initiations. For example, in an English language class, a teacher initiated more than 20 exchanges while adult learners initiated two, meaning there were two instances when an adult learner contributed a comment that was not elicited by the teacher. Similarly, in an ABE/ASE class, while approximately 35 verbal responses came from adult learners, only four were not initiated by the teacher, and most were responses to teacher questions. In a large group tutoring session, it was often hard to discern who was initiating discussion; however, it appeared that tutors were doing most of the talking.

In an English language class with a public speaking focus, the adult learner presentation might be considered a learner-initiated exchange, but it was led much like the model of traditional teaching and the adult learner presenter engaged the other learners but did not initiate engagement with the teachers. In a student council meeting at a family literacy center, adult learners appeared to have the highest rate of initiation of any session. The observer noted the high number of suggestions that staff also made at the meeting.
Adult learner responses and initiations generally increased as time went on during a session. Adult learners would seem to “loosen up” and become more interactive nearer the end of a session than at the beginning. Part of that dynamic may reflect the structure of a class, with more interaction being planned later in the session. Another aspect could be that adult learners and teachers were gradually becoming more comfortable with being observed.

**Nature of Teacher-Initiated Exchanges**

Often staff in a class setting would explain materials while adult learners listened and sometimes took notes. When staff would initiate an exchange, it was usually in the form of asking questions. The majority of questions generally required a prescribed “right” answer such as answering something for a workbook exercise. This question-answer style was seen especially in two English language classes. Sometimes teachers even posed questions to which the class would give the “correct” answer in unison, as observed in videos of both English language classes and ABE/ASE classes. Other times the teacher would have adult learners read something aloud together or individually or repeat a phrase after the teacher. Reading in unison was used not only in the English language classes, but also for a lesson in inferences for mostly native English-speaking ABE learners, where the teacher had the adult learners repeat constructivist principles about reading.

For more open-ended questions, teachers might ask for an example, like sharing “what makes you nervous” and “what makes you feel tired” in an English language class. At other times, a teacher might ask for an example of a concept from a person’s life. For example, the teacher instructing on inferences in an ABE/ASE class asked adult learners to list items in their homes from which other learners could make inferences.

In an English language class, adult learners were told to prepare to answer mock job interview questions. The teacher told them to “take a minute to prepare”, but she gave them about 20 seconds to do so. The teacher then role-played the part of the potential employer, interviewing each of the adult learners in turn. Adult learners in the interview session seemed to need a lot of prompting.

Adult learners were rarely asked for their opinions. Occasionally, they might be asked for an example from their lives. Only in student council meetings and a meeting sharing local university research results, were adult learners observed being asked for their opinions on something. For the meeting with research results, the observer noted that the director of the program worked at soliciting adult learner opinions, but adult learners seemed reluctant at first to provide their opinions.

Humor was a part of most classes but was usually initiated by the teacher. The teacher would make a humorous comment about themselves or situations that adult learners might face, and the learners would laugh. An exception was a student council meeting, where learners initiated most of the humor. Nonetheless, the humor generally added warmth to the classes, helping the adult learners relax a bit more with the teachers.

Despite teachers driving most of the interactions, they generally communicated caring toward adult learners. Teachers worked at responding to learner needs although some teachers were not always consistent in giving attention to adult learners in certain areas of the room. Some teachers were less likely to notice the adult learners on their right or their left. One teacher seemed to be less engaged with ABE learners at a round table in the back of the room than with those near her.
**Adult Learner-Initiated Exchanges**

Adult learners tended to initiate significantly fewer exchanges. Most would sit quietly and listen to the instruction. Many would take notes. In a video of an English language class, adult learners waited quietly with the teacher before the class began. (However when the teacher left the room, they did speak to each other). Most often when adult learners spoke, it was to respond to a question or task posed by the teacher. In one session, adult learners seemed to share more freely in response to the adult learner presentation than they did to the teacher-initiated exchanges.

When an adult learner initiated an interaction, it was usually to ask a question about the lesson being presented. Sometimes, an adult learner would insert a humorous comment. On one occasion, an adult learner quipped, “nice to meet you,” when a fellow learner introduced herself before a brief presentation. Often, there would be one to three adult learners who would consistently respond to the teacher’s questions, while others would stay silent unless specifically prompted to speak. At times, other adult learners would seem to be emboldened after an adult learner initiated a question. For example, in an ABE/ASE class, one vocal adult learner, who had given many answers earlier, asked the teacher to give an example of a strong inference, which seemed to inspire an adult learner from the back table (who had been very quiet) to speak up and ask how to make an inference “strong” which had been judged “weak” a few minutes earlier by the teacher.

Usually in classes, adult learners who initiated an exchange would primarily interact with the teacher, but on occasion they would directly engage with other learners. Most such interactions were informal side conversations. However, in a few cases, adult learners would dialogue with each other as part of the class session. It was noticeable that adult learners would be less reluctant to offer a response when a fellow learner posed questions. Adult learners seemed to respond well to other adult learners’ leadership and initiation.

**Relationships**

Overall, the relationships between most staff and most adult learners appeared warm. Adult learners usually expressed liking their teachers, and would smile and laugh at jokes. Teachers appeared to express genuine caring for their adult learners and about their day-to-day lives. For example, at the beginning of an English language class, a teacher indicated that she knew about the circumstances of the adult learners’ lives, and they would share their circumstances with her. One adult learner related about her deceased spouse, and after the class, another adult learner stopped by with a gift and told the teacher about her brother dying of cancer. In an adult learner council meeting, an observer noted in her written comments that adult learners and staff participated in a holiday gift exchange as equals.

**Program Information**

*Key Findings: Programs had an average size of 400. From 2011-12 to 2013-14, annual hours per adult learner stayed approximately the same, 48 hours. The number of program administrators stayed steady, the number of instructors fluctuated, and the number of volunteers decreased. Program data on core outcomes indicated decreasing learning gains percentages and fluctuating high school equivalency/diplomas and postsecondary entry rates from 2011-12 to 2013-14. Programs generally relied on nearby resources to fund their programs. From 2013-14 to 2014-15 the average reading level for ELLs increased from High Beginning ESL to Low Intermediate ESL (d = .68). In contrast, scores for ABE/ASE learners were highly correlated from 2013-14 to 2014-15 (r = 0.75) and stayed an average High Intermediate ABE.*
Sixteen programs involved in the evaluation reported overall enrollment and attendance data for their programs and, if collected, for the adult learners in ALLIES. Most of the programs also reported annual data on staffing, learner outcomes, and learner workforce status data. They also supplied sources of funding and described how they recruited adult learners to the program. Where available, programs provided standardized test data in Reading, Mathematics, or ESL Listening for adult learners involved in ALLIES. Program-level statistics for 2011-12 through 2013-14 are displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4. Program-level Statistics in 16 ALLIES Programs, 2011-12 through 2013-14**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average enrollment</td>
<td>380.2</td>
<td>400.6</td>
<td>419.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance per enrollee</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total employed adults</td>
<td>2493</td>
<td>1419</td>
<td>1382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning gains %</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total HSE/diplomas</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total postsecondary entry</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total paid staff</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total administrators</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total instructors</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total volunteers</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Programs ranged in size from approximately 30 to 1,700 adult learners, with an average size of 400. Average enrollment tended to increase slightly from 2011-12 to 2013-14. After 2011-12, annual hours per adult learner stay approximately the same, 48 hours. The number of adult learners who were employed decreased from nearly 2,500 to nearly 1,400 during three years.

Staffing information was provided as well and is displayed in Table 4. The number of program administrators stayed steady, the number of instructors fluctuated, and the number of volunteers decreased. Program data on core outcomes indicated decreasing learning gains percentages and fluctuating high school equivalency/diplomas and postsecondary entry rates from 2011-12 to 2013-14.

Programs generally relied on nearby resources to fund their programs. Major sources of program funding were local or regional government or non-profit grants and federal or state adult education funds. Programs relied most frequently (n = 24) on non-education state agencies, city or county government, faith communities, or non-profit funding to source program needs. A second major source of funding was national or local foundations (n = 18). Four programs also received support from local corporate sponsors. Eight programs counted on federal AEFLA funds, and five relied on state adult education funding. Six programs held events or fundraisers to gain needed funds for their program, and four programs relied on private donations.

To recruit adult learners, programs looked to local agencies, print advertising, and word of mouth. Contacts with and referrals from local agencies was the most frequent method (n = 20). Advertising services via flyers, brochures, bookmarks, billboards, and newspaper ads was also popular (n = 17). Sixteen programs relied on word of mouth referrals from other adult learners, families, friends, and neighbors. Less prominent recruitment methods were online information (n = 7), media ads or PSAs (n = 6), and outreach to local schools (n = 5), to colleges (n = 4), and to employers (n = 2). Two programs also recruited learners via fundraising activities.
Adult learner standardized test scores in Reading, Mathematics, and ESL Listening were collected from 2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14, and 2014-15 where available. Overall adult learners increased in Reading from 2013-14 to 2014-15. Increases represented growth in scores for English language learners rather than in scores of ABE/ASE learners. The average reading level for ELLs increased from High Beginning ESL to Low Intermediate ESL ($t = 4.4, p < .001, d = .68$). In contrast, scores for ABE/ASE learners were highly correlated from 2013-14 to 2014-15 ($r = 0.75$) and stayed an average High Intermediate ABE. Math levels for ABE/ASE learners and Listening levels for ELLs could not be compared from 2013-14 to 2014-15 because of small cell sizes (19 math tests and 9 Listening tests in both years). Year-to-year score comparisons by condition were not possible. Programs that tracked it also supplied monthly adult learner attendance from November 2013 through November 2014. On average, hours of attendance increased from the late fall through mid-spring, then decreased over the summer months before rising again in the early fall (see Figure 18). Four programs provided annual hours for the academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15. Adult learners in these programs averaged 80 hours per year. Baseline attendance data will be compared with Year 2 attendance on a program-by-program basis.

**Figure 18.** Adult Learner Average Monthly Attendance, November 2013 to November 2014

Conclusions and Recommendations

The adult learner quoted in the title of this paper stated: “I expect so much from this [project], because it’s a big and excellent opportunity for my future, because I’m going to be a leader. And I’m going to have more opportunities.” In order to begin to understand what this “big and excellent opportunity” entails, data from potential adult learner leaders in the first year were analyzed. This paper contributed baseline findings that add to the extremely limited knowledge base on learner leadership. It also identified leadership characteristics and perceptions and assessed baseline critical thinking and writing approaches of potential leaders, in anticipation of later evaluation outcomes.

Year 1 findings from ALLIES provide a picture of adult learners and their 21 programs in seven states. The 306 adult learners and 67 staff work in a variety of settings and programs of different sizes and demographic makeup – from rural Florida and Kansas to urban New Jersey and Texas. What stand out most from these findings are the similarities – that is, when considered by condition, the similarities among adult learners far outweighed the differences. Participating and control learners did not differ significantly in Year 1 in:

- Program services that helped them learn best
- The extent of progress they made in the program
- Awareness of funding sources for the program
Knowing who made decisions about changes and implemented them
- Comfort with adult learners being leaders
- Perceptions of their own organizational skills
- Perceptions of the value of diversity
- How involved they felt with the program
- How determined they felt about learning
- Most attributes associated with leadership
- Nearly all critical thinking skills that were assessed (enquiry, reasoning, information processing, decision making, and problem solving)
- All writing skills that were assessed (metacognitive strategy use, checking strategy, capacity belief, contextual belief)

Staff responses to baseline surveys tended to vary little by condition. Like adult learners, they held generally positive perceptions of their programs and of leadership. Rapport among adult learners and staff appeared genuine and almost universal in programs. While staff and adult learners responding to surveys had differing levels of comfort with adult learner leadership and disparate beliefs in adult learner post-program involvement, their experiences of the program generally yielded corresponding perceptions, which seldom differed by condition.

Given these similarities, the evaluator makes the following recommendations for ALLIES’ final year:

1. Complete data collection for Year 2 no later than summer 2016.
2. Review ALLIES project descriptions and report on the characteristics of participating adult learner leaders in those projects.
3. Controlling for Year 1 levels, ascertain growth in participating adult learners, in contrast with control learners, from 2014-15 to 2015-16. Where sample sizes permit, growth needs to be measured employing survey responses, assessment scores, observational change, and from program documentation. Examine participating adult learner attendance and reading assessment patterns from Fall 2013 through the end of data collection Analyze observation data from 2015-16 qualitatively and by interaction interval.
4. Analyze and report on connections between survey responses and assessment scores as identified in Year 1 findings.
5. Assess growth in staff survey responses by condition from 2014-15 to 2015-16, as well as the extent of agreement between staff and adult learners.

References


Toso, B. W. & Grinder, E. (revised and resubmitted). Engaging parents in meaningful roles: The benefits of parent leadership activities for family, school, and community. Educational Policy.


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1 VALUEUSA has roots in the 1980’s Literacy Network. The National Institute for Literacy granted $35,000 in start-up funding in 1997-8 to establish VALUEUSA, with Paul Jurmo as its first administrator.

2 New Jersey originally had three programs, but one participating program dropped out before data collection, and a Pennsylvania program substituted as a control program. Connecticut had three programs initially, but the third program could not arrange for data collection in the baseline year. Texas originally had five programs, but one participating program dropped out before data collection; a control program later substituted.

3 Surveys will be available with written permission following the conclusion of the study.

4 Assessments are copyrighted by their respective developers and available online.

5 Multi-year data were not available in part because many programs were not required to test adult learners at all and in part because adult learners were not in the program in prior years. These reasons impacted control programs more frequently than participating programs; therefore comparisons could not be made.

6 The ALLIES trainings and projects started in fall 2014, so the period of attendance represents baseline data before the intervention occurred.