



R-Ally: Research Allies for Lifelong Learning

ALLIES Final Year Leadership Report:

Part 2, Qualitative **Executive Summary**

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VALUEUSA and Research Allies for Lifelong Learning released the [final year key quantitative findings](#) of the Adult Learner Leadership in Education Services (ALLIES) evaluation in September (Patterson, 2016). This report is the second in a series of final ALLIES reports. The first report highlighted the growth in skills and perceptions that 133 adult learners experienced between rounds of data collection. The current report's comparisons focus on survey comments on gains and contributions 80 participating adult learner leaders reported making in leadership projects. Many of these leaders were English language learners; their words are presented here as they wrote them. Adult learners are given pseudonyms to acknowledge their uniqueness as individuals without violating confidentiality of their identities. The report also shares insights on learner gains and contributions from 21 staff members.

Following training in leadership from VALUEUSA, participating adult learners and staff identified, planned, and implemented a leadership project. Twelve groups undertook leadership projects of one of three types: fundraising, awareness, or communications. Five fundraising projects generally had as a goal raising funds to benefit the program or purchase needed materials. Raising awareness was the goal of five leadership projects, which focused on outreach, local neighborhoods, or staff awareness. Two projects focused on communications, either in the program or in the community.

The vision VALUEUSA had for the ALLIES evaluation projected that adult learners would gain knowledge and skills by participating in leadership training and project activities. In addition to growth in leadership skills, VALUEUSA anticipated adult learner leaders would show growth in skills in collaboration, organizational skills, knowledge of the organizational structures in adult education programs, communication skills, and overall critical thinking skills.

Participant Changes

As they wrote about their experiences, learner leaders described a wide range of changes in action or behavior, in knowledge or skills, or in attitudes or feelings. Changes in actions or behaviors included: getting involved, helping with specific project activities, sharing opinions and ideas, getting organized, or applying previous knowledge in new ways. About getting involved, adult learner Hermione wrote, "I learnt that to be a leader you have to participate in projects, and also have to be a

strong leader in what you do, to build your project.” Leadership projects that focused on outreach offered further opportunities for adult learners to help in specific ways. Enrique explained, “We help the project this [year] contributing with the distribution and publishing of pamphlets and flyers in our city and community and inviting [friends] to be tutors.”

At meetings and throughout the course of their projects, adult learner leaders learned to share their opinions and ideas. “You need to [speak] up and say what’s on your mind,” wrote Jake, who worked in an awareness project. During her fundraising project, Lorene shared, “I learned how to work together. To come in with ideas and conclusions to get help for the thing we would need.” Working in a leadership project required organization. Beatriz noted that she “learned how to become a leader. How to plan events [and] organize papers.” Rufia, a leader in an awareness project, applied previous knowledge in new ways. “I learned how to work in a group and how to manage a group of people.” She also “learned about the organization by participating in the leadership project in the past year.”

Other changes in action or behavior include finding voice, listening to and respecting others, telling others about the program, and teaching or mentoring others. For a few learners, finding voice was part of actively engaging in outreach, either within the program or externally. “I stood and told the rest of the students about what we were doing,” wrote Eleanor, as she worked on a fundraising project. “I learned how to communicate with others.” She added that she realized “that I have a voice in my community. And I learned how to make my opinion count and my voice heard.” In a separate fundraising project, Marcie learned “how to listen to others [and] pay attention to details, not putting away others’ idea.” Part of learning respect is to value the important contributions others can make to a group. She noted that “[everyone] is very important in discussion...Also it is very [important] to be respectful to other and don’t let others feel less important.”

In some leadership projects, outreach to other adult learners or to the community in general was explicitly part of an awareness effort that the group had decided on; in others, sharing about the program was an added benefit of the project work. For example, Antoinette explained how she contributed “to the leadership project in the past year by putting the word out that the program really is a great program.” As part of their leadership projects, several adult learners described taking on a role as peer tutor or mentor. Patricia saw her mentoring role as helping “classmates and student council members to being involved in our project.” She observed, “Trying to help others and teaching/guiding other people usual[ly] helps you to learn or reinforce what you are trying to teach or transmit.”

Adult learners reported gaining collaboration skills. Francesca emphasized sharing responsibilities during collaboration: “I learned how to share [responsibilities]... with others, and together make a [successful] work.” Gaining organizational skills was the most prominent theme among learner leaders. Many described how they learned to organize themselves, put their ideas in order, and plan components of the project step by step. Not only did they learn how to organize themselves and the project, but many learned more about how the program was organized and how to work within its structure. During his project, Chase “learned to get a problem solved or to make changes that you have to find out [who’s] responsible for the change and get as close to the source as you can to make those changes happen.”

“I learned that I have a voice in my community. And I learned how to make my opinion count and my voice heard.” -- Eleanor

Encouraging others to share ideas and opinions was another skill participants gained during their projects. Michael emphasized knowing “how to listen to other [people’s] ideas and work with others.” His peer on the same project, Ridge, remarked, “It helped me open my eyes to see that [everybody’s] opinions actually do matter.” Participating adult learners described learning skills that contributed to how they might continue to learn in the future, such as getting experience in new areas of learning, learning to work with others, learning about the environment, and learning to use a computer. Teresa wrote about gaining experience in their fundraising project: “I gained knowledge... I gained experience.”

As adult learner leaders changed behaviors and gained skills in leadership projects, many reported changes in their attitudes. These attitudinal changes seem to reflect the depth of experience learners went through while participating, and they speak to the richness and meaningfulness of the project interactions and activities. Learners reported insights on collaboration and gains in confidence. Wyatt, for example, gained new insight into making compromises while collaborating with others in the center: “I learned how important compromising can be.”

An instructor on a communications project wrote, “Our students gained and learned many things from this project, but I think the most important thing they gained was confidence about what they could do.” Leader Patricia’s self-confidence soared as she was selected as adult learner of the year in her state and won a nursing scholarship: “So I learnt how far you can go when you are committed to reach your goals.” Nicole realized gains in self-confidence during a fundraising project: “I gain a lot of confidence in school and the work place knowing that I can achieved anything through hard work.”

In addition to changes in attitudes, many adult learners experienced changes in their feelings as they worked on leadership projects – feelings about the adult education program, about leadership in general and the project specifically, and about themselves as leaders. Several adults expressed gratitude for the program or strove to give back by sharing their feelings about the program with others. Edward was eager to “tell others about the program, how important it is and much they can [achieve].” Bertha had strong feelings about her project. “Our project was amazing. [It’s] still happening,” she gushed. “I’m so happy to be part of our newsletter.”

Effects in Programs and Workplaces

Changes in behavior, in knowledge or skills, in attitudes or feelings can be anticipated to explain effects occurring in leadership projects. Effects explain the circumstances surrounding the outcomes of leadership projects. One important effect was extra funding for the program. Chad related that his leadership group “worked together to organize an [awareness] event to help gain funding for the center.”

“I gained better performance at work... I am happy to be manager now.” -- Jorge

In Betsy’s fundraising project, as she “got donations” to refurbish the center, she learned “how to help our school.” Another effect adult learners described on their programs was an infusion of new ideas from adult learners. In Anna’s leadership project she contributed “ideas to help the program.”

Although most leadership projects did not explicitly relate to employment or workforce preparation, adult learners described how gains from leadership projects spilled over into helping them get jobs, work with or manage others on the job,

and build businesses. Jorge felt he gained “better performance at work.” He added, “I am happy to be manager now” at his workplace. Another benefit adult learner leaders noticed from their leadership projects was group cohesiveness. Adults cited the benefits of teamwork and the closeness they felt. Paz remembered, “It is very necessary [to have] the communication to work in a good team and obtain good results.” The soft skills learned in leadership projects connected with useful workplace skills for these learners.

Evaluation

As they reported gains and contributions, adult learner leaders more often evaluated their experiences positively than negatively. The themes presented in this report offer much detail and description of the rich experiences that adult learners underwent in leadership projects. Even though many learners appeared to struggle with writing in English or with communicating their points clearly, most participants had much to say and many insights to share. Their writing was positive overall and communicated how meaningful leadership projects tended to have been to their peers and themselves.

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