A ProLiteracy Research Brief

Student Recruitment: A Review of the Research

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Learner recruitment has been a longstanding concern of adult basic education (ABE) programs. It involves identifying individuals who need and would benefit from the services that adult education provides. Recruitment is a particularly important activity because the population of potential adult learners is largely unreached, estimated to be near 90% (Patterson, 2018). Recruitment requires understanding the motivations that contribute to and the obstacles that prevent individuals from enrolling in programs. Adult education providers must be intentional, systematic, creative, and persistent in their recruitment approaches. They must also find attractive and compelling ways to encourage learners to take advantage of the opportunities that are offered.

This *Research Brief* describes findings drawn from the research base and highlights key practices and strategies that can be used to recruit ABE learners. In addition to summarizing the research on recruitment, this *Brief* also includes recruitment strategies developed in other fields that serve similar populations and concludes with links to recruitment resource guides and toolkits.

Getting Started on Recruitment: Collecting Data

As programs seek participants, it is important to engage with prospective learners and understand their motivations for enrolling (Martin, 1989, Patterson, 2018). A key strategy here is to collect targeted data (e.g., through qualitative interviews and focus groups or community surveys and questionnaires) in order to make strategic recruitment decisions. The focus here is on understanding prospective learners' community contexts and the driving factors that may encourage and inhibit participation. Although valuable, collecting relevant data for recruitment can be resource intensive, and it may not be practical for programs to engage in multiple information-gathering strategies. Therefore, it is important for staff to prioritize what information to collect and make strategic decisions about how it will be used.

- **Learn about potential ABE learners**
  A first consideration is to focus on a target recruitment audience. Martin (1989) suggest examining three variables: geographic (e.g., distance from program site), demographic (e.g., age, occupation, income), and psychographic (e.g., values, attitudes). With this knowledge in hand, they recommend marketing that is specifically targeted to reach prospective students according to selected variables. Before actively

recruiting, programs should collect data with potential students, instructors, and employers. Such interviews can help programs understand prospective learners' needs and interests, gain a better understanding of who might want to enroll, and identify the best methods of communicating with potential participants (Caffarella and Dafron, 2013; Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010; Cross, 1981).

■ Learn about potential learners' motivations and goals

Learning more about potential and current program participants' goals and why they would consider enrolling in a program can help staff better understand potential learner populations and focus recruitment campaigns on relevant goals (Caffarella and Dafron, 2013; Cross, 1981). Current participants can provide insight into ways to recruit others with similar backgrounds and ambitions. Patterson (2018) also points to the importance of knowing more about non-participants' backgrounds (e.g., employment, previous education, work and family responsibilities) to understand what might compel them to engage.

■ Learn more about the community

It is important to learn more about what program aspects are especially of interest to the community. Meeting with community organizations (e.g. neighborhood revitalization projects, faith-based initiatives, community action programs) is another way to better understand the target population and how ABE programs can address their needs (Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010; Cross, 1981). For example, addressing a strategic community goal (e.g., improving a crime-ridden neighborhood) or a desire to have more knowledge about a specific issue (e.g., a major business closing down) could motivate adults to join programs (Prins and Frey, 2016). Framing messaging around

identified issues can be an effective recruitment strategy. Understanding community needs might be more important for new programs; however, established programs should not neglect periodic research in this area. If changes are tracked over time, programs can address the evolving needs of their community.

Employing Recruitment Strategies: Getting the Word Out

Recruitment strategies range from spreading program information through current and former students to drawing on formal studies that inform mass-marketing campaigns. Programs should employ a variety of recruitment strategies to reach the largest pool of participants. Specific strategies may be site-specific, but the approaches discussed here can be adapted for most any context.

■ Utilize word of mouth

Fostering interpersonal connections between learners and potential learners is one of the most effective ways to recruit (Goto et al., 2009; Martin, 1989). When adult learners share stories about program involvement, positive experiences, and benefits, potential learners often feel more comfortable and motivated to enroll (Goto et al., 2009; Martin, 1989). Marketing strategies that encourage currently enrolled learners to spread the word about the value of an ABE program are especially effective. Programs can harness the power of learner experiences by making brochures using learner photos and short testimonials or success stories. Current and former learners could talk to potential learners about their experiences at community events and open houses. Simply encouraging current participants to invite friends or family members to classes can also help. It is obviously important to ensure high quality program offerings that will attract students as word of services spreads (Michael and Hogard, 1996).

Diversify marketing campaigns

Marketing campaigns and materials need to be carefully planned and relevant to the target population. Campaigns should establish program identity and clearly show potential learners how services can help them to get started and to achieve their educational and/or employment goals. Programs should use community research to customize marketing in order to reach potential learners. Strategies recommended in published research and toolkits (see resources below) include organizing marketing campaigns geared to the needs, interests, and cultural identities of communities. In addition, advertisements must be culturally relevant and translated into potential learners' languages. Use of flyers, local TV news and radio advertisements, social media, and/or emails/texts is recommended. Employing multiple marketing strategies can help programs maximize their reach.

Enlist community partners

Working with businesses and community organizations provides avenues for both program recruitment and potential employment opportunities for adult learners (Caffarella and Dafron, 2013). Community partnerships are crucial for focusing recruitment efforts (Caffarella and Dafron, 2013; Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010; Patterson, 2018). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) makes partnerships with local workforce organizations especially important. These can be leveraged for recruitment purposes. Specifically, potential learners may want to participate in a workforce training program but need adult education services to succeed. Conversely, adult education programs that advertise connections to employment opportunities may also be able to recruit adults who need a high school diploma to pursue those opportunities. Other community partners that serve the target population (e.g. social service organizations, libraries, homeless shelters, and foodbanks) can also help recruit and refer potential participants. It is critical for ABE programs to routinely meet with these organizations so that partners are familiar with their services and can encourage individuals to enroll. Because partners are likely to experience employee turnover, ABE staff should check in regularly and establish multiple contacts with them.

Initiating and Maintaining Enrollment: Focusing on Continuous Improvement

An important element of recruitment is ensuring that programs are as attractive to prospective learners as possible. Research highlights two ways to increase program appeal. The first is to use recruitment materials and marketing events to articulate the ways in which the program addresses barriers to participation. Second is to engage in ongoing program evaluation and regularly assess recruitment efforts. These activities should be data driven and improvement oriented.

Address potential participation barriers

Students may be more likely to enroll and sustain participation in ABE programs when needs are met and barriers are addressed (Prins & Schafft, 2009; Sandlin; 2004; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Recruitment materials should reflect this effort. To understand and address barriers, Patterson (2018) highlights the three types of participation barriers identified by Cross (1981, p. 99): situational (e.g., health conditions, transportation, childcare), dispositional (e.g., self-perceptions, attitudes), and institutional (e.g., program schedule, formats for instruction, etc.). Organizational knowledge specific to the community can inform program design and services to help manage these barriers and allow more interested learners to engage. For instance, family responsibilities are a common deterrent to participation; advertising childcare options (associated with the program or otherwise) may attract learners (Chase-Lansdale, et al., 2019; Patterson, 2018).

■ **Evaluate program and update recruitment plans**

Cross (1981) proposed a "chain of response" evaluation framework: educators have the responsibility to provide high quality options for adults and then let learners choose the options that work best for them. Within the model, learners self-evaluate and consider the importance of their goals and how education will support their attainment. If assessments are positive, the adult is likely to continue to participate. For example, if a woman with young children desires to attend ABE classes as a step toward better employment, she will likely weigh the reputed quality of an ABE program against the possible inconvenience of finding childcare while she attends classes. If she does not feel the program will meet her needs, the difficulty of finding childcare may outweigh her felt need for the classes. Having program evaluation procedures in place not only increases the likelihood of retaining learners because it leads to continuous program improvement, it also helps staff take stock of instructional, programmatic, and recruitment strategies and determine which ones help attract current students or would appeal to new ones.

Because demographics, funding, and needs frequently change, it is necessary to update recruitment strategies. Programs should use feedback from participants and other stakeholders to do so (Cafferella and Dafron, 2013; Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010). Adult learners often have ideas, based on their experiences, which can improve recruitment strategies to capture potential learners' attention, form connection points, and inspire them to act. Therefore, it is important to track how learners found out about the program and frequently ask for input on recruitment materials and messaging.

Recruitment Research from Other Fields

Much of the research on adult education recruitment was published in the 1980s and 1990s. Although still relevant, more recent research from other related fields such as out-of-school youth and social service programs offers ideas that may help adult education programs expand and implement successful recruitment campaigns.

■ **Offer related support services**

Providing and publicizing related support services can be a helpful recruitment tool. For example, researchers working with out-of-school youth documented the effectiveness of offering mental health services alongside educational programming (Gillard and Witt, 2008; https://youth.workforcegps.org). Returning adult learners may also face mental health challenges (Waller, Bovil, & Pitt, 2011). Among other services, mental health support could be especially attractive to prospective adult learners. Programs might consider seeking partner organizations that offer mental health or other needed supports (e.g. medical services, financial literacy, substance abuse counseling) to help engage adult learners. Likewise, programs offering these services typically have participants who would benefit from enrollment in ABE programs.

■ **Provide resources for reengaging in education**

Creating toolkits to help learners return to classes after time away from school is another recruitment strategy used by youth programs (CLASP, 2015). ABE programs could adopt this strategy and provide resources geared to adults on topics such as overcoming fears related to returning to school, brushing up on study or time management skills, or investigating options for child-

care or transportation. These kinds of resources acknowledge and address challenges many adults face when returning to school and may attract those who are reluctant due to dispositional or situational barriers (Cross, 1981, p. 99).

■ Appeal to psychological motivations

Some programs are using psychologically based concepts to recruit participants. These include "present bias," weighing current concerns more heavily than future ones, and "loss aversion," feeling that the anticipated losses associated with participation are greater than potential gains. To counteract these kinds of impediments, the Paycheck Plus program used a loss-aversion strategy and sought to reduce present bias to recruit and retain participants by offering supplemental income for participants if they met certain requirements (Dechausay, Anzelone, & Reardon, 2015). Programs used phrases such as "'With this postcard, $50 is yours,' 'Don't miss out!," and 'Only a few days left to claim your $50!'" (p. 9) in their recruitment materials to make participation benefits seem more concrete and immediate, and they reduced cognitive load through repeated reminders before appointments (OPRE, 2015). ABE programs could use these strategies by texting referrals about community events such as "Don't miss out on your opportunity to enroll in free ESL classes." Researchers also found that creating a checklist of steps for completing the program helped participants feel more accomplished. ABE programs could develop an enrollment checklist for potential recruits (e.g., intake, assessments, orientation, first class). Increased knowledge about the enrollment process and particulars about participating in the ABE program may help attract potential students and reduce anxiety about unknowns.

Resources/Toolkits

Although not necessarily extensively grounded in research, some states and organizations have developed tools and checklists that provide helpful recruiting tips and ideas. Below is a list of selected resources, links, and a summary of their contents. The recruitment strategies in these resources are discussed within this brief; however, these resources offer substantial detail about how to implement them.

- Information about forming recruitment partnerships with other organizations: Career Pathways Toolkit https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/CareerPathwaysToolkit2011.pdf

- Extensive information and links to practical resources for recruitment, including reflective questions for practitioners and programs: http://literacybasics.ca/learner-recruitment/

- Detailed ideas and checklists for recruitment plans and marketing:
  http://wvde.state.wv.us/abe/documents/Section7.pdf
  https://www.in.gov/dwd/files/Teacher%20Handbook.pdf
  https://mnliteracy.org/sites/default/files/learner_recruitment_ideas_-_updated_12.2014.pdf

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