

Perspectives on Persistence: A Review of the Research

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Learner persistence is a well-known concern for the adult basic education (ABE) field, and understandably so. Students may need many hours of instruction to meet educational goals or accountability benchmarks, yet programs consistently report that many students leave without achieving either (Kefallinou, 2009; Mellard et al., 2013; Porter et al., 2005). The research reviewed for this Brief suggests that there are two ways, broadly, that the field has viewed student persistence: a *control/prevent perspective* and an *acknowledge/accommodate perspective*. A control/prevent perspective sees low learner persistence as a problem that can be prevented by changing programs or learners. In contrast, an acknowledge/accommodate perspective suggests that low learner persistence will likely always be an issue, but may or may not need fixing, depending on the goals and circumstances of the individual learner. It also acknowledges that forces outside the control of either learners or programs often determine whether learners persist.

How practitioners define persistence informs the actions they take. Below I will briefly explain how persistence has been defined in the research, describe the two perspectives on persistence I found in the research, and suggest implications for practice.

Persistence Defined

Much of the research I reviewed defined persistence as continuous participation in a program until a goal is reached (e.g., Chande et al., 2015, 2017; Greenberg et al., 2013; Mellard et al., 2013; Sabatini et al., 2011; Ziegler et al., 2006). Other researchers have resisted defining persistence as requiring continuous participation and have suggested that many adult learners “stop out” of programs, only to re-enroll later (Belzer, 1998; Comings et al., 1999; Comings, 2007; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Schafft & Prins, 2009).

Neither of these can be claimed as the “true” definition of persistence. However, each definition suggests different solutions to the issue of low persistence: The former calls for a control/prevent approach, while the latter suggests an acknowledge/accommodate approach. Both approaches may offer promising interventions.

Control/Prevent: Stopping Dropout Before It Happens

Research that has studied learner persistence from a control/prevent perspective has generally attempted

to reduce dropout by (1) focusing on predictive learner characteristics and (2) making changes to programs that might help learners persist.

■ **Preventing Dropout by Increasing Learner Motivation**

A number of studies have created psychologically-based “profiles” of adult learners to predict who will and will not persist (Beder et al., 2006; Greenberg et al., 2013; Mellard et al., 2013; Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Shaw et al., 2015; Ziegler, et al., 2006). These studies are often grounded in the belief that factors like motivation, self-efficacy, and goal-directedness influence learner persistence. From this perspective, learner persistence would be improved by finding ways to increase learner motivation.

However, efforts to identify which aspects of motivation influence persistence in ABE have met with little success. One common belief is that previous negative school experiences undermine motivation to persist in ABE programs (Chande et al., 2015, 2017; Quigley, 2000; Windisch, 2016; Ziegler et al., 2006). Yet, after interviewing 150 adult learners, Comings et al. (1999) found that past experiences with school were not a determining factor in who persisted. Similarly, although persisting students reported that individual attributes, including motivation, were helpful (Reynolds & Johnson, 2014; Shaw et al., 2015), when persisters and non-persisters were compared statistically (Mellard et al., 2013; Ziegler et al., 2006), researchers found that none of the tested motivation-related variables were related to persistence. These findings indicate the limitations of increasing motivation as a solution to the issue of learner persistence.

■ **Preventing Dropout by Identifying Demographic Characteristics**

Another strand in the research attempts to identify demographic characteristics that

influence learner persistence. From this perspective, learner persistence might be improved by targeting programmatic interventions to groups that are more likely to drop out. In this research, older learner age emerged repeatedly as related to higher rates of persistence (Greenberg et al., 2013; Sabatini et al., 2011; Ziegler, et al., 2006); however, the difference in the mean ages of high and low persisters was relatively small, ranging from 3.66 years to 7.2 years. Additionally, one study found that non-native English speakers were more likely to persist, but learners receiving government-provided food assistance—a measure related to income—were less likely (Greenberg et al., 2013). Of particular interest to literacy programs, three studies found that lower reading assessment scores at intake were associated with greater persistence (Greenberg et al., 2013; Mellard et al., 2013; Sabatini et al., 2011), and one study found that high persisters were more likely to have self-reported learning difficulties (Ziegler et al., 2006). That these types of characteristics were found to influence persistence when motivation-related characteristics were not lends weight to the argument that persistence may be impacted by issues outside of learner or program control.

■ **Preventing Dropout Through Program Improvements**

The National Research Council (NRC, 2012) suggests that attention to the design of learning environments can improve adult learner persistence; however, a major limitation of the NRC recommendations is their grounding in studies of K-12 education and failure to take account of ABE program contexts or learners. Within the field, a number of studies have looked at how timing of classes, class size, type and intensity of orientation procedures and support services, and type and quality of teachers and classes might influence learner persistence (Chande, et al., 2015, 2017; Nash &

Kallenbach, 2009; Porter et al., 2005; Quigley, 2000; Shaw et al., 2015; Zacharakis, 2011).

These studies report mixed findings. Qualitative interviews and focus groups found that positive relationships with teachers were important to students who persisted, but it is unclear to what degree these relationships impacted those who did not persist (Shaw et al., 2015; Zacharakis, 2011). Porter et al. (2005), reporting on a four-year effort to improve persistence in nine library-based literacy programs, found that changes such as improved tutor training, increased use of computer assisted instruction, and expansion of social supports (such as on-site childcare and transportation funding) did little to increase the persistence rate of students. The authors concluded that the changes may not have gone far enough to be successful, particularly those related to social supports; they believed that the barriers students faced outside of class were possibly too great for library programs, which lacked dedicated social support staff, to meaningfully mitigate.

Other studies have reported some successes. Chande et al. (2015, 2017) found that sending texts with motivational messages or reminders slightly improved program attendance and completion rates. Although this intervention was inexpensive and took little administrative effort, its impact was relatively small. Nash and Kallenbach (2009) described the New England Adult Learner Persistence (NELP) Project, in which 18 programs sought to increase persistence by modifying procedures for intake and orientation, instruction, and counseling and peer support. Outcomes of these efforts varied, depending on the site and emphasis of the strategy implemented. Instructional improvements showed the greatest effect, with an average attendance rate increase of 16%.

Acknowledge/Accommodate: Supporting Students When Attrition Happens

Distinct from a control/prevent perspective is an acknowledge/accommodate perspective. From this perspective, some learners will always be leaving ABE programs, largely for two, sometimes interrelated, reasons: (1) they are subject to forces outside of learner or program control that prevent attendance and (2) persistence as defined by programs and policies is not meaningful to the learner. For example, Belzer (1998) found that learners who left an ABE program did not consider themselves dropouts; all reported a plan to return in the future. Furthermore, most attributed their leaving to circumstances beyond their control, such as jobs, health problems, and financial strain. A number of other studies have similarly described how structural forces like poverty, racial/ethnic discrimination, gender-based violence and inequality, housing instability, and lack of public transportation can influence adult learners' persistence (Albertini, 2009; Cuban, 2003; Horsman, 2006; Kefallinou, 2009; Lukes, 2014; Prins & Schafft, 2009; Schafft & Prins, 2009).

Additionally, some studies emphasize that learners themselves are the best decision-makers about their persistence. There are times when participation is no longer meaningful (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002); acknowledging this can position programs to work in partnership with learners to plan for departures and to re-engage learners when, and if, they are interested and able (Kefallinou, 2009; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009).

Three programs in the NELP project attempted to re-engage learners who had left the program; however, this was considered the least successful approach across the entire project (Nash and Kallenbach, 2009). Instead, the authors recommend discussing stopping out with learners and making re-engagement plans from the beginning of their enrollment. Kefallinou (2009) reports that addressing persistence in this way changed program procedures as well as how teachers responded to students.

As a result, the program saw small improvements in attendance rates, substantial improvement in program completion rates, and the deepening of relationships within the learning community.

Implications for Practice

Unfortunately, there is no formula for improving learner persistence. Given the complexity of the issue, it is likely that a range of approaches will be needed. What does seem clear is that external forces and demographic factors may be more likely to influence persistence than learner motivation or program

characteristics; this suggests the benefit of having policies that support students in stopping out and re-engaging. Discussing these policies with students *before* they stop out may have the greatest impact.

While studies have not demonstrated a link between learner motivation and persistence, improving persistence by modifying program characteristics has demonstrated some success. Importantly, the success or failure of these efforts was highly context-dependent. Because of the wide variation across ABE programs, the most appropriate recommendation for practice may be that programs

Table 1: Strategies to Address Persistence

Category	Specific Strategy
<p>Preventing Stop-Outs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust timing of classes to better accommodate learners’ schedules • Offer distance learning or hybrid learning that combines distance and face-to-face instruction • Utilize managed enrollment • Offer supports such as childcare, transportation, counselors, and social workers • Increase social engagement among learners and between learners and program (e.g., involve existing students in orientation and mentoring of new students, host events that include learners’ families, offer small-group learning instead of one-on-one tutoring) • Support learners in meaningful, realistic goal setting • Improve instruction through high-quality professional development and/or practitioner inquiry • Offer ongoing, formative feedback so learners can gauge their progress; include lists of competencies and learner self-assessments along with test scores • Send text messages of support/organizational reminders during program breaks
<p>Accommodating Stop-Outs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a program-wide definition of persistence that includes leaving/returning to class • Modify attendance policies to allow for leaving/returning • Address stopping out during orientation • Work with learners to develop at-home study plans and plans for returning • Develop resources for learners during stop-out periods: lend books, software, and other materials; share class homework; offer online learning and tutoring

develop context-specific responses using the action research process utilized in the NELP (Kefallinou, 2009; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). In this process, practitioners first built knowledge about persistence issues and strategies, and then they developed context-specific initiatives to improve persistence and assessed their results. This approach has the benefit of both supporting the development of nuanced responses to the needs of local learners and of being well-established as a highly successful model of professional development and program improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015).

However, some programs may feel ill-equipped to undertake action research. In these circumstances, practitioners might select from among strategies described in the research. These strategies are summarized in Table 1 on page 4.

Meaningfully supporting learners to persist is complex—any single strategy is unlikely to work by itself or be effective for all students. However, utilizing a range of strategies from both the control/prevent and the acknowledge/accommodate approaches to persistence can help programs develop effective responses for their local contexts.

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