Research Article

"What We Came For": Adult Learner Perspectives on Goals and Outcomes of Adult Foundational Education

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Abstract

Do U.S. adult learners really "get what they came for" in adult foundational education programs – and how do we measure the value of what they get? A pressing need exists to conduct return-on-investment research to make clear the benefits of learner investments in adult foundational education to funders and prospective partners. As U.S. researchers in the Evidence-Based Adult Education System, we conceptualized return-on-investment research to center on perspectives of adult learners who seek to meet their needs in adult foundational education programs (learner return-on-investment). To lay a foundation for learner return-on-investment analyses, in 2022 we conducted a survey of 793 adult learners to identify their goals and outcomes. This paper shares major survey results and offers four quantifiable priority areas that may be considered as topics for further study of learner return-on-investment. Priority areas include making a positive difference in the community, family support, learning outcomes, and career outcomes.

Keywords: adult learner, outcomes, return on investment, adult foundational education, E-BAES

Adult foundational education (AFE) is an emergent term that describes the U.S. adult education system providing participants with opportunities to learn English, improve literacy and numeracy skills, prepare to take a high school equivalency exam or seek a high school diploma, or gain workplace skills. The term was coined by Open Door Collective; see Rosen and Kennedy's (2022) explanation at https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/2022/05/adult-foundational-education. AFE programs may receive funds from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Title II, state, local, and philanthropic sources, or from a mixture of resources. They offer services to meet a range of critically important adult learning needs.

Nearly all AFE programs work with community partners to help adults gain access to employment opportunities, social services, healthcare, housing, family services, and further education. AFE program staff may also work to promote AFE's value to prospective adult learners and in their local communities.

Expanding outreach to and collaboration with prospective partners is a major goal of AFE nationally. It is a key strategy of the Open Door Collective, a national program of Literacy Minnesota (https://www.literacymn.org/OpenDoorCollective), in making the case that working together to meet learner needs holistically is more effective than working separately. In 2019, the Open Door Collective

organized the Evidence-Based Adult Education System (E-BAES) Taskforce to bring together researchers to plan and conduct research benefiting the AFE field. More than 30 U.S. AFE researchers, government officials, and practitioners in E-BAES share a vision to conduct research about AFE's value as a key mechanism for reducing poverty and increasing social and economic justice.

As part of fulfilling E-BAES' research agenda, members have been working to develop and conduct a national return-on-investment (ROI) study. Rigorous ROI studies are lacking in AFE, partly because of a chronic lack of research resources and because of the complexity of conducting ROI in this field (Kim & Belzer, 2021). Therefore, E-BAES undertook foundational work to prepare for a thorough and comprehensive ROI study that takes a different approach. Initially, the ROI workgroup began by looking broadly at what is already known about ROI in AFE to establish an ROI research design that meaningfully assesses its costs and benefits. However, rather than take a traditional economic approach, we have conceptualized ROI research to center on perspectives of adult learners who seek to meet their needs in AFE programs ("learner ROI") without sacrificing the rigor expected in traditional ROI research that informs national policy and practice.

We acknowledge that what funders (e.g., WIOA, state, and local programs) require is what AFE programs measure; however, those measures may not fully reflect what adult learners actually want/need when they decide to seek foundational skills. Nor do program measures consider costs that learners incur or returns they find meaningful. Centering an ROI study around adult learners' actual goals and outcomes offers an alternative approach to understanding AFE's value. Instead of starting with the usual ROI relationship between investment (i.e., what is costs to provide AFE programs) and measurable economic outputs (i.e., what individuals and society each gain economically from AFE), our research starts with a learner-centered focusby identifying what "returns" matter most to adult learners and employing their perspectives to inform the design of E-BAES' future learner ROI study.

To lay a foundation for learner ROI analyses, we conducted a survey aimed at identifying priorities and outcomes of adult learners who were enrolled in AFE programs. The purpose of this paper is to share major results from the survey in the context of ROI. The survey asked learners why they attend AFE along with their priorities for participation, and the outcomes of doing so. Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1999) and Teaching Skills that Matter (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2021) frameworks informed the survey design. We chose these frameworks because they prompted us to think about purposes for participation more broadly than WIOA's focus on workforce development and postsecondary outcomes. We developed four research questions to guide our thinking; these questions addressed learner representativeness, learner priorities for participation, learner outcomes, and variability in learner responses, as detailed in the Methods section.

Literature Review

This foundational research builds on a growing interest in evaluating the ROI of AFE. Federal initiatives supporting AFE programs were introduced as early as the 1960s, primarily focusing on providing basic skills and high school equivalency programs for disadvantaged adults. Over the years, federal investments, complemented by state support, have persisted through various legislative acts and programs, most recently the 2014 *A*dult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) as part of WIOA (Roumell et al., 2019). However, federal funding for AFE has gradually but significantly declined in adjusted dollars, and enrollment in AFE, especially for low-level learners, has decreased (Patterson, 2025). Consequently, there is a pressing need to investigate the efficacy and value of AFE programs using ROI and make the benefits of learner investments in AFE clear to funders and prospective partners.

By definition, ROI traditionally calculates the ratio of costs to benefits associated with a specific program. Prior major ROI studies in AFE include Hollenbeck and Huang's (2014) findings that adult basic education (ABE) was associated with modest increases in participants' average quarterly earnings and reduced reliance on unemployment benefits. Sum and colleagues (2012) found that adults completing a GED credential had 18% higher weekly earnings and were more likely to work more weeks and hours compared with those not completing high school, with combined earnings impacts close to 30%. McLendon and colleagues (2011) cited cost/benefit ratios of adult education in ten states

and noted benefits to the workforce and to learners' self-esteem, health, civic engagement, and families. Morgan and colleagues (2017) pointed to benefits for AFE participants, drawing from Reder's (2014a) experimental longitudinal study, which highlighted increases in income over time.

Extant literature has consistently emphasized diverse benefits associated with AFE participation, including economic gains and educational advancements. For example, engaging in AFE equips individuals with skills, knowledge, and certifications, which subsequently contribute to increased human capital via greater employment opportunities and earnings (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Hollenbeck & Huang, 2014; Morgan et al., 2017; Parker & Spangenberg, 2013; Reder, 2014; Sum et al., 2012).

Additionally, research demonstrates that adults participating in AFE programs experience improvements in foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy (Bingman et al., 1999; Kruidenier et al., 2010; Reder, 2014b, 2014c; Soliman, 2018). AFE programs also create opportunities for individuals to pursue valuable postsecondary education credentials (Reder, 2014c).

However, AFE's value is not only in building human capital. AFE programming is positively associated with personal, family, and social domains, fostering self-esteem, social inclusion, and improved health outcomes (Feinstein & Hammond, 2004; Panitsides, 2013; Soliman, 2018). Furthermore, AFE participation is related to developing social and political confidence, increasing cultural participation, and enhancing overall well-being (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020; Motschilnig, 2012).

Despite these benefits, conducting ROI research in AFE has its challenges (Kim & Belzer, 2021). A lack of long-term evaluations showing positive program impacts and a potential mismatch between program goals and offerings may hinder documenting, much less achieving, learners' desired outcomes. A second challenge is wide variation in AFE implementation; no one national approach to AFE exists (Kim & Belzer, 2021). Similarly, the many mechanisms of AFE programs to support learners in attaining outcomes cannot easily be accounted for in a national study of ROI. These challenges underline the diversity within AFE, encompassing a wide array of programs, formats, and variations in implementation and quality. Thus, understanding learners' goals and outcomes

is pivotal for aligning program offerings effectively with learner goals – and key for redefining learner ROI.

To develop a structure for investigating learner goals and outcomes, we drew on two learner-centered frameworks used to inform the design of AFE programming. First, Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1999), developed by the National Institute for Literacy and other partners, offers a broad-based perspective on skills adults need. Equipped for the Future serves as an inclusive skill framework that considers diverse adult learner roles as worker, parent, and citizen. Second, Teaching Skills That Matter (AIR, 2021) offers a recent framework identifying nine high-impact skills that can be transferred across five key topic areas of health, financial, and digital literacy as well as civic engagement and workforce preparation. TSTM notes the importance of integrating digital skills into learning and teaching transferable skills. Together, both frameworks account for varied domains in which adults operate and develop skills. The frameworks serve as a valuable starting point for guiding questions about learners' self-identified needs for and benefits of participation in AFE programs.

Both are critical in studying learner ROI as it focuses on learner-identified investments and returns. While this paper reports on survey results to inform ROI, a complete learner ROI study design has not yet been finalized. The final design will need to consider the challenges noted in Kim and Belzer (2021) and determine how learner goals and outcomes, as well as AFE program offerings and impacts, may be incorporated.

Methods

Research Questions

In conducting the Adult Learner Survey (ALS), we developed four research questions (RQ). The first RQ compares characteristics of survey respondents for representativeness of adult learners in federally funded programs that are required to report learner outcomes to the U.S. National Reporting System (NRS). The second and third RQs encompass adult learner participation priorities and outcomes. To help us better understand the context of adult learner reasons for and outcomes of participation, RQ4 considers responses among learners in various AFE program classifications.

1. How do demographic and background characteristics of adult learners responding to the survey compare with characteristics of U.S. adult learners in NRS-accountable programs overall?

2. What reasons do adult learners report for participating in AFE programs and how do they prioritize those reasons?

3. What learning, work, personal, family, and community outcomes do learners report as a result of participation in AFE programs?

4. How do learner reasons for participation and outcomes differ among five AFE program classifications?

Survey Instrument and Sample

The ROI workgroup conducted the ALS to address adult learners' AFE participation priorities and outcomes, along with their characteristics and background. The survey instrument, adapted from topics in Equipped for the Future (Stein, 1999) and TSTM (AIR, 2021), explored learners' AFE participation priorities and outcomes in learning, work, personal, family, and community domains. Sample questions included:

1. What did you hope to learn in adult education ... which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (response options included: to strengthen my skills [such as reading, writing, or math], to learn to speak and understand English as a new language, to earn a high school diploma (HSD) or take a GED or HiSET test, to know how to get online and use what is online for learning.)

2. How did you hope adult education would help prepare you for work...which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (response options included: to learn skills to keep the job I have, to figure out how to get along even better with others on a team, to prepare to take on new challenges at work, to learn skills for a new job, to learn skills to get a work certificate or license.)

3. What did you hope to get from adult education... which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (Response options included: to gain confidence in what I know, for myself, to keep myself healthy, to make my life even more satisfying.)

4. How did you hope adult education could help you in your family life...which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (response options included: to help me support my child(ren) to learn at home or in school, to make my parenting skills even better, to keep my family safe and healthy, to help meet my family's financial needs.)

5. How did you hope adult education could help you as a community member...which of these reasons did you go for, and which did you actually get? (Response options included: to become a U.S. citizen, to get informed and stay informed, to get ready to vote, to make a positive difference in my community.)

6. Which of these reasons (in each section) is *most* important to you?

The survey also asked whether the respondent was enrolled in an AFE program currently and, if so, the type of AFE program. Demographic and background items collected data on education attainment, gender, age, U.S. state of residence, children under 18, health, disabilities, and employment status.

We developed the survey in August and September 2022 and field tested it with several adults, including English learners, in California, Massachusetts, and Virginia. To ensure those without internet access (e.g., adults in prisons or jails or adults in remote areas) could take the survey, we developed a paper-based survey and an electronic survey. We mailed paper surveys to adult learners and/or AFE program staff on request and included self-addressed, stamped envelopes to boost response. To include a wider audience of adult learners with limited English skills, the survey was translated into Spanish by a bilingual Spanish-English speaker from New York and reviewed for accuracy and clarity by two bilingual speakers from California. Translating into other languages was considered yet not pursued due to resource limitations.

Drawing on connections among E-BAES taskforce members, including multiple national and statewide organizations and urban and rural programs, we employed a snowball sampling method (Emerson, 2015) to recruit 871 adult learners who were participating or had participated in various AFE programs throughout the United States. Of 871 adult learners taking the survey, 793 were participating in AFE at the time; results are based on

these 793 adult learners. We administered the survey in October and November 2022. Those providing informed consent and completing the survey were entered into a drawing for one of two $100 gift cards. We downloaded and cleaned survey data and conducted analyses.

Analyses

We employed descriptive analyses to address the first three RQs. For RQ1, we compared demographic and background characteristics of ALS respondents descriptively with adults in the NRS to gauge the extent to which the survey sample represented a recent population of U.S. adult learners in AFE programs. RQ2 and RQ3 data were compiled from frequencies and percentages representing 793 adults participating in AFE. For RQ4, we conducted a latent class analysis (LCA; Sinha et al., 2021). LCA is a type of structural equation modeling that can be used to identify latent, or hidden, classifications from continuous and categorical data. Next, we determined the best-fitting model based

on learning- and work-related goals of 793 survey respondents as determined through Akaike and Bayesian model fit statistics (i.e., AIC, BIC). Once the best fitting model was selected, we analyzed learning and work-related goals as well as outcomes for each class. We determined outcomes learners in each class made that were expected (i.e., they came in with an expressed goal in an area and had an outcome in that area) and unexpected (i.e., they did not originally express a goal in an area but had an outcome in that area anyway) from program participation.

Results

Adult Learner Survey Demographics and Comparisons with National Reporting System Data

We begin by presenting demographic descriptives of ALS survey respondents according to the program in which they participated, as displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics of Survey Respondents by Program Type

ALS Demographics by Program Type									
		Overall	Basic Skills	Career Training	HSD/ HSE	English Learning	College Prep	Family Literacy	Sig.
Overall	N	793	117	147	174	305	32	18	
	%	100	14.8	18.5	21.9	38.5	4.0	2.3	
Gender (n=774)	Female	64.1	50.4	45.1	67.1	77.8	62.5	47.1	**
	Male	35.9	49.6	54.9	32.9	22.2	37.5	52.9	
Median age (n=788) (Range)	34	34	32	30	39	29	34		
	(16-100)	(17-88)	(18-100)	(16-99)	(18-100)	(19-60)	(23-78)		
Years in school (n=793)	1-5 years of school	6.9	10.3	9.5	6.3	4.9	0.0	16.7	**
	6-8 years of school	10.3	15.4	6.1	14.9	8.2	6.3	11.1	
	9-11 years of school	22.5	18.0	12.2	47.7	13.8	37.5	11.1	
	HSD/HSE	24.2	29.1	32.0	19.0	22.3	25.0	11.1	
	Work certificate	10.6	12.0	23.1	5.8	7.5	3.1	11.1	
	College or university	25.5	15.4	17.0	6.3	43.3	28.1	38.9	

		Overall	Basic Skills	Career Training	HSD/ HSE	English Learning	College Prep	Family Literacy	Sig.
Employment (n=783)	Unemployed	21.0	17.2	31.7	26.0	16.3	12.9	0.0	**
	Employed P/T	32.7	43.1	46.2	28.3	21.3	48.4	61.1	
	Employed F/T	10.2	11.2	9.7	7.5	10.7	16.1	16.7	
	Employed more than F/T	29.5	23.3	11.7	30.6	42.3	16.1	11.1	
	Retired	6.6	5.2	0.7	7.5	9.3	6.5	11.1	
Health (n=785)	Fair or Poor	18.1	15.8	20.4	30.2	12.2	9.7	11.1	**
	Excellent or Good	81.9	84.2	79.6	69.8	87.8	90.3	88.9	
Child (n=773)	Children under 18	60.2	55.7	61.3	51.8	63.3	70.0	88.9	*
	No children under 18	39.8	44.4	38.7	48.2	36.7	30.0	11.1	
Disability (n=763)	Diagnosed with disability (any)	22.9	21.1	36.1	38.4	8.4	26.7	22.2	**
	No disability	77.1	78.9	63.9	61.6	91.6	73.3	77.8	

ALS Demographics by Program Type

Note. * $p<0.05$, **$p<0.001$

RQ1 considered how survey respondent demographic characteristics compared with NRS data—that is, in 2022 were survey respondents representative of AFE learner demographics in the United States, by program type, gender, age, education attainment, and employment? The corresponding demographic data available on the NRS website (nrs.ed.gov) represents the 2021-22 fiscal year (*N*=899,692 participants). ALS respondents and NRS participants were similar in program type, age distribution, and gender, yet survey respondents were more often employed or in career training and were educationally more widely distributed than adults reported in NRS.

Overall, three-fifths of ALS respondents have children under 18, indicating many parents of school-aged children in AFE. A sizable proportion (18.1%) of survey respondents indicated fair or poor health. Reported disabilities of any kind was 22.9%. The rates of disabilities were highest among those in high school diploma/high school equivalency (HSD/HSE) programs (38.4%) and lowest among those in English learning programs (8.4%). The survey did not differentiate among disability types.

ALS respondents in program types defined under NRS indicated the following rates of participation: 14.8% in basic skills programs, 21.9% in HSD/HSE programs, and 38.5% in ESL programs; 18.5% of 793 survey respondents participated in career training programs, which are not measured under NRS. Although ALS respondents had less basic skills participation, the overall program type balance was similar for NRS adult learners, with half in ESL and half in ABE/ASE; 41.5% were in ABE, 9.0% were in ASE, and 49.5% were in ESL programs. Across these NRS program types, 49,572 adults (5.5%) participated in integrated education and training (IET). In the NRS 1.3% participated in family literacy programs; a similarly small proportion (2.3%) of ALS respondents did so.

By gender, more women participated in both ALS and NRS. ALS respondents were 35.9% men and 64.1% women; corresponding NRS percentages were 39.8% men and 60.2% women. In the ALS, median age was 34 years (range 16 to 100 years). The largest age group for both ALS and NRS was ages 25-44 years (60.1% for ALS and 51.1% for NRS); however, ALS had proportionately fewer adults under 25 (20.5%) than did the NRS (26.7%) as well as proportionately fewer adults 45 years and above (19.4%) compared with the NRS (22.2%).

Concerning education attainment, although most adult learner respondents completed at least some secondary education, survey respondents tended to report more widely distributed education levels - that is, lower or higher levels of education - than adults in NRS data. For example, as shown in Table 2, the rate of survey respondents finishing grades 1 to 5 (6.9%) is two and a half times the NRS rate (2.8%), and college attainment is higher for survey respondents (25.5%) than adult learners in the NRS (19.3%). Because survey respondents also came from community-based literacy programs or career training programs for English learners, this polarization was expected. The Other row in Table 2 designates adults with unknown or no schooling in NRS and workplace certificates in ALS.

TABLE 2: Education Attainment of Survey Respondents and National Reporting System Adult Learners

	NRS		ALS	
Education Attainment	N	%	N	%
Grades 1-5	25,254	2.8	55	6.9
Grades 6-8	76,040	8.5	82	10.3
Grades 9-12 (9-11 ALS)	384,116	42.7	178	22.5
HSD/HSE	165,641	18.4	192	24.2
College	173,498	19.3	202	25.5
Other	75,143	8.4	84	10.6

The employment rate of survey respondents, 72.4%, was much higher than the 42.0% reported in the NRS, likely because survey respondents tended to be somewhat older than adults in NRS-accountable programs. It is noteworthy, however, that most employed adults taking the survey indicated being employed either part time (32.7%) or more than full-time (29.2%), rather than in a regular full-time position (10.5%; see Table 1). These responses may indicate work in low-paying part-time jobs—especially noticeable in those entering career training programs—or cobbling together multiple jobs to try to make ends meet. Part of the significant employment difference may also be attributed to NRS data being collected as early as July of 2021, in contrast to the survey being administered in late 2022, when more adults had returned to the workforce post-pandemic.

Adult Learner Goals for Participation and Priorities

RQ2 addressed goals adult learners reported as reasons for participating in AFE programs. Adults selected from as many goals as they wanted in five domains: learning goals, work goals, personal goals, family goals, and community goals. We ordered the goals they selected most often across these five domains. Table 3 displays individual goals, ranked from most respondents selecting to least selecting, by domain. Goals most often selected were in four of the domains (all except community goals). The most frequent response among adults taking the ALS survey (51.7%) was participating to strengthen skills, such as reading, writing, and math (see Figure 1). Additional frequently selected reasons for entering AFE programs were gaining confidence in what they know (48.3%), learning skills to keep the job they have (48.1%), making life even more satisfying (47.9%), helping to support their child(ren) to learn (46.7%), and being able to plan and go after career goals (45.2%). Interestingly, the most important personal and work goals were also ranked highly (2nd and 6th, respectively): gaining confidence and being able to plan and go after career goals. Across all five domains, frequently selected reasons indicate that adults have multiple goals for entering AFE.

TABLE 3: Goals for and Outcomes of Participation in AFE: Adult Learner Survey

Reason	Adults Reporting Goal (%)	Adults Reporting Outcome (%)
Learning goals		
To strengthen my skills	51.7	37.3
To prepare to enter career training	42.9	35.8
To learn to speak / understand English as a new language	42.6	43.0
To be able to find out things and learn on my own	41.2	38.1
To earn an HSD or take a GED or HiSET test	37.5	39.0
To know how to get online and use for learning	35.1	39.6
To learn how to find services in my community	33.8	31.7
To prepare to enter college	33.3	38.6
None of these reasons is applicable*	19.3	17.8
Work goals		
To learn skills to keep the job I have	48.1	30.3
To be able to plan and go after career goals	45.2	38.0
To prepare to take on new challenges at work	44.6	33.8
To learn skills to get a work certificate	43.3	30.6
To find an even better balance between work and life	42.8	33.5
To get skills before starting a business	41.9	29.6
To figure out how to get along even better with a team	41.7	34.7
To learn skills for a new job	40.4	34.7
To know how to get online and use for work	38.7	31.4
None of these reasons is applicable*	19	25.5
Personal goals		
To gain confidence in what I know, for myself	48.3	42.1
To make my life even more satisfying	47.9	42.5
To learn how to better understand / manage money	36.8	36.6
To keep myself healthy	34.7	36.2
To learn about getting accommodations for a disability	33.4	30.9
To do things in everyday life	32.9	44.6
None of these reasons is applicable*	25.7	21.9
Family goals		
To help me support my child(ren) to learn	46.7	34.7
To help meet my family's financial needs	43.4	38.5
To keep my family safe and healthy	39.3	37.3

Reason	Adults Reporting Goal (%)	Adults Reporting Outcome (%)
To make my parenting skills better	35.7	38.7
None of these reasons is applicable*	30.3	31.4
Community goals		
To express my opinions and ideas to others	42	40.7
To get informed and stay informed	40.6	37.3
To make a positive difference in my community	40.6	39.0
To volunteer in my community	38.1	30.5
To become a US citizen	37.7	34.4
To get ready to vote	32.8	32.2
To get ready to re-enter my community after serving time	31.9	29.9
None of these reasons is applicable*	27.9	27.9

* Designates that none of the reasons in the list of items for each domain was a goal for the learner.

## TABLE 4: Frequences of program type and years in schooling

	CLASS 1	CLASS 2	CLASS 3	CLASS 4	CLASS 5		
	High Achiever	Ambitious Learners	Quiet Success	Steady Achievers	Low-engaging Learners	Total	χ^2 (df)
	(n=46) 5.8%	(n=64) 8.1%	(n=73) 9.2%	(n=329) 41.5%	(n=281) 35.4%	(n=793) 100%	
Program type							
Basic Skills	6.5	15.6	17.8	13.4	16.7	14.8	24.9 (20)
Career Training	26.1	17.2	16.4	15.8	21.4	18.5	
HSD/HSE	23.9	17.2	13.7	21.9	24.9	21.9	
English Learning	37.0	42.2	43.8	42.0	32.4	38.5	
College Prep	4.4	3.1	6.9	3.7	3.9	4.0	
Family Literacy	2.2	4.7	1.4	3.3	0.7	2.3	
Years in schooling							
8 grades or fewer	8.7	21.9	23.3	17.0	16.4	17.3	30.1*
9-11 grades	15.2	14.1	21.9	25.5	22.1	22.5	(16)
HSD/HSE	32.6[a]	29.7	26.0	17.9	28.5[a]	24.2	
Work certificate	19.6	6.3	11.0	9.4	11.4	10.6	
College or above	23.9	28.1	17.8[b]	30.1	21.7[b]	25.5	

*p<0.05
[a] Pairwise comparisons indicate Class1> Class 4 and Class5>Class 4
[b] Pairwise comparisons indicate Class 4>Class 3 and Class4>Class 5

FIGURE 1: Learners' Six Most Frequent Goals for Participation in AFE: Adult Learner Survey
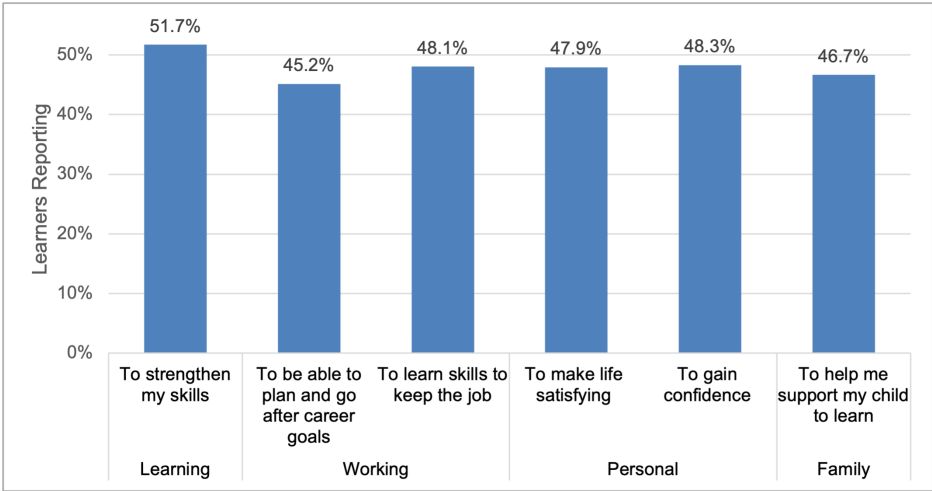
Adult learners also could prioritize, in a separate question, the "most important" reason for participating in AFE in each of the five domains (see Figure 2). In the personal goals domain, gaining confidence (28.5%) was selected as most important. Among community goals, making a positive difference in the community was chosen as most important (26.7%). The top priority in family goals was keeping the family safe and healthy (25.2%). Among learning goals, adults selected speaking and understanding English as a new language as most important (22.0%). The top priority in work goals was being able to plan and go after career goals (20.9%).

FIGURE 2: Learners' Most Important Goals for Participation in AFE by Domain: Adult Learner Survey
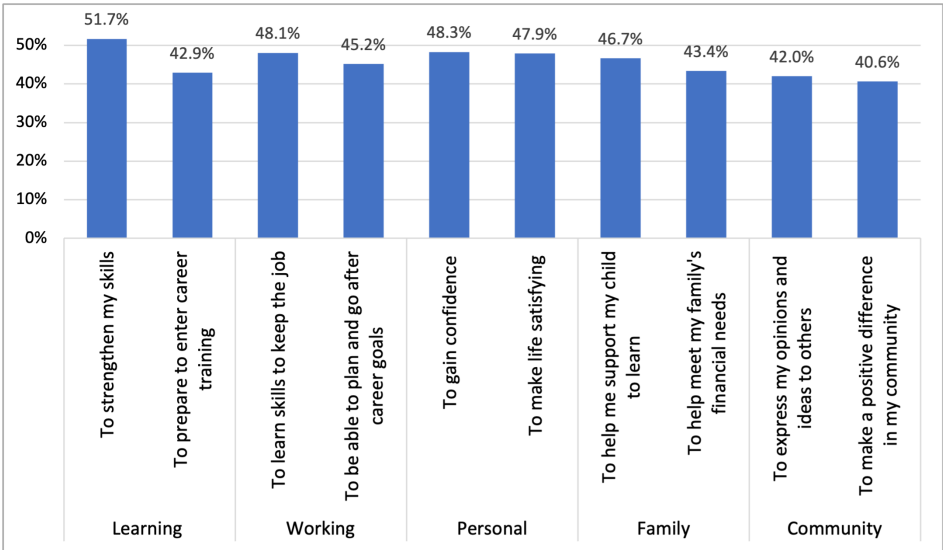
### Adult Learner Outcomes from Participation in AFE

Adult learners' learning, work, personal, family, and community outcomes from AFE program participation were analyzed to address RQ3. We again ordered outcomes they selected most often across these five domains. Table 3 also includes reported outcomes in the same five domains; percentages for goals and for outcomes are aggregated separately rather than matched by individual learners. The most reported outcome

overall was in the personal domain: learning to do things in everyday life, selected by 44.6% of adult learner respondents (see Figure 3). The learning outcome of speaking/understanding English was second (43.0%), followed by two more personal outcomes, making life even more satisfying (42.5%) and gaining confidence (42.1%). The learning outcome of earning an HSD, GED, or HiSET credential and the community outcome of making a positive difference in the community came next, in number of responses (both had 39.0%).

FIGURE 3: Six Highest Outcomes from Participation in AFE: Adult Learner Survey
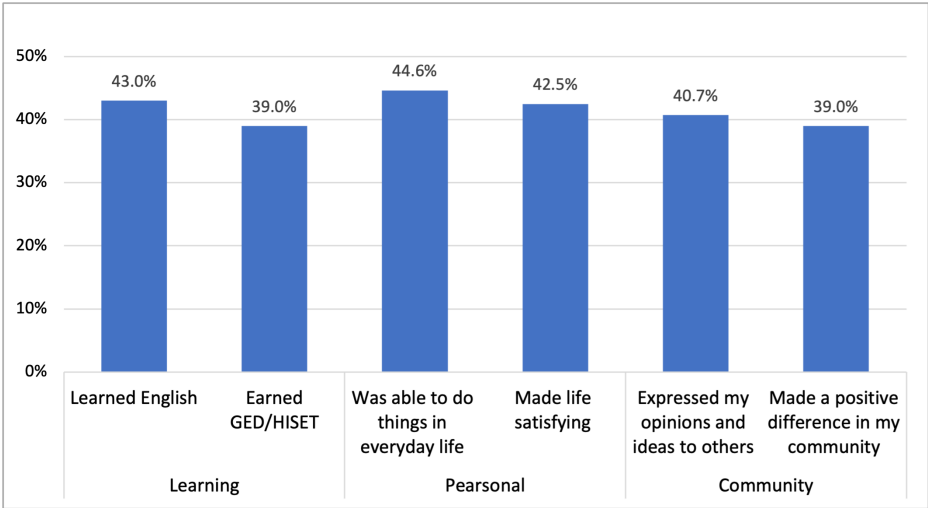
In most cases, overall, adult learners reported progress toward meeting goals (expected outcomes), and some learners reported progress in areas they had not selected (unexpected outcomes). However, a notable exception to this positive pattern was the goal of strengthening skills. Regardless of AFE program type, desiring to strengthen reading, writing, or math skills was the top reason they enrolled, thus affirming the importance of skills. Even though 51.7% of learners had goals to strengthen foundational skills, only 37.3% reported getting these skills from participation.

Adult Learner Classifications

Our final analysis addressed RQ4 by classifying adult learners based on their learning and work goals and outcomes. We employed LCA, a method to statistically determine the heterogeneity of individuals who had similar response patterns to a set of items. We used 34 goals and outcomes in learning and work areas—the two most prevalent areas—as class indicators. A five-class model was selected as the best-fitting model after examining multiple fit indices such as Akaike Information Criteria (AIC), Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC), and entropy, as well as the model's interpretability. AIC was 29,326.0,

BIC was 30,139.6, entropy was .0957, and the parametric Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test was significant. Each class had more than 5% of observation, indicating that the five-class solution provided a statistically significantly better fit. Adult learners were assigned to their most likely class based on model-generated probabilities of class membership as examined in frequencies of demographic variables among classes. We used chi-square tests of independence to determine whether latent classes differed on demographic frequencies and conducted pairwise chi-square tests. Among demographic characteristics, only the highest educational level showed statistically significant differences across the five classes.

Five profiles of adult learners based on probabilities of learning and work goals and outcomes are presented in Figure 4. The first LCA class (n_1=46, 5.8%) was characterized as "High Achievers." This class showed high learning goals and particularly high work goals, and they also achieved strong work outcomes such as being able to plan and go after career goals and learning skills for a new job. They also had a high proportion (23.9%) of adult learners with an HSD/HSE and a notable share (26.1%) was in job training programs. A second class consisted of 8.1% of adult learners

(n_2= 64), who reported relatively high learning and work goals, for example, preparing for career training and new challenges at work. However, their achievements were very low, so this group was labeled "Ambitious Learners." Seventy-three adult learners (9.2%) exhibited membership in Class 3. Though this class showed relatively low learning and work goals overall, they had a somewhat higher probability of specific goals like earning an HSD/GED/HISET or learning skills to get a work certificate. Despite their low goal probability, this class showed surprisingly high probability of achieving outcomes both in learning and work. Thus, Class 3 was labeled as "Quiet Success." They also had notably higher proportions in basic skills (17.8%) and ESL (43.8%) programs relative to other classes.

The fourth and largest class consisted of 41.5% of adult learners (n_4=329). This class was labeled "Steady Achievers" who set moderate learning and work goals and achieved moderate success. About 42% of Steady Achievers participated in ESL programs and 30.1% of this class already had a college or higher degree, the highest proportion across classes. The last class was "Low-Engaging Learners" (35.4%, n_5=281) who had low goal setting and outcomes in both learning and work; 21.4% of Low-engaging Learners enrolled in Career Training programs, and 25% in HSD/HSE programs, both somewhat higher than some other classes. Additionally, they represented a larger share (28.5%) of adult learners with an HSD/HSE compared to Steady Achievers.

FIGURE 4: Profile of Adult Learner Learning and Work Goals and Outcomes: Adult Learner Survey
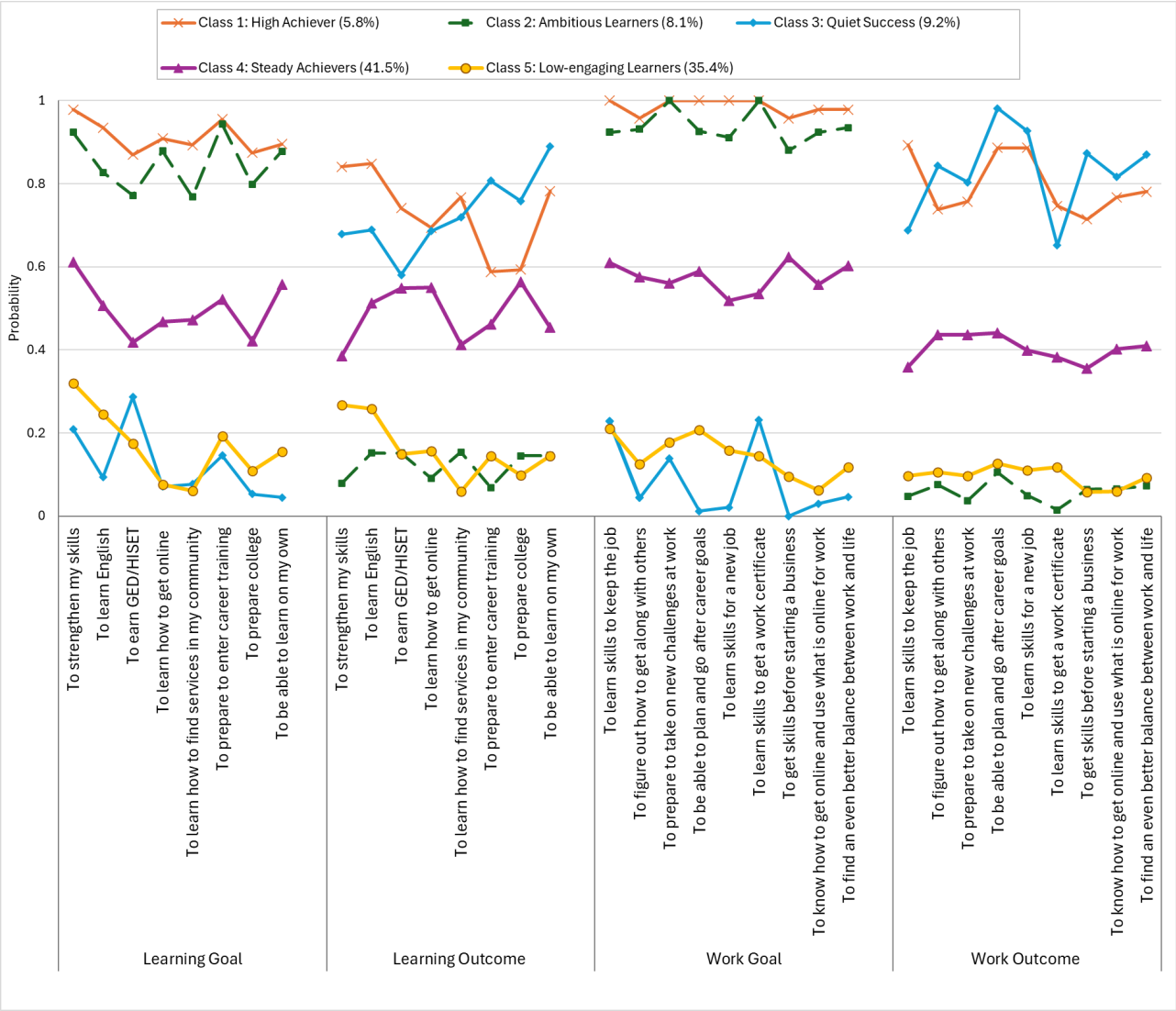
Discussion

The ALS's purpose was to measure priorities and outcomes of adult learners who enter AFE programs, to inform a future comprehensive study of learner ROI. Respondents' major priorities for participation tended to hover in affective and unquantifiable areas—difficult to calculate in traditional ROI—and were consistent across participants in all program types. When asked about the "most important" reasons for enrolling in AFE, respondents chose, in order:

1. Gain confidence;

2. Make a positive difference in the community;

3. Keep my family safe and healthy;

4. Speak and understand English as a new language; and,

5. Plan and go after career goals.

Within this list of five reasons, quantifiable goals such as learning English and planning and pursuing career goals were less of a priority. However, learner priorities varied by program type. Gaining confidence was most important for three of four program types but only ranked fifth for those in HSD/HSE programs; in contrast, the number one priority for those in HSD/HSE programs was making life even more satisfying.

Also, ranked priorities of what was most important often differed from overall goals respondents tended to select most frequently, such as strengthen my skills (reading, writing, and math), learn skills to keep the job I have, and support my children to learn. These three goals are quantifiable and could also be considered for ROI study.

What funders (e.g., WIOA and state programs) measure drives what programs do, but that programming may not fully reflect what learners actually want/need. In learning and workforce goals, ALS survey respondents tended to experience positive yet varied outcomes. In the learning domain, for instance, even though half of survey respondents expressed strengthening skills (reading, writing, and math) as a goal, slightly more than a third reported the outcome. This gap of 15 percentage points indicates that many learners did not meet their goals—or did not recognize meeting them. This finding is not an indictment of AFE but does point to the need for comprehensive learner ROI study.

For surveyed learners with workforce preparation goals,

AFE in general is not as successful as it could be. The most common goal was learning skills to keep their job (48.1%), but only 30.3% reported that as an outcome. For every work-related goal there was unmet need. That is, more people had the goal than reported an outcome in that area. The gap was anywhere from nearly 18% (for learning skills to keep their job) to just over 6% (knowing how to get online and use it for work).

Data in this area point to the continued importance of a focus on workforce development despite high employment rates among respondents. Although most respondents are employed, the majority are not in regular full-time positions. Rather, they work part-time or work multiple jobs to accumulate full-time (or more than full-time) work. Many jobs are likely low paying (the survey did not ask about income).

At the same time, some adult learners came without specific goals as measured in our survey. The extensive mismatch between adult learners' goals and outcomes was noticeable. Some learners did not make gains in areas they initially hoped to make, while others reported gains in areas where they did not set goals. In the five LCA classes, this pattern is reflected in "Quiet Success" with low-goal/high-outcome and "Ambitious Learners" with high goal/low-outcome patterns.

This mismatch may be interpreted both positively and negatively. On one hand, learners may perceive gaining skills or growth opportunities in unanticipated areas as a bonus. In addition to what they came for, they are made aware of learning opportunities that they might not have recognized or did not see as of immediate importance. Similarly, some learners may enter AFE with vague or unrealistic goals or little knowledge of what AFE offers—and clarify or adjust goals in the learning process. In making unexpected outcomes, learners accrue skills and experiences that can benefit their lives and open further possibilities in unexpected and positive ways.

On the other hand, learners may feel they invested time in a program that did not provide what they came for, thus making that investment questionable. Unexpectedness implies mismatches between what attracts adults to an AFE program and what the program actually offers, which may be driven by rigid funder requirements or inattention to learner goals. AFE programs may need to better

communicate their offerings—as well as what they do *not* offer—and help incoming learners discern what kind of a match is possible from the outset.

ROI has potential to make a case for the value of AFE; partners and policy makers need this information to make critical decisions about AFE's role in efforts to address poverty and improve wellbeing of U.S. adults. Survey findings offer some quantifiable priority areas that may be considered for further study of learner ROI. These priority areas include the following:

1. Making a positive difference in the community

2. Family support (child's learning and family health / safety)

3. Learning outcomes (English learning, foundational skills, and HSD/HSE credentials)

4. Career outcomes (planning career and gaining skills for a new job)

While these topic areas may be difficult to measure employing traditional ROI calculations of costs and benefits (that is, in dollars and cents), pursuing learner ROI remains an option for study. They help make the case for a broader understanding of potential benefits of AFE participation in comparisons of costs and benefits in an ROI analysis.

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge several limitations to our survey and findings. To begin with, survey respondents represented not only participants enrolled in programs that report NRS data but also adults in community-based literacy programs, career training for English learners, and other AFE programming. ALS survey respondents and participants enrolled in NRS-accountable programs were similar in program type, age distribution, and gender, yet survey respondents were more often employed or in career training and were educationally more varied than adults in NRS-accountable programs. A puzzling finding, however, was demographic differences in gender and age *by* program type. We were surprised to see high proportions of men in basic skills, career training, and family literacy (this last difference is likely an artifact of the small sample). Median ages for HSD/HSE, career training, and especially English learning seemed high given the program intent. These differences point to the wide variety of program types and learners entering them, differences not captured in NRS tables. While we cannot conclude that survey respondents are fully representative of adult learners in NRS-accountable programs—especially given vast differences in sample sizes—we believe that ALS results represent a meaningful sample of U.S. adult learner perceptions and therefore results from this paper are useful for understanding learner ROI.

We also noticed another puzzling finding: among survey participants in English language programs, HSD/HSE preparation, or career training, a surprisingly small proportion stated as goals, respectively, to learn English (42.6%), earn an HSD/HSE (37.5%), or prepare for career training (42.9%). Not having more information from learners to interpret this disconnect is a limitation. Learners may have understood these goals simply as a steppingstone to other, more important goals. For example, respondents in English language programs emphasized their desire to strengthen basic skills and prepare for career training as well. Thus, for some, learning English may have been simply a steppingstone to those goals. Similarly, HSD/HSE participants emphasized interest in strengthening basic skills, learning English as a new language, and learning on their own, so they may have been more focused on steps preceding HSD/HSE. Career training participants emphasized strengthening basic skills, learning English as a new language, learning on their own, and HSD/HSE, so may have focused on these precedents to career training.

Another survey limitation is that it targeted AFE participants with at least intermediate reading comprehension or English language skills. Beyond translating the ALS survey into Spanish, language translations were not feasible. This limitation means that perspectives of AFE learners with low skills were only included where teachers, tutors, or fellow learners helped with reading the survey; missing perspectives need to be included in future learner ROI study.

Finally, survey results indicate that to plan further study, we need to know more about program-level and state-level expectations and constraints in attaining positive learner ROI. As this paper was written, additional qualitative research with AFE practitioners was underway. This qualitative research will allow us to triangulate survey findings and understand program and state perceptions of traditional and learner ROI to support further planning for a more comprehensive ROI study.

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