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Changing the Odds:
*Informing Policy with Research
on How Adult Learners Succeed*

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The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is one of the nation's leading firms supporting improvements in adult basic education with services that include training, technical assistance, and research at the federal, state and local levels. AIR has been conducting projects in adult education in professional development, English as a Second Language (ESL), numeracy, assessment, use of technology in instruction and accountability over the last 20 years.

Established in 1946, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., AIR is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of health, education, and workforce productivity.

Executive Summary

Research has identified the barriers adult learners face in attaining their education and English proficiency goals, entering and advancing in employment, succeeding in postsecondary education and training, and navigating service systems. Most adult learners face long odds in trying to meet these goals. What would it take to address these barriers and produce better outcomes? What policies, focused investments, and public-private partnerships would help change the odds?

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) hosted a Symposium, *Changing the Odds: Informing Policy with Research on How Adult Learners Succeed*, on September 16, 2009. The panelists and participants discussed innovative solutions and collaborations for supporting today's low-skilled adult learners and challenges to improving adult education and workforce development outcomes facing the nation.

Stephen Reder opened the Symposium with a keynote address that discussed the importance of building a **ladder of opportunity** to improve adult learning in the 21st century. The Symposium panels and special interest table groups continued in this theme to identify the pressing needs for:

- Facing the reality of impending demographic and immigration trends,
- Alignment and contextualized learning opportunities among Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title I and Title II programs, and
- Developing ways to reach the vast majority of adults with low skills who are not in programs and to foster innovation through model demonstration projects.

There was widespread interest in innovative models to scale up programs and accelerate learning through leveraging technology and reaching untapped populations. Participants also expressed an immediate need for leadership and evidence, and acknowledged that the workforce in adult education and vocational programs has many unmet professional development needs and little infrastructure available to meet them.

This paper explores these challenges and solutions in more detail, offering many ideas and alternatives for program delivery and policy infrastructure that could change the odds for adult learners in the United States. Based on the research, it is clear that reforms need to be undertaken to ensure that the potential of the low-skilled adult population can be realized. An evidence-based reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, now seven years overdue, will help “change the odds” for millions of adults.

From Beating the Odds to Changing the Odds¹

Two recent publications, *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future and Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, make a strong case that a lack of sufficient adult literacy in our workforce and society threatens our future economic well-being as a nation.² Both of these influential reports call for dramatic changes in the scale and effectiveness of adult literacy education. They challenge us to ask why we are losing ground in education and basic skills to our international economic competitors and how we can change the odds for adult literacy success.

Larry Wallack likes to ask what the equivalent social change would be to the tremendous technological change that has occurred in the past half-century. His answer is a new collective understanding of our nation's growing economic, educational, and social problems. As he points out, we have the technology and the data required to tackle the inequities of opportunity that abound, but we lack the necessary shared understandings and values to solve these problems. He sees a need to build a shared **ladder of opportunity** in our society. Our common good, he argues, depends on having a well functioning ladder of opportunity, enabling individuals to exercise initiative, acquire the skills they need, and make use of their energies and talents. The ladder of opportunity is something we all need to build together—government, business, private citizens—or rebuild together, as there are growing indications that the ladder of opportunity we once had in America is in need of major repairs.³

Some of the signs from these reports that our ladder of opportunity is in need of repair include these:

- The distribution of wealth in our society is getting increasingly skewed and concentrated;
- Our educational attainment is slipping in international comparisons amidst increasing globalization; and
- The assessed skill levels of our schoolchildren and adults are stagnant over the past couple decades, with persistent racial and ethnic disparities.

Adult Literacy and the Ladder of Opportunity

Our work as adult literacy educators is central to efforts to rebuild the ladder of opportunity in our country. Adult literacy is deeply embedded in the structure of inequity and opportunity within our society. Our national conversations about equity, economic strength, and stability, as well as opportunity, typically refer to education as a key strategy. But beyond K–12 education, which is without doubt vitally important, adult literacy is also crucial. The following charts illustrate some of the ways education and adult literacy together play a central role.

¹This section is based on the symposium keynote address by Stephen Reder.

² Kirsch, I., Braun, H., Yamamoto, K., & Sum, A. (2007). *America's perfect storm: Three forces changing our nation's future*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service. Available at: <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICSTORM.pdf>; National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York. (2008). *Reach higher, America: Overcoming crisis in the U.S. workforce*. New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy. Available at: <http://www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/ReachHigherAmerica/ReachHigher.pdf>.

³ Wallack, L. (July 9, 2007). "A ladder of opportunity in dire need of repair." *The Oregonian*. (July 4, 2006). "Retelling the American story." *The Oregonian*.

These charts are based on analyses of data from the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS, collected in 1992) and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL, collected in 2003), nationally representative surveys and literacy assessments of adults in the United States. Taken together, they show that the relationships demonstrated in 1992 held steady through the next decade. The first chart shows the relationship between employment and education and literacy proficiency. The height of each bar is the average number of weeks worked in the previous year by adults with varying amounts of education and literacy.⁴

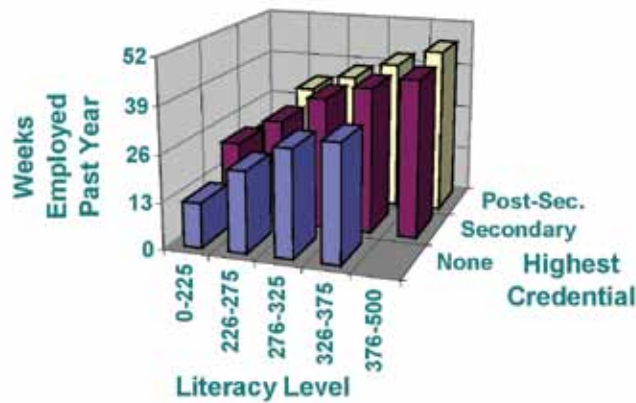


Chart 1: Average weeks of employment per year by literacy level and educational attainment. *Source:* Author calculations, National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992.

The chart shows that adults with higher levels of educational attainment and adults with higher levels of literacy proficiency have worked for a greater number of weeks. At any given level of education—no high school diploma or GED, a high school diploma or GED, a college degree—the more literacy proficiency an individual has, the more weeks of employment. Indeed, to move toward full employment, adults need *both* high levels of education *and* high levels of literacy proficiency. The three-dimensional bars in the figure can be viewed as stepping stones through increasing literacy and education—rungs on the ladder of opportunity towards full employment in our society.

In 2003, the picture remained much the same. Chart 2 shows the employment status of adults by their document literacy level, placing the data from 1992 side by side with that of 2003, revealing how powerfully these indicators work together. There is a significant shift in the percentage of adults who are employed as one moves from below basic literacy to proficient levels of literacy. Only 27% and 32% of adults with below-basic literacy were employed full time in 1992 and 2003 respectively, but among those who were proficient, these numbers grew to 68% and 63%.

⁴ These levels are the indicated subranges of the 0-500 point proficiency scale for document literacy.

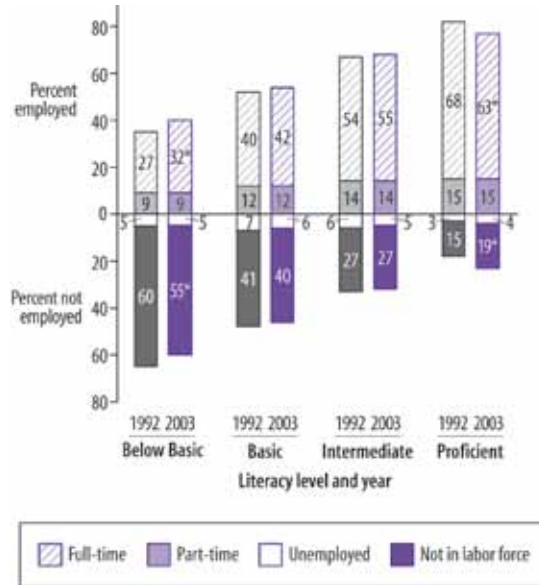


Chart 2: Percentage of adults in each employment status category, by document literacy level: 1992–2003.⁵

A similar relationship emerges in the next chart, which displays the percentage of individuals living in or near poverty in 1992 in terms of both literacy proficiency and educational attainment.⁶ To have good chances of escaping poverty, individuals need high levels of *both* education and literacy. Educational attainment by itself is not enough.

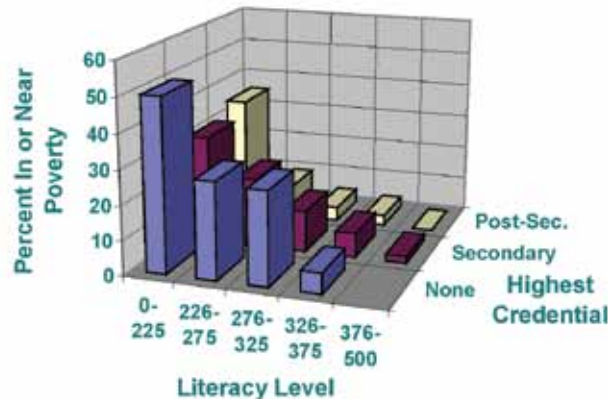


Chart 3: Percentage of individuals living below poverty line by literacy level and educational attainment. *Source:* Author calculations, National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992.

⁵ Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., & Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in everyday life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2007–480). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Figure 4.1b, page 46. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007480>.

⁶ Poverty levels are defined as usual in terms of household income and household size.

At each level of educational attainment, higher levels of literacy are associated with better chances of staying out of poverty. In 2003, the picture remained stubbornly similar. Weekly wages continued to rise with literacy.

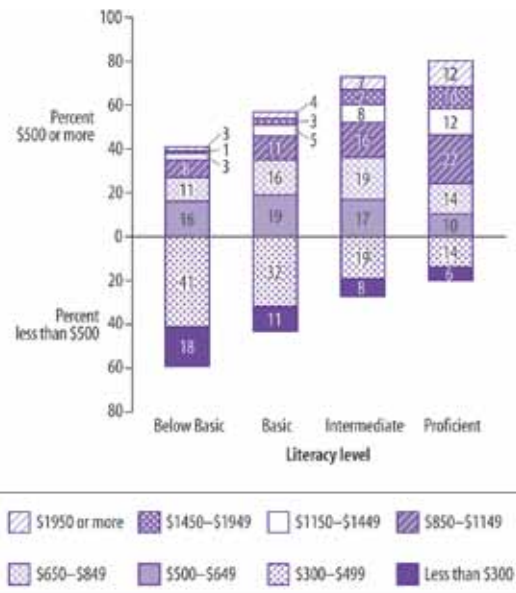


Chart 4: Percentage of full-time employed adults in each weekly gross earnings category, by document literacy level: 2003.⁷

This picture is not limited to economic outcomes. Broader measures of civic engagement, for example, also show a similar dependence on both education and literacy. In the next set of charts, we see that with increasing levels of both literacy and education, individuals become more likely to have voted in the previous five years.⁸

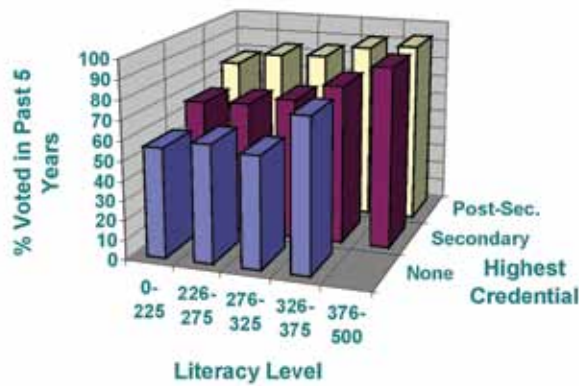


Chart 5: Percentage of individuals who reported voting in the previous five years, by literacy level and educational attainment. *Source:* Author calculations, National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992.

⁷ Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., & Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in everyday life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2007-480). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Figure 4.3b, page 53.

⁸ This chart includes only individuals eligible to vote over the preceding five year period – U.S. citizens 18 years of age or older at the beginning of the preceding 5-year period.

In 2003, similar patterns were demonstrated. Adults with higher levels of literacy were more likely to vote and volunteer. Once again, the steps up the ladder of opportunity and engagement in our society pass through increasing levels of both literacy and education.

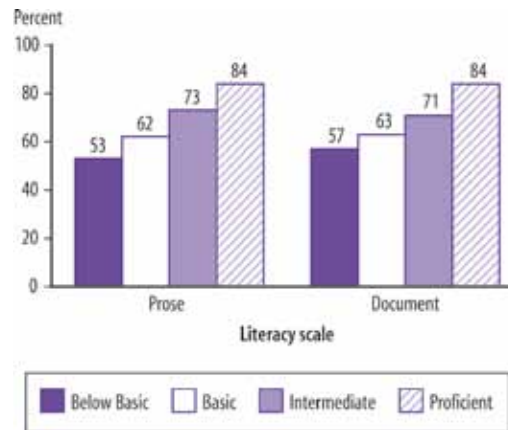


Chart 6: Percentage of adult citizens of voting age who voted in the 2000 election, by prose and document literacy level: 2003.⁹

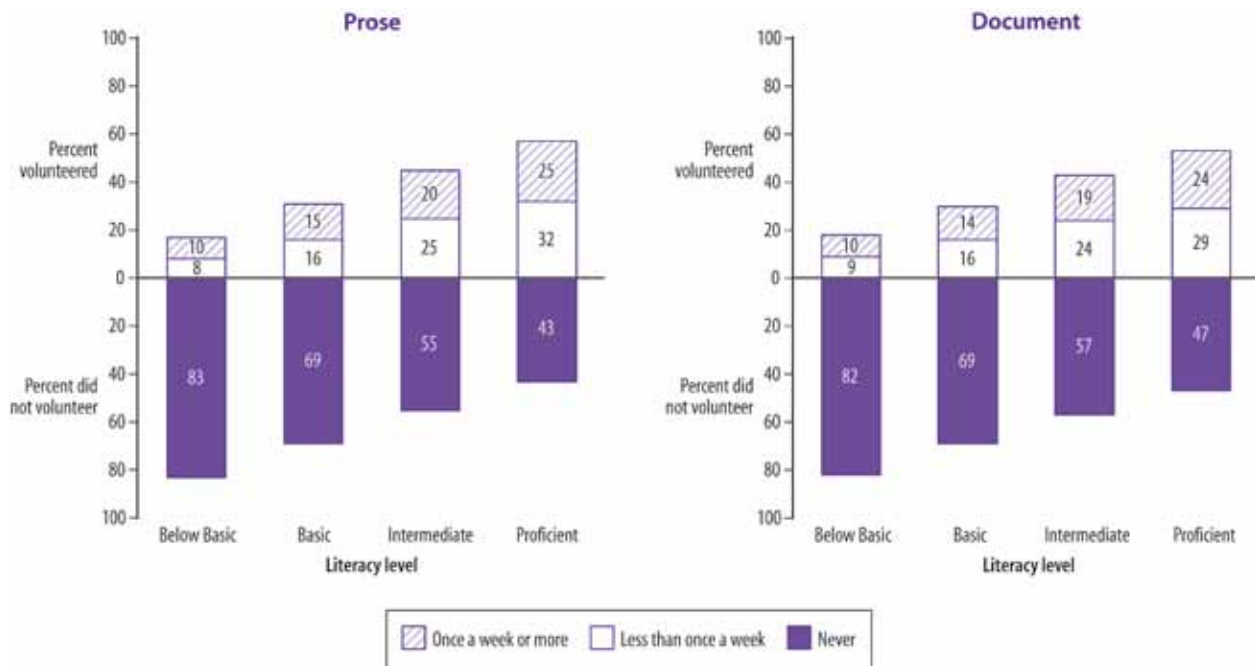


Chart 7: Percentage of adults who volunteered during the past year, by prose and document literacy level: 2003.¹⁰

⁹ Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., & Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in everyday life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2007-480)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Figure 6.1, page 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Figure 6.4, page 77.

Additional analyses would show similar pictures for other kinds of outcome measures – such as health literacy and criminal justice indicators. It is clear that adult literacy proficiency and educational attainment is strongly associated with a variety of social and economic outcomes in our society.

This does not mean, of course, that all of these complex problems will miraculously disappear if only we can raise the literacy levels of our adult population. It does reflect, however, how deeply literacy is embedded in a range of issues in our society. Solutions to these problems will very likely involve developing new and more effective ways to increase adult literacy levels over time.

Our Adult Education and Literacy Problems Aren't Going Away

Traditionally we have talked about two sources of adults with basic skills needs: those who left the public school system without sufficient skills (whether they graduated or not) and immigrant adults.

Too many youth exit our K–12 schools without the basic skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education or function effectively in the workforce. Although many policymakers focus on K–12 school reform as the way to minimize the future size of this population stream, most adults with basic skill needs are *already* in the workforce – where they will remain for decades to come – and beyond the reach of reformed K–12 schools.

Research on high school dropouts suggests that the nation's alarming dropout rate will very likely continue at high levels for years to come, despite ongoing efforts to improve our K–12 schools. Individuals drop out of school for a wide variety of reasons. Some students drop out for reasons related to school conditions and levels of quality, but many others drop out for reasons over which schools have little control.¹¹ Certainly we need to improve our schools. But we also must provide effective adult education that will help youth and adults to develop needed basic skills after leaving the K–12 school system.

A second source of adults with basic skill needs is immigration. Many adults immigrate into the country without the English language and literacy skills they need. Given immigration patterns discussed in the next section, we should anticipate and prepare for future immigration levels that will continue to supply a substantial stream of adults with basic skill needs.¹²

These two sources of adults with basic skills needs are familiar to us. There is a third source, one that will soon be expanding rapidly, that we have not thought as much about: aging adults. Research shows that literacy proficiency begins to decline after midlife.¹³ Older Americans, who once may have had the skills they needed for work and active participation in our society, find themselves needing new basic skills as they age and technologies

¹¹ Reder, S. (2007). Giving literacy away, again: New concepts of promising practice. In A. Belzer (Ed.), *Toward defining and improving quality in adult basic education: Issues and challenges* (pp. 255-276). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

¹² Kirsch, I., Braun, H., Yamamoto, K., & Sum, A. (2007). *America's perfect storm: Three forces changing our nation's future*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service.

¹³ Reder, S. (2009). "The development of literacy and numeracy in adult life." In Stephen Reder and John Bynner (Eds.), *Tracking adult literacy and numeracy: Findings from longitudinal research*. New York: Routledge.

increase basic skill requirements over time. Older Americans may need special kinds of adult education programs to brush up basic skills and develop new ones. We need to develop such programs.

The ongoing technological and economic changes are creating new skill demands which will amplify the needs of all three of these groups of adults with basic skills needs – youth coming out of schools, immigrants, and older Americans. At the same time, divergent skill distributions and growing disparities of skill and economic status within our society will continue to link adult literacy with other pressing social and economic problems.¹⁴

As we think about helping all of these groups move up the ladder of opportunity, it is clear that we are not currently doing enough to effectively serve them. Indicators that show we're not doing enough include the following:¹⁵

- 14.1% of adults age 18–64 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent;
- Almost 13 million adults age 18–64 with less than a high school diploma or GED are living in poverty;
- More than 8 million adults age 18–64 speak English “not well” or “not at all”;
- Of the target population for adult education:
 - ◆ Age 16–24: only 28% enrolled in a state-administered adult education program in 2005
 - ◆ Age 25–44: only 11% enrolled
 - ◆ Age 45 & older: only 2% enrolled

We are not doing enough to meet our existing and projected basic skills needs. Given the fraction of adults enrolled in state-administered programs, we are not likely to meet our future needs by just doing more of the same—that is, by funding increased enrollment only within the existing types of basic skills programs.¹⁶

Thinking Outside the Box: Research-Based Approaches

We need to be thinking outside the box. Research provides some suggestions about new approaches we should consider in adult literacy education. Two large studies conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) provide one set of suggestions. Both the *Persistence Study* and the *Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning* (LSAL) followed adult learners over time. The Persistence Study followed a set of adult education students to understand the factors that influenced their participation in formal programs and their self-directed efforts to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED tests.¹⁷ The LSAL followed a random sample of about 1,000 high school dropouts over nearly a 10-year period of time, looking at changes in their assessed literacy skills, changes in their personal

¹⁴ Kirsch, I., Braun, H., Yamamoto, K., & Sum, A. (2007). *America's perfect storm: Three forces changing our nation's future*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service.

¹⁵ National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York. (2008). *Reach higher, America: Overcoming crisis in the U.S. workforce*. New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy.

¹⁶ National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York. (2008). *Reach higher, America: Overcoming crisis in the U.S. workforce*. New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy.

¹⁷ Comings, J. (2009). Student persistence in adult literacy and numeracy programs. In S. Reder and J. Bynner (Eds.), *Tracking adult literacy and numeracy: Findings from longitudinal research*. New York: Routledge.

and family economic circumstances, their educational goals and informal and self-directed learning activities, and their decisions about entering, staying in, or re-entering basic skills and other educational programs.¹⁸

The findings of these two major studies suggest that we need to develop strategies to:

- **Build persistence** in adult learners so that they stay in programs and engage in self-directed learning activities for much longer periods of time;
- Gather data and build accountability around **longer-term outcomes**;
- Develop community-wide **learning support systems** that strengthen collaboration among educational providers and social service and community-based organizations to meet learners' needs; and
- **Utilize technology** to increase system capacity, coordination, and effectiveness.

Other research suggests that our field needs to experiment with and systematically evaluate alternative ways to combine language, literacy and job skills training. There are a number of promising approaches to consider, including:

- **Contextualized basic skills instruction**, in which reading, writing, math, and computer skills are taught in meaningful work-related, family-related, or other individually engaging contexts;
- **Differentiated instruction**, in which career orientation and/or job training can be provided to adults at a broad range of reading and math skill levels even as adults strive to raise their basic skill levels;
- **Flexible career pathways** in which individual adults take a carefully constructed set of complementary basic skills, occupational, and (in some cases) postsecondary education modules related to a particular learning goal or outcome; and
- **Innovative public-private partnerships** that break down the traditional distinction between basic skills and job-specific skills training for incumbent workers.

Research shows that we need to extend postsecondary education to adult literacy students and help them succeed academically. Jobs paying family-supporting wages will increasingly require adults to have both high levels of basic skills and some postsecondary education.¹⁹ To make postsecondary education more accessible to and successful for adult literacy students, we need to develop effective ways to:

- Bridge adult education and postsecondary programs;
- Minimize the need for remedial courses in community colleges; and
- Deconstruct the postsecondary model to create more flexible paths toward credits, credentials, licensures, and professional degrees.

¹⁸ Reder, S., & Strawn, C. (2001). Program participation and self-directed learning to improve basic skills, *Focus on Basics*, 4(D), 14-17.

¹⁹ National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York. (2008). *Reach higher, America: Overcoming crisis in the U.S. workforce*. New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy.

Where We Go from Here

Several impending legislative initiatives that could be opportunities to introduce needed policy changes and programmatic innovations in the adult literacy and education system include:

- Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act; Title II currently provides federal funding to adult ESL, adult basic education and adult secondary education programs;
- Comprehensive immigration reform, expected to come before the Congress, will likely provide new contexts for ESL and citizenship education; and
- The administration's new American Graduation Initiative, which calls for expanded collaboration between community colleges and adult education programs.

Certainly, appropriate legislative changes will help us move forward with better policies, more effective programs, and expanded funding. These important advances will help more individuals to *beat the odds*. That is very important. To bring about more significant social and educational changes, however, we must strengthen our society's ladder of opportunity to *change the odds* for all adult learners.

As Americans, we like to tell Horatio Alger-type stories about triumphant individuals. Congress likes to hear such stories, too. Malcolm Gladwell debunks some of our American mythology of the lone, meritorious individual in *Outliers*,²⁰ exposing the roles that policies and circumstances play in success. To bring about the systemic change our field needs we must do more than tell stories about our individual students who overcome the odds to succeed. We must come together as a field to work together and collectively change the odds, through more effective partnerships among federal and state agencies, educational institutions, community-based organizations, and the private sector. The time is right to activate and energize these partnerships. Together, we can rebuild the ladder of opportunity and change the odds.

²⁰ Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company.

Changing Demographics and Changing Markets

The demographic challenges facing adult education providers are staggering, but they must be faced for our nation to address economic and societal inequities that have grown over the past several decades – the broken ladder of opportunity. This section describes trends in the population of people who need English language learning, education and vocational training, and skill improvement. Only a fraction of the youth and adults with such needs ever participate in formal classes and programs; understanding the demographics of the potential learner population can inform program planning and policy making to increase capacity strategically.

Adults and Youth Without a High School Diploma

Fully a quarter of U.S. youth do not finish high school. Improved graduation tracking measures in the past few years have galvanized educators and policymakers around these shocking numbers. Reports from think tanks, policymakers, advocacy groups, and educational researchers all decry the economic and human capital cost of allowing such a sizeable portion of our next generation to fail to get a foothold on the ladder of opportunity.

A U.S. Department of Education trend analysis,²¹ released in September 2009, provides a grim picture of the consequences of this statistic:

Dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative outcomes. For example, the median income of persons ages 18 through 65 who had not completed high school was roughly \$24,000 in 2007. By comparison, the median income of persons ages 18 through 65 who completed their education with a high school credential, including a ...GED...certificate, was approximately \$40,000. Among adults ages 25 and older, a lower percentage of dropouts are in the labor force compared with adults who earned a high school credential. Among adults in the labor force, a higher percentage of dropouts are unemployed compared with adults who earned a high school credential...Further, dropouts ages 25 or older reported being in worse health than adults who are not dropouts, regardless of income... (p. 5–6).

Disaggregating the numbers, it is clear that low-income youth drop out at rates nearly 10 times greater than their high-income peers. Hispanic students have the highest dropout rates, but looking more closely, there is an enormous difference in the dropout rates between U.S.-born Hispanic youth, approximately 11%, and foreign-born, 37.5%.

Differences are apparent in the dropout experiences of young men and women as well. A Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies report²² found that female dropouts were “six times as likely to have given birth and nine times as likely to be single mothers as

²¹ Cataldi, E. F., Laird, J., and KewalRamani, A. (2009). *High school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 2007* (NCES 2009-064). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2009064>.

²² Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2009). *The consequences of dropping out of high school*. Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University. Boston, Massachusetts. Available at: http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf.

their peers who were college students or four year college graduates (p. 6).” Additionally, “a very high share of these young unwed mothers lacking high school diplomas were poor/near poor and dependent on government assistance and in-kind transfers to support themselves and their children” (p. 8). Meanwhile, the report found that nearly 1 of every 10 young male dropouts was institutionalized by the justice system on a given day in 2006–2007, versus fewer than 1 of 33 high school graduates.

These costs to society and individuals of high school non-completion over a worker’s lifetime are estimated to be “negative net fiscal contribution to society of nearly -\$5,200, while the average high school graduate generates a positive lifetime net fiscal contribution of \$287,000”. Furthermore, “the average high school dropout will cost taxpayers over \$292,000 in lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs, and imposed incarceration costs relative to an average high school graduate” (p. 15).

Adults and Youth without College-Ready Skills

Meanwhile, even those students who do graduate often find that their education has not prepared them fully for college. Over 40% of all college enrollees test into developmental levels of math, reading, and writing, with minority students overrepresented in developmental classes.²³ Addressing these basic skill needs is the focus of the following section on the postsecondary and vocational success.

Adults and Youth without Job-Ready Skills

Even students with high school diplomas are not seen as “work ready” by the business community, which points out the poor preparation in writing in particular,²⁴ as well as in 21st century skills such as team cooperation and collaboration, problem solving, and lifelong learning.²⁵ There is a vital role for adult education and vocational training programs to play in the preparation of the workforce through youth workforce development programs, transition programs for youth with disabilities, vocational English classes, credential programs at community colleges, and for incumbent worker training offered on the job.

A recent report by Georgetown University economist Harry Holzer,²⁶ a presenter at the Changing the Odds Symposium, examines the effectiveness of community colleges in responding to labor market demands. The report identifies several promising models, but notes that:

²³ Strong American Schools. (2008). *Diploma to nowhere*. Available at: <http://www.deltacostproject.org/resources/pdf/DiplomaToNowhere.pdf>.

²⁴ Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools – A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Available at: <http://www.all4ed.org/files/WritingNext.pdf>.

²⁵ Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2008). *Education & competitiveness: A resource and policy guide*. Available at: http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/21st_century_skills_education_and_competitiveness_guide.pdf; Business Roundtable. (2009). *Getting ahead—staying ahead: Helping America’s workforce succeed in the 21st century*. Available at: http://www.businessroundtable.org/sites/default/files/BRT_Getting_Ahead_online_version.pdf.

²⁶ Holzer, H. J. & Nightengale, D. (2009). *Strong students, strong workers*. Center for American Progress. Available at: http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/12/pdf/strong_students.pdf.

...despite considerable improvement over the past decade, low-income youth and adults still have relatively limited community college enrollments, and often fail to complete a degree or certificate once they enroll. A range of barriers still limits their ability to successfully attend these institutions and to complete courses of study there...[and] community colleges are frequently disconnected from state and local workforce development systems...(p. 1).

Aligning and coordinating the training services of workforce development programs with education through innovations such as dual enrollment, career pathways, stackable credentials, and vocational education or vocational English could offer accelerated and market-ready training that could provide family-supporting wages. There is evidence that programs that integrate language learning with occupational skills foster greater persistence and outcomes.²⁷

Immigrant Adults with Limited English Proficiency

According to the 2008 American Community Survey (ACS), there are approximately 38 million foreign-born individuals living in the United States. This figure has quadrupled from 9.6 million in 1970. During much of the past decade, more than 1 million immigrants entered the U.S. legally each year and roughly another 500,000 entered illegally.

The United States is experiencing its largest ever wave of immigration. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that in 2005, 22 million people in the U.S. labor force were immigrants, or 15% of U.S. workers. Based on current trends, MPI estimates that by 2030, one-third to one-half of the national labor force will consist of immigrants.²⁸ In their report, “Improving Immigrant Workers’ Economic Prospects,” Beeler and Murray state:

Today’s U.S. economy is highly dependent on immigration, authorized and unauthorized, temporary and permanent. (Immigrants) are expected to be a critical driver of labor force growth when the first wave of baby boomers starts retiring in 2008. And without the contribution of immigrant labor, the output of goods and services in the United States would be at least \$1 trillion smaller than it is today.²⁹

Immigration and labor statistics make it clear that immigrants are playing an increasingly important role in the U.S. labor force, both at the higher and lower skill levels. However, wage data for the lower-skilled groups show that immigrants comprised more than a fifth of workers earning below twice the federal minimum wage (a common definition of “low income”).³⁰ From one-quarter to one-third of employed immigrants have less than a high

²⁷ Jenkins, D., Zeidenberg, M., & Kienzl, G. S. (2009, May). *Educational outcomes of the I-BEST, Washington State Community and Technical College System’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a multivariate analysis*. (CCRC Working Paper No. 16). New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Available at: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp>

²⁸ Lowell, B. L., Gelatt, J., & Batalova, J. (July, 2006). *Immigrants and labor force trends: The future, past, and present*. Migration Policy Institute Insight. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available at: http://www.migrationpolicy.org/ITFIAT/TF17_Lowell.pdf.

²⁹ Beeler, A., & Murray, J. (2007). *Improving immigrant workers’ economic prospects: A review of the literature*. In M. Fix (ed.), *Securing the future: U.S. immigrant integration policy, A reader*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

³⁰ Bernstein, J. (2007). *Work, work supports, and safety nets: Reducing the burden of low-incomes in America*. Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper #200. Available at: <http://www.sharedprosperity.org/bp200.html>.

school education, and almost half are limited English proficient (LEP). Immigrants comprise three-fourths of all U.S. workers with less than a ninth-grade education. On average, immigrants in the U.S. have significantly less education and fewer skills than the people they are replacing in the labor pool.³¹

Taken together, these trends lend new urgency to creating policies and practices that can address the needs of low-skilled immigrants who are not yet proficient in English so that opportunities to learn, work, and earn a family-supporting wage can be created and expanded.³²

To begin to address the trends, it is important to acknowledge that the foreign-born adult population in the United States is not a monolithic group and that it has widely differentiated needs and goals for skill training, English language learning, and vocational training. Some key distinctions with implications for the adult education and vocational training systems include:

Immigrants with limited native literacy. The English language learning (ELL) population includes individuals with no schooling or only an elementary education. Students who are non-literate in any language include refugees who may have never held a pencil or learned an alphabet, and immigrants from areas such as rural Mexico, Central America, Asia, and Haiti. These students face tremendous learning challenges, and teachers are often at a loss for how to integrate them into a conventional class where the ability to read and copy simple words is taken for granted. Most jobs available to immigrants with limited English skills are in the service industry, where wages are notoriously low, making this population of low literacy and low English proficiency extremely vulnerable to living in poverty.³³ The majority of immigrant population growth between 2000 and 2020 is projected to be those with the lowest levels of education.³⁴

Immigrants with higher education degrees. In 2005, more than 1.3 million college-educated immigrants, or one out of every five, in the United States were unemployed or significantly underemployed. Almost half (44%) of recent Latin American immigrants with a college degree or higher worked in unskilled jobs in the United States.³⁵ College-educated immigrants who lack full proficiency in English face severely limited professional opportunities. While these limitations affect wages for all immigrants, the negative effects are greater for those with higher levels of formal schooling, who are less likely to obtain the technical, managerial, or professional jobs for which they are trained than those with more English proficiency. “Welcome Back” centers, which

³¹ Powrie, J., & Wrigley, H. S. (forthcoming). *Meeting the challenge of educating and training our rapidly growing immigrant labor force*. Public Private Ventures.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Wrigley, H. S., Richer, E., Martinson, K., Kubo, H., & Strawn, J. (2003). *The Language of opportunity: Expanding employment prospects for adults with limited English skills*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Available at: <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0150.pdf>.

³⁴ Jones, D., & Kelly, P. (2007). *Mounting pressures facing the US workforce and increasing need for adult education and literacy*. New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy.

³⁵ Batalova, J., Fix, M., & Murray. (2007). *Measures of change: The demography and literacy of adolescent English learners*. Migration Policy Institute, National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy.

offer specialized English language learning through adult education and community college ESL programs for professionals seeking certification or licensure in the U.S. are a promising model for serving this population.

Immigrant youth and “generation 1.5.” We know that the majority (55%) of younger Hispanic students do not graduate from high school within 4 years. In areas like California, New York, and the Southwest, a high percentage of out-of-school youth are ELLs, including “late entry students” (those who entered the United States as older children or youth) who have dropped out of high school and those who have never gone to school in the United States. Surprisingly to some, the majority of adolescents nationwide (57%) who are designated as LEP are not foreign-born but U.S.-born. The Center for Immigrant Integration in Washington, DC, reports that up to 27% of U.S.-born students who are LEP are second generation, and 30% are third generation.³⁶ While these students might have the basic communication skills to converse with English speakers face to face, read teen magazines, and engage in everyday tasks requiring English, they often lack the language and literacy ability required for academic achievement, earning them the label “generation 1.5”—referring to a mix of both immigrant and native characteristics.

Countries of origin. Over one-third of all employed foreign-born workers are from Central America and Mexico. Of the 18.9 million employed foreign-born workers in the United States in 2002, 7.1 million (37%) were from Central America, primarily Mexico. Approximately 4.9 million (26%) of all employed immigrant workers were from Asia, 2.4 million (12%) from Europe, 1.7 million (9%) from the Caribbean, and 1.3 million (7%) from South America.³⁷ Data from the 2006 Current Population Survey indicates that foreign-born Mexican workers made up almost 5% of the total civilian labor force in the United States and almost 31% of all foreign-born workers. Over half worked in service and construction occupations. In fact, one in every five workers from Mexico worked in the construction industry,³⁸ an especially hard-hit industry in the economic downturn.

If any level of comprehensive immigration reform is enacted, the adult education system is likely to see millions of new learners enter local programs. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that approximately **6.4 million** unauthorized immigrants in the country will require English language instruction to gain the skills necessary to pass the naturalization exam and obtain legal permanent resident status and fully participate in the country’s civic life or in continuing education. These new learners will reflect the diversity of the immigrant population. Policies and programs need to plan to accommodate the diversity of needs and goals as well. The current adult education and training system has neither sufficient capacity nor strategies to adequately prepare the growing number of immigrant learners, and most

³⁶ Batalova, J., Fix, M., & Murray, J. (2007). *Measures of change: The demography and literacy of adolescent English learners*. Migration Policy Institute, National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy.

³⁷ 2002 Current Population Survey, March Supplement, reported in Grieco, E. (2004, January). *The foreign born in the US labor force*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

³⁸ 2006 Current Population Survey, reported in Migration Policy Institute. (2006). *Immigration facts: Mexican-born persons in the US civilian labor force*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/FS14_MexicanWorkers2006.pdf.

have limited practical experience in providing the services that many immigrants require to develop English fluency and employment skills.

Working and Learning Women

Women have unique—yet well-documented—needs to be able to participate in education, training, or the workforce. Chief among these is affordable, safe, and reliable child care. U.S. mothers continue to bear an unequal burden of responsibility for child care and housework, even if they are married. Adult education providers have struggled to provide or expand child care for their students for years, as this is a critical barrier to participation for many women. Community colleges also struggle to provide or expand child care for students, yet in both settings, demand far outstrips capacity, and the cost of onsite child care is often prohibitive. Heidi Hartmann, President of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, discussed the implication of the issues related to child care and women’s participation in education at the Changing the Odds Symposium, noting that 23.3% of all students in 2- or 4-year colleges are parents and that 17.8% of students in 2-year colleges are *single* parents. Of community college students who are parents, 76% are also working, and 35% of those working students work 30 or more hours per week. Policies that support families and children, such as affordable child care, paid sick days, family leave, and flexible time for study are seen in other high-income countries where women’s labor force participation is far greater than in the United States.

Understanding the demographic landscape can help policy makers and program managers shift resources and plan more appropriate programs. This understanding is becoming possible with better tracking systems and data that allows for disaggregation of identifiable sub-groups within the larger patterns, but there is still a long way to go before we can track individuals’ paths. Strengthened tracking systems and differentiated offerings are key, and will require the coordination of multiple federal and state systems and redesigns of intake, placement, and advancement models. Incentivizing this through WIA reauthorization funding would be appropriate and would support the Department of Education’s stated priorities for improved longitudinal data systems and a culture of data informed decision-making.

Achieving Postsecondary and Vocational Success

We *must* get more adults into postsecondary education if America is to meet its 21st century workforce demands, replace aging workers, and meet national goals of having an educated society. Glenn Comings, Deputy Assistant Secretary for OVAE, speaking at the Changing the Odds Symposium, clearly articulated that the Obama Administration's 2020 goals³⁹ to lead the world in college attainment cannot possibly be met without involving adults—those with and without a high school diploma. Other education policy reports and foundations have reached the same conclusion ([Lumina](#), [Center for American Progress](#), [The Education Trust](#), and the [National Center for Higher Education Management Systems](#)).

OVAE and foundation partners, such as the Fannie Mae Foundation and Lumina, have invested significant funds to identify successful models of transition from adult basic education, ESL, or GED programs into postsecondary institutions. Summer bridge programs, support groups, career and college counseling, freshman year initiatives, and peer mentors are among some of the successful strategies used. More investment is needed for scaling up these practices in adult education and community college programs across the country.

With recent access to disaggregated graduation data from institutions of higher education, we now know how truly dismal the graduation rates are for low-income, minority, or underprepared students. Nationally, the rates of graduation⁴⁰ show that:

Less than 40% of students earn their four-year degree in four years...roughly 57% [in six years]. Even giving institutions credit for students who transfer and graduate elsewhere only brings the average up to 63%, still less than two-thirds of all students. Graduation rates for minority students are substantially lower. Black students, for example, typically graduate at a lower rate than their white peers at the same institution. Black students also are disproportionately enrolled in colleges with overall graduation rates that are below average. As a result, less than half of black college students graduate within six years (p. 2).

Moreover, the rate at which low-income and minority students are entering postsecondary institutions lags behind higher income and white students in an inverse reflection of the population as a whole. As reported by the Education Trust:⁴¹

In recent years, America's Latino and African-American populations have grown faster than the white population. And those patterns will continue...the Latino population is projected to increase by 27% and the black population by 9%; meanwhile, the white population will grow by just 2%. Although the degree-attainment rates of minority and low-income students have improved over the past three decades, these rates have not kept pace with those of other students...the gaps that separate Latino and

³⁹ The White House Office of the Press Secretary. (February 24, 2009). Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/.

⁴⁰ Carey, K. (2008). *Graduation rate watch: Making minority student success a priority*. Washington, DC: Education Sector. Available at: http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/Graduation_Rate_Watch.pdf.

⁴¹ Engle, J. & Lynch, M. (2009). *Charting a necessary path: The baseline report of public higher education systems in the Access to Success initiative*. Education Trust. Available at: <http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/NASH-EdTrust.BaselineReport.pdf>.

African-American students from their white peers actually are wider today than in 1975, and the gap between low-income and high-income students has *doubled*. These degree attainment gaps are the result of gaps in both enrollment and graduation rates (p. 3–4).

For youth and adults who *do* begin postsecondary education, a full 40% of those entering 2-year colleges and 29% entering 4-year colleges⁴² may be told that their basic skills need remediation before beginning college-level work. This is true for students coming straight from high school with a diploma, those with a GED credential, and non-traditional adults who have spent many years out of education. Remedial classes often do not award credits toward degrees yet require tuition payments, a hardship for many nontraditional students.

Educators, policy makers, and the media have all noted with alarm the costs of remediation, and have laid blame with various educational sectors for the lack of preparedness of our high school graduates. However, it is time to change the conversation. First, remediation is not necessarily expensive, although it might be redundant. Remedial courses are typically offered in our nation's community colleges, where the average educational expenditure per student is lower than in any other type of college or university.⁴³ In an ideal world, all students would graduate from high school prepared to undertake college courses or enter the workforce. This is not the case, and until this becomes the case, it is our adult-serving institutions, particularly our community colleges and adult education programs, which need to rectify the situation.

Secondly, when remediation is done well, it works. In a study that tracked students through high school and into 2- and 4-year colleges, students who placed in remediation courses and who took and passed these courses performed and graduated at greater rates than their peers who did not enroll in or complete remediation courses.⁴⁴ Considerable research is underway on what works in remedial education, yet more is needed. Once again, it is informed decision-making based on disaggregated data that can allow programs and administrators to understand how remediation options can be responsive to various student needs.

Low-skilled adults do not have any time to waste, but most do have a lot of learning catch-up to do. Data show that only 14% of the adults served by state-administered adult education programs in the 2007–08 program year were functioning at an adult secondary education (ASE) level,⁴⁵ from which they could reasonably expect to transition into postsecondary education and vocational programs.

Accelerating learning for adults is a key factor toward their sustained motivation, engagement, and ultimate success. Several innovative programming ideas were shared at the

⁴² Strong American Schools. (2008). *Diploma to nowhere*. Available at: <http://www.deltacostproject.org/resources/pdf/DiplomaToNowhere.pdf>.

⁴³ Wellman, J., Desrochers, D., Lenihan, C., Kirshstein, R., Hurlburt, S., & Honegger, S. (2009). Trends in college spending: Where does the money come from? Where does it go? DeltaCost Project, Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.deltacostproject.org/resources/pdf/trends_in_spending-report.pdf.

⁴⁴ Attwell, P., Lavin, D., Domina, T., & Levey, T. (2006). New evidence on college remediation. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77, 5, 886-924.

⁴⁵ See data at <http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/reports/>.

Changing the Odds Symposium that speed the transition from low-skilled to postsecondary learner. These include:

- Programs which **contextualize** basic skills and strategies report greater persistence and completion rates for participants than do sequentially offered programs in which literacy skills are taught prior to work-related training.⁴⁶ At the Symposium, examples of successful contextualized programs from the Jobs for the Future *Breaking Through* initiative⁴⁷ were shared, such as teaching English for the workplace, or carpenters' mathematics. Most adults engage in education and training to meet immediate needs; providing learning opportunities that meet and go beyond those needs help adults generalize to more abstract goals as well as nurture their motivation and persistence. Creating these opportunities requires creative partnerships and alignment between education and vocational programs; the ability to mingle federal funds from Title I and Title II of WIA would incentivize contextualized learning programs.
- Re-conceptualizing how content is packaged into courses can allow for **compression and chunking** in new ways that can allow students to focus on the elements of a subject with which they are struggling, rather than be forced to retake an entire semester's course. Shared at the Symposium by Jonathan Gueverra, CEO of the Community College of the District of Columbia, were examples of repackaged basic math content: in one community college, working moms were offered a single course of study per semester with hours that coordinated with the public schools. Another example was decoupling content from the traditional course delivery schedule so that students could take and retake conceptual units—such as fractions—rather than an entire semester's course when they failed portions of the placement exam or class.
- **Blended learning** has also been shown to be very successful, not only for high-achieving and well practiced students,⁴⁸ but for adult new learners as well.⁴⁹ Blended learning pairs self-directed learning (usually online or computer-based) with opportunities to learn with peers and a teacher or tutor. The combinations of self-study and facilitated learning can take a myriad of configurations, but in nearly all comparison studies, students engaging in a blended option achieve as high as (or more than) peers in either pure online or classroom only settings, and report greater satisfaction with and persistence in the experience. Incentivizing creative blended options is a necessary innovation in adult education programming. Appropriate content needs to be created or compiled (or both) for online learning, instructors need to be given professional development to learn to facilitate blended learning classes, and programs need to be given guidance on how to account for student and teacher time.

⁴⁶ Chisman, F. (2009). *Expanding horizons: Pacesetters in adult education for work*. Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. Available at: <http://nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/Expanding.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Report, toolkit and resources available at <http://www.jff.org/projects/current/workforce/breaking-through/20>.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, (2009). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*, Washington, DC.

⁴⁹ McCain, M. (2009). *The power of technology to transform adult learning*. New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. Available at: http://nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/POWER_OF_TECH.pdf; National Institute for Literacy (2008). *Investigating the literacy and language thresholds for independent online learning*. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/NIFLOnlineLearningReport.pdf>.

The creative use of technology-based learning can help programs and funders accomplish these accelerations and innovations and take successful models to scale. The potential of technology-based learning is recognized in the administration's American Graduation Initiative⁵⁰ as a powerful means for providing access, experiential learning, and support. The Initiative plans for \$10 billion to be invested to fund the development of open, freely available courses. Making sure these funds are coordinated with WIA partners in communities, as well drawing upon existing research and development, will ensure that efforts are aligned and resources leveraged efficiently.

⁵⁰ The White House Office of the Press Secretary. (July 14, 2009). Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Excerpts-of-the-Presidents-remarks-in-Warren-Michigan-and-fact-sheet-on-the-American-Graduation-Initiative/.

Innovative Program Models for the 21st Century

The adult education and literacy program is unique within the U.S. education system in the diversity and range of students it serves. Adult literacy students enter with a broader range of goals and skill levels than traditional K–12, workforce education, or community college students. In 2007–2008, over 2.3 million adults enrolled in adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a second language (ESL) classes. These learners include immigrants and refugees who want to improve their English skills and improve their literacy, high school dropouts who want to obtain a postsecondary credential, job seekers who want to improve their basic skills, and adults who seek to enter postsecondary education. Enrollment statistics reflect this diversity: while about 14% of enrollees entered were at the adult secondary level, fully one third of students were at the lowest levels of literacy; 44% of all students were ESL learners.⁵¹

Despite the many indicators of the success of adult education, including determination of the program as one of only three U.S. Department of Education programs to receive an “Effective” rating by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB),⁵² there is need for expansion and change. As other sections in this report attest, changing demographics, economic conditions, and learners’ needs speak to the need for changes and innovation in adult education. In addition, many adults needing adult literacy instruction are not served. Programs across the country are running at full capacity and often must turn away adults who have summoned the courage and motivation to take on further education. The lack of availability of sufficient instructional opportunities withers motivation – an essential learner resource that could augment the system’s efforts.⁵³

Need for Reauthorization

Title II of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) is the legislative authority for adult education, and its reauthorization has been delayed for seven years. At the federal and state levels, the lack of new legislation has stifled growth and discouraged the implementation of improvement plans. States have not developed new state plans that reassess their needs, allocate services, and define state priorities. Additionally, adult education programming, accountability, and funding systems are ready for a check-up to foster innovation. Reauthorization can be the mechanism to prompt this check-up, and with it comes the opportunity to develop new programs and innovative models.

At the Changing the Odds Symposium, participants discussed innovative program models and approaches that could improve programs, reflect the needs of adult students in the 21st century, and improve the odds of success for adult literacy learners. Questions discussed included: What are elements of successful models? How can we scale those elements up? How do we coordinate and align various systems? Key issues discussed included:

- Organizing the delivery system toward learner needs and goals;

⁵¹ See data at <http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/reports/>.

⁵² See OMB at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/summary/10000180.2006.html>.

⁵³ Porter, K. E., Cuban, S., Comings, J. P., & Chase, V. (2005). *One day I will make it: A study of adult student persistence in library literacy programs*. New York: MDRC.

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- Innovative ways to reach the large number of adults with low skills who are not in programs;
 - Case management for learners to support learners across various service providers;
 - Professional development and professionalization needs in the workforce; and
 - Revisiting the national reporting system (NRS) to improve it and align it with programmatic and policy changes.

Learner-Centered Delivery System

Local adult education programs organize instruction according to educational functioning levels that describe student literacy and language abilities. There are six levels each for ABE/ASE and ESL, ranging from literacy to advanced levels, with learners advancing levels as they improve their skills. The levels help programs develop instruction and provide benchmarks to measure learner progress. The educational levels, however, reflect a traditional, academic approach that often does not match adult student needs. While the rare adult learner may advance through the levels to obtain secondary credentials, most learners are unaware of level progression and enter adult literacy classes with specific needs and to achieve individual goals.

Adult literacy learners fall into several categories, according to their skills and goals, as they enter programs. At the low end, many ABE and ESL learners attend classes to improve basic literacy and numeracy skills. At the other extreme, out-of-school youth and others attend classes to help them to pass GED tests or attain a secondary diploma. In between are adults with some basic skills who want to obtain better job skills or enter community college.

For adult ESL learners, educational background influences the rate of progress an adult is able to make in learning English and developing literacy skills, more than culture, age, or learning style. Yet the current adult ESL system does not take this into account; nor are literacy levels in the native language considered. As discussed above, this population represents an incredible range of skill levels, backgrounds, and experiences with literacy and language learning.⁵⁴

Rather than rely on a single approach and corresponding set of educational levels and program offerings for all of types of learners, a learner-centered delivery system would organize program areas and classes around these or similar learners' skills and goals. Within each "special focus,"⁵⁵ programs, instruction, and learning could then be designed to help learners achieve their specific goals on an accelerated timeline. Educational levels may be part of some instructional categories, for example, ESL learners and learners receiving basic literacy instruction, but would not be needed for workforce or GED learners.

The advantage to this type of segmented organization is that it would provide a uniform programmatic structure within instructional categories that would create classes that were

⁵⁴ Wrigley, H S. (2008). From survival to thriving: Toward a more articulated system for adult English language learners. Published in the proceedings of the 2008 LESLLA Symposium in Antwerp, Belgium (Eds., I. van de Craats and J. Kurvers).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

homogeneous in learner needs, skills, and goals. The segmenting would allow for clearly defined curriculum and assessments, as well as the type of teaching experience and professional development needed within each level. For learners, this approach to program organization offers a clear connection between goals, instruction, and outcomes. Students would have a course of instruction with steps toward a definable and achievable goal that meets their needs.

Reaching Low-Skilled Adults

Many low-skilled adults who could benefit from adult literacy instruction do not attend classes, due to lack of knowledge about programs or their own literacy needs, lack of motivation, or because no services are available to them. The state-administered system currently enrolls only a fraction of the 44 million adults with Basic and Below Basic document literacy as reported by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL).⁵⁶ NCSALL's research has shown what many adult educators know: that learners stop out of adult literacy and return at different times over their lives.⁵⁷

Rather than relying on these learners to someday make their way to classes or overlooking them entirely, a more responsive delivery system is needed, with approaches that make adult literacy more accessible. Increased use of technology is one obvious way to try to reach learners. As personal computers, cell phones, and PDAs become widespread, adult literacy programs can take advantage of these technologies to reach adults who are unable or unwilling to attend traditional classes. Existing and emerging websites, such as USALearns and Learner Web,⁵⁸ are a step in this direction, and provide free access to literacy resources.

Technology-based and other self-directed resources also provide a missing link to services for those adults who attend literacy classes periodically but could benefit when not in classes from easy access to materials, instruction, and tutors, who can help them on a just-in-time basis. The existence of such approaches to instruction would encourage motivation and persistence, and these approaches deserve increased support in an innovative adult literacy instructional system.

Case Management

Many adults entering adult education have only a vague sense of their needs and goals for participating. Most learners also lack an understanding of the education and workforce training system options available to them. Along with personal and situational barriers to learning, this lack of information inhibits participation and prevents learners from charting a clear, realistic path to meeting their education goals.

⁵⁶ Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., & Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in everyday life: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2007-480). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

⁵⁷ Comings, J. (2009). Student persistence in adult literacy and numeracy programs. In S. Reder and J. Bynner (Eds.), *Tracking adult literacy and numeracy: Findings from longitudinal research*. New York: Routledge.

⁵⁸ Learner Web for Adults Continuing to Learn. (2007). *Using the Web to improve adult education*. Available at: <http://www.learnerweb.org/infosite/index.html>; U.S.A. Learns. Available at: <http://www.usalearns.org/>.

To address this need, Symposium participants, as well as the Commission on Adult Literacy's report and the adult learner alumni group, VALUE,⁵⁹ propose a case management system as a means to help adult students navigate the education, training, and community adult services for which they are eligible. This system would capitalize on the motivation expressed by learners' initial engagement.

Case managers would work in conjunction with multiple agencies but would consider the adult learners as their primary clients. One Stop Centers, funded through local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) were envisioned as offering such a service, but by most accounts,⁶⁰ they have failed to live up to their potential, in large part because of a lack of local, state, and federal alignment of efforts. A renewed approach is needed to empower a central agency or professionals to work with learners and workers across education, training, and adult services in a way that would strengthen the adult literacy system, learners' families, and by extension, the workforce.

Waivers and Demonstration Programs

Fostering innovation and change is difficult in the environment of categorical program funding that exists today in adult education and related service delivery systems. Regulations and requirements that come with public funds often constrain the implementation of new ideas. As this paper demonstrates, participants at the Changing the Odds Symposium and other leaders in adult literacy have many intriguing approaches for improving services. Implementing these and other changes may not require additional funding but often cannot be done without violating federal or state grant requirements.

One way to allow programs to experiment with new approaches is for the U.S. Department of Education to allow waivers of federal and state rules that may be barriers to innovations. Waivers would allow a creative program, LEA, or state to make changes without bureaucratic barriers. Without this option, adult educators face limitations in trying anything new, leaving the field reliant on innovations coming from other program areas, Congress, or other sectors. Charter schools have tapped this approach to develop innovations in K–12 education in some states.

Demonstration grants are an additional way to foster innovation. Through this type of grant program, states and local programs can try new approaches and ideas to service delivery that do not take away from existing services. OVAE could set priorities for demonstration projects, or topics could be left for states and programs to develop on their own.

⁵⁹ National Commission on Adult Literacy, New York, (2008). *Reach higher, America: Overcoming crisis in the U.S. workforce*. New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy; see <http://www.valueusa.org/>.

⁶⁰ Holzer, H. J., & Nightengale, D. (2009). *Strong students, strong workers*. Center for American Progress; The AFL-CIO Working for America Institute. (2009). *Fulfilling the promise of the Workforce Investment Act: A survey of labor representatives on Workforce Investment boards*. Washington, DC: The AFL-CIO Working for America Institute. Available at: <http://www.workingforamerica.org/pdf/WIBSurveyReportPDFFinal.pdf>; Business Roundtable. (2009). *Getting ahead—staying ahead: Helping America's workforce succeed in the 21st century*.

Need for Professional Development Mechanisms

The ability to implement innovations and improve program quality is profoundly dependent on a well planned and funded professional development system for adult educators – a resource that is sorely lacking in adult education. The lack of a full-time workforce infrastructure with a steady professional development delivery mechanism hampers innovation and continuous program improvement. It is difficult for programs and providers of technical assistance and professional development to roll out and build upon initiatives, disseminate best practice and research findings, and connect student outcomes to teacher performance.

Instructors in adult education programs may not have education training and experience in the field. They may not have had coursework on adult learning theories and practices or in the pedagogy of their content area, and often lack opportunities to engage in high-quality professional development on related topics. There is no nationally recognized certification for instruction in adult education, and few states have requirements for coursework. Most of the workforce is part-time, with few if any benefits such as paid professional development and planning granted by their employment.⁶¹ Turnover among the instructor ranks is very high, a problem that diffuses momentum behind implementation efforts, depletes program resources, and challenges programs to deliver high-quality and effective instruction to learners.

Assuring high-quality instruction requires that there be well-qualified instructors dedicated to delivering it, and who stay current on evidence-based practices. This is currently impossible to assume in the federally funded or community-based volunteer adult education programs. Raising the quality of instruction will require the system to engage in a campaign of professionalization (which will challenge budgets), coordination with state higher education systems, and the commitment of federal, state, and local educational agencies.

The National Reporting System (NRS): Revisiting Accountability

Implemented in 2000, the NRS is the accountability system for the adult education program. It has had a substantial effect on the adult education system. The NRS has produced state and national data that describe students and outcomes that have guided federal and state program improvement efforts.⁶² The implementation of the system has mandated a common language of performance reporting and goal attainment that has focused state efforts on improving instruction, goal setting, and data quality. Accountability has helped programs define quality and has given states targeted goals that guide improvement efforts.

After 10 years, however, it is time to review and evaluate the NRS. Such a review would include examining data collection methodologies and measures of educational gain, employment, and postsecondary transition to assess their utility, burden to states, and potential changes. Accountability systems work best when they are aligned with the policies, goals, and services in the program. Consequently, a review of the NRS must consider

⁶¹ National Commission on Adult Literacy (2008). *Reach higher, America: Overcoming crisis in the U.S. workforce*. New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy.

⁶² See <http://www.nrsweb.org/NRSwork> for information about the NRS and professional development efforts to promote data use for program improvement within the states.

any new programmatic or policy changes to adult education, such as those discussed above, included in reauthorization. These changes may identify new measures, reporting requirements, and methods to include within the NRS to permit monitoring and evaluation of their performance toward meeting policy objectives and impact on the delivery system.

The NRS, like all accountability systems, is not only reflective of programmatic activity but can promote change and innovation. Steve Reder, in Senate testimony in 2009⁶³ and at the Changing the Odds Symposium, has suggested more sensitive and contextualized learning and goal attainment measures that can create incentives for new programs, models, and partnerships. His suggestions include determining how to account for online and self-study learning, longer term outcomes to track students who “stop out” and return, and learners who enter postsecondary institutions. Throughout this document, we have shown that the current lack of disaggregated data makes it difficult to design programs for unique groups or plan for demographic trends.

Creating incentives for shared accountability across Title I programs (Department of Labor) and Title II (Department of Education) could facilitate tracking learners’ efforts and successes across education and training programs. A strong accountability system would allow the field to monitor the effect of changes and innovations, and would continue to guide program improvement efforts by providing a formal and standardized means of regular evaluation and monitoring.

Conclusion

Changing the odds for low-income, low-skilled adults is going to require focused efforts in multiple sectors to acknowledge and address the existing barriers to their participation, access, achievement, and transition to further education and training. Addressing infrastructure barriers through policy changes is critical. The levers of reauthorization of WIA and funding of the American Graduation Initiative are important actions to take immediately. The demographic and economic trends and pressures domestically and internationally highlight the dire need to pay attention to this long-ignored segment of our population. The engagement and partnership of other public and private agencies to create more robust avenues for advancement is critical and requires clear communication from the adult education field about needs and opportunities. This paper joins a growing body of compelling, data-informed evidence showing that this population is a vital growth sector for America’s workforce and social well-being.

⁶³ Testimony of Dr. Stephen Reder to the House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Competitiveness (May 5, 2009). Available at: <http://edlabor.house.gov/documents/111/pdf/testimony/20090505StephenRederTestimony.pdf>.



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AGENDA

Changing the Odds: Informing Policy with Research on How Adult Learners Succeed September 16, 2009 | Washington, DC

- 8:15 a.m. Registration and Continental Breakfast
- 8:45 a.m. Welcome: Larry Condelli, Managing Director, AIR
Opening Remarks: Sol Pelavin, President and CEO, AIR
Overview: Heidi Silver-Pacuilla, Senior Research Analyst, AIR
- 9:00 a.m. Keynote Speaker: Stephen Reder, Professor, Portland State University
- 9:30 a.m. Panel Discussion: Achieving Postsecondary and Vocational Success
Moderator: Rita Kirshstein, Managing Director, AIR
Jonathan Gueverra, CEO, Community College of the District of Columbia
Judy Taylor, Program Director, Jobs for the Future
- 10:10 a.m. Special Interest Group Discussions
- 10:30 a.m. Break
- 10:45 a.m. Roundtable Panel Response to Questions
- 11:00 a.m. Panel Discussion: Innovative Program Models for the 21st Century
Moderator: Hans Bos, Vice President, EHDW, AIR
Jane Oates, Assistant Secretary, Employment and Training Administration (ETA),
U. S. Department of Labor
Nancy Williams, Director, National Programs, Verizon Foundation
Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Senior Policy Analyst, Center for Law and Social Policy
- 11:40 a.m. Special Interest Group Discussions
- 12:10 p.m. Roundtable Panel Response to Questions
- 12:30 p.m. Networking Lunch
- 1:30 p.m. Panel Discussion: Changing Demographics and Changing Markets
Moderator: Heide Spruck Wrigley, Researcher, LiteracyWork International, Inc.
Michael Fix, Sr. Vice President & Director of Studies, Migration Policy Institute
Heidi Hartmann, President, Institute for Women's Policy Research
Harry Holzer, Professor, Georgetown University
- 2:10 p.m. Special Interest Group Discussions
- 2:40 p.m. Roundtable Panel Response to Questions
- 3:00 p.m. Wrap up, Mark Kutner, Vice President, EHDW, AIR

AIR thanks all the attendees at the Changing the Odds Symposium for their participation and commitment to the goals of improving the lives of adult learners.

