

April 2003

**“As Long As It Takes”  
Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence  
in Library Literacy Programs**

Weak literacy skills can mean the difference between holding a job and being unemployed, can limit career choices, and can prevent people from participating in the civic life of their community. Research shows that meaningful improvements in adult literacy require a “threshold” level of participation in an adult literacy program; sporadic participation may well make little difference in literacy. Unfortunately, however, in a one-year period, most adult literacy students spend fewer than 70 hours engaged in organized literacy instruction. Given their low initial literacy levels, many would need more hours of instruction to make progress and several years of study to accomplish their literacy goals.

Many public libraries in the United States provide literacy services, and some provide direct instruction through individual tutoring, classes or small groups, and computer-assisted learning — often to students who have no other education options because of their low literacy skills. Concerns about low levels of student persistence have become a major policy and program issue for library literacy programs and other providers of adult education, especially as more federal funding has become contingent on showing student progress.

With a goal of addressing problems of student persistence, the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Funds launched the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative in 1996 and contracted with the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy to study the effort. Of the fifteen libraries participating in the initiative, five are the focus of the LILAA persistence study. Each of these five libraries and their nine branch programs (described in Table ES.1) developed plans to improve student persistence, and they received funding from the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Funds to implement service enhancements in 2000. This report describes the adult learners who are served by the programs, analyzes initial patterns of learner persistence (in terms of both length and intensity) prior to the full implementation of program enhancements, and documents the early progress of these programs in implementing innovations to increase participation. Because this is the first study of its kind, the findings break new ground in many respects.

The LILAA Persistence Study

Table ES.1

The Five Libraries Participating in the LILAA Persistence Study

Library	Number of Branches	Program Name/Units	Where Program Is Housed	Program Features
Greensboro (NC) Public Library	9	Part of Literacy 2000	Chavis and Glenwood branches <sup>a</sup>	Chavis offers afternoon and evening GED classes and a computer lab. Glenwood offers small-group instruction in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), one-on-one tutoring, and a computer lab.
New York Public Library	85	9 Centers for Reading and Writing (CRWs) in 3 boroughs	Fordham (Bronx), Wakefield (Bronx), and Seward Park (Manhattan) branches	Fordham serves 150 students with individual tutorials and in small groups and offers a computer lab for independent literacy self-instruction. Wakefield serves about 100 students, mostly of Afro-Caribbean origin, in small groups and computer self-study; offers jobs search resources. Seward Park serves a diverse group of 80 students in small-group tutoring.
Oakland (CA) Public Library	19	Second Start	Downtown office building near the library	Founded in 1984, the program offers classes and one-on-one tutoring through a mix of 150 volunteers in addition to professional staff; with 20 computers, offers computer-assisted instruction.
Queens Borough (NY) Public Library	62	6 Adult Learning Centers (ALCs)	Central (Jamaica), Flushing, and Rochdale Village branches	Founded in 1977, the 6 ALCs enroll over 2,500 adults per year, offering ESOL and basic literacy instruction.
Redwood City (CA) Public Library	3	Project READ	Redwood City Public Library, with services in other community organizations, including schools, a jail, and a halfway house	More than 180 volunteers tutor approximately 200 adults one-on-one and in small groups; includes a learning disabilities program. Two-thirds of adult students are Hispanic.

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>Quantitative data were collected only from the Glenwood program.

## Key Findings

### **The Adult Learners and Their Initial Patterns of Participation**

- **Overall, the literacy levels of students in the LILAA programs were low, and native English speakers, on average, achieved at lower levels than those who were learning English.**

At the start of this study, 250 students took literacy tests, and a follow-up test was scheduled for one year later. Average initial scores ranged from near the third-grade level on assessments of reading, phonetic decoding, and comprehension to the fifth-grade level on a test of vocabulary. Average scores for students who were learning English exceeded average scores for native English speakers who were participating in adult basic education (ABE) programs, by one to three grade levels, depending on the test used. This difference may have arisen in part because the students learning English may have had stronger literacy skills in their native language. In any case, these low initial levels of literacy suggest that students need to participate in many hours of instruction over an extended period in order to achieve their literacy goals.

- **Adults participating in the LILAA programs all share one thing in common — a desire to improve their literacy skills — but in some other ways they are a diverse group, reflecting the variety of the communities served.**

The clientele of library literacy programs very much reflect the characteristics of their communities as well as local perceptions of the library programs and their services. The adult learners in these programs were almost entirely people of color (less than 5 percent were white), with each site drawing half or more of its students from a single racial or ethnic group. All the programs attracted students of a broad age range. Slightly more than one-third of students (36 percent) were between ages 21 and 35, and slightly more than one-third (36 percent) were between ages 36 and 50. Eight percent were younger than 21, and a full 20 percent were older than 50.

- **Prior to the implementation of program innovations, the length and intensity of students' participation in services fell short of the amount needed to improve literacy levels substantially.**

Prior to the full implementation of innovations to support student persistence, only two-thirds of the adults entering the programs participated at any level in the third month of follow-up. After this rapid early drop-off in participation, the participation rate continued to decline, gradually dropping to 28 percent in the twelfth month of follow-up and to 15 percent in the eighteenth month. Entrants averaged 57 hours of participation over 18 months, though in months when students were active, they averaged 7 hours of participation per month, or less than 2 hours per week.

There do not seem to be major systematic differences among learners by gender, but students over 36 years of age and those employed full time at entry tended to participate more. There are some differences across racial and ethnic groups, but these are intertwined with differences related to local program characteristics and communities, because groups tend to be clustered in specific sites. There are major differences in participation according to learners' primary mode of instruction; those primarily working with an individual tutor participated the most, and those studying primarily in classroom settings participated the least. However, this effect could also be driven by local program differences (sites tended to emphasize a particular mode of instruction) or by differences in the characteristics of participants in each mode (because different students were attracted to different modes of learning).

- **Movements in and out of the program were frequent.**

Many students who stopped participating did so abruptly (without a gradual decline in hours), and about one-third of those who stopped participating for a month returned to the program in some later month. Maintaining contact with a program's currently inactive learners could be an important support to student persistence.

- **Students in these library literacy programs used the services in four different ways during the early phase of the LILAA initiative, suggesting that a range of programmatic responses may be needed to address low participation.**

Some adult literacy students are *intermittent participants* who join and leave a program several times. Breaks in participation are often caused by a personal crisis, and students return when the problem has passed. Programs should help these students maintain a connection during periods of inactivity and should welcome them back when they are able to resume participation. *Short-term students* participate intensely but briefly to accomplish a specific goal, such as admission to a training program or preparation for a citizenship test. Programs should help such learners identify long-term goals and other programs that they can use. *Long-term students* are active in programs for an extended period, often participating in computer-assisted instruction or self-study activities as well as tutoring and classes. For some, specific, realistic literacy goals can be developed, but others participate because it provides social interaction and a sense of community. *Mandatory participants* are required to attend a program as a condition of receiving some type of aid or to comply with conditions of parole. If these learners can identify goals of their own — related to but separate from the agency that referred them — this could help motivate them to participate more substantially.

- **Many adult learners face serious difficulties in other aspects of their lives, and these often hinder their efforts to participate steadily and intensely in literacy services.**

The adult learners in library literacy programs are almost entirely from low-income households, and a substantial minority may have undiagnosed learning disabilities that hamper their progress in the literacy program and in other aspects of their lives. They may also have health problems or histories of substance abuse that have prevented them from achieving steady employment. Those who are learning English may be relatively new to the United States, socially isolated, and struggling to acclimate themselves to a new culture. Some have been in abusive family relationships and have not received emotional support in their efforts to improve their literacy skills.

These patterns of participation illustrate the importance of the LILAA initiative and the need to create broad-based interventions that extend and deepen engagement in program literacy activities. Given most adult learners' low levels of literacy, they will make only slow progress in meeting their literacy goals with the amount of participation that was reported in the early stages of the LILAA initiative.

### **Early Implementation of Persistence Innovations**

The LILAA persistence study involves a focus on student persistence and the implementation of specific innovations in four categories: *information gathering* to learn more about students and developments in the adult literacy field, *instructional improvements* to make instructional techniques more engaging and useful, *operational changes* to reform program procedures and make the services more accessible, and *support services* to help students overcome personal and social barriers to persistence.

- **In the initial implementation phase, the LILAA initiative's continued focus on improving student persistence shaped local programs' behavior, and the resulting search for ways to achieve this goal had more significance than many of the specific innovations that were originally planned.**

During the initial implementation phase, from January 2000 to June 2001, some planned interventions were dropped or delayed, while others moved ahead and new ones emerged. The constant during this period was the emphasis within the LILAA project on increased student persistence, both as a goal to be sought and as an operational indicator of student progress to be tracked.

- **Information that the programs collected at the start of the initiative concerning students' needs and perspectives and alternative program approaches did not lead to major changes in local plans for reform; most sites focused on their existing plans for innovations.**

As part of the LILAA persistence study, programs were expected to collect information from participants about their needs, the barriers they faced to more intensive participation, and

their ideas about how to improve program services. The findings from this data collection effort — following the model of action research — were to be used in the design of subsequent interventions. In most cases, the information gathering was done more slowly than originally envisioned. Programs typically began to move forward with new interventions before completing efforts to fully document and formally analyze the participants' perspectives on possible improvements, though, in some cases, information was used to justify changes already under way or to refine and add new strategies.

- **Throughout the initial implementation period, the literacy programs focused mostly on improving instruction and changing operational procedures.**

Instructional innovations included improved student orientations and tutor training, new ways to build more effectively on learners' goals, new methods of delivering literacy services (for example, through enhanced computer labs or new methods of group instruction), and clearer standards for instruction to ensure that each student received services meeting a minimum threshold of adequacy. Operational strategies involved changing and expanding program hours. These enhancements aimed to improve the direct services in library literacy programs.

- **Support services were the most difficult innovation for the library literacy programs to implement.**

Some adult learners arrived at the literacy program needing multiple support services. Because library literacy programs could not directly offer all the needed supports (such as child care, counseling, health services, transportation assistance) even if they wished to, efforts to enhance such offerings were dependent on the cooperation of other agencies, many of which were already hard-pressed to meet the demand for their services. In addition, some libraries were hesitant to take on the responsibility of addressing the support needs of adult learners, out of concern that this could be a “slippery slope” pulling them into the role of a social service provider and diverting them from the core mission of improving literacy. Their reluctance was also connected to the long-term costs of such services and to worries about not being able to continue services to students in need. Finally, some library staff members were concerned about the equity of providing special support services to learners in literacy programs when other library patrons might have as great a need for such assistance.

- **Data collection and reporting on students' characteristics and participation improved over time, though the problems encountered may herald difficulties to be faced as federal reporting requirements increase.**

At the outset of the persistence study, the library literacy programs had varied experiences in data collection; some were able to meet the project's requirements with only modest adjustments, while others needed substantial help in making changes. As part of the initial implementation phase, the programs built new data collection systems or enhanced existing ones

and were able to provide information about learners' background characteristics and hours of participation. However, these improvements required new commitments of staff time for data collection and reporting, which in this case were supported by special project funding. In addition, the data collection effort raised concerns about confidentiality, because some staff saw it as contrary to traditional library values, which hold that patrons can use services as they wish, without fear that anyone is monitoring their activities.

- **As the program innovations begin to take hold, there are some signs of an encouraging trend in the intensity of participation among students who are active in the programs.**

It is premature to judge whether the program interventions will increase learner persistence, but there are early suggestions of encouraging trends in the intensity of participation among active students. Those who entered a library literacy program in 2001 participated for more hours while active than their counterparts who entered in 2000. However, the percentage of students who remained active over time did not increase. Further analysis of these trends will be a focus of the final report.

## **Early Implementation Lessons**

At this early stage in program implementation, the lessons from the LILAA persistence study center on key challenges in developing a strong initial connection with adult learners and on promising approaches that are suggested by the initial year's experience.

- **Adult learners expressed two types of goals, and literacy programs need to find ways to acknowledge and build on each of these.**

Many literacy students may have specific goals, such as passing the General Educational Development (GED) examination or an occupational test, reading job-related material more quickly and accurately, or reading stories to a young child. Such *instrumental goals* can motivate many adult learners to participate in a literacy program. But some students may also express broader goals that may initially strike program staff as unfocused or unrealistic. Underlying these *transformational goals* may be a profound desire to improve the conditions of one's life, to expand one's repertoire of skills, or to change one's social identity. Aspirations like these can also be a motivator of long-term participation in a program, especially if they can be linked to intermediate objectives. Literacy programs should seek ways to tap into such aspirations, and initial efforts at goal-setting should not be restricted in ways that might exclude or devalue these more nebulous but still-important student goals.

- **Learners benefited from different types of sponsors — individuals who provided continuing encouragement and support. Literacy programs could help students identify people who can play these roles and could support sponsors' efforts.**

Because most adult learners face many challenges outside the literacy program, problems may interrupt participation, and disappointments may undermine motivation. Early experience in the persistence study suggests that students can benefit from different types of sponsors. *Personal sponsors* are often family members or close friends who have a long-term relationship with a student and can provide continuing emotional, literacy, and informational support. *Intermediate sponsors* typically play a supportive role through a student's participation in a religious, social, self-help, or educational institution. *Official sponsors* are professionals such as social workers, welfare case managers, literacy staff members, or parole officers who are providing intermittent, targeted institutional support to students. Library literacy programs can assist students in identifying individuals and organizations to serve in sponsoring roles and can aid sponsors in their efforts.

- **Learners see library literacy programs as caring and respectful and, hence, as different from other educational or social service organizations with which they are involved. Library literacy programs need to preserve this personalized atmosphere while simultaneously emphasizing more intensive participation.**

Directors of the LILAA programs reported that many students were demoralized by the feeling that schools or other program providers did not treat them with respect or strive to meet their needs. In response, and noting that many students are members of minority groups, directors have attempted to create a climate that — unlike mainstream institutions — reflects students' cultural experiences and values. Many students report that libraries feel different, offering them a caring and respectful setting in which to improve their literacy skills and express themselves. At the same time, the LILAA initiative and the early experience in the first program year support the need to strengthen instruction, provide cultural diversity training to tutors, and build a community that is open and communicative. Libraries should be careful to preserve their existing atmosphere as they work to strengthen these aspects of literacy programs.

## **Implications of the Findings for the Project**

This initial research has also highlighted several key themes that cut across the literacy programs in the LILAA persistence study. At times in this report, findings challenge both the stereotypical views of what “all” literacy programs and students look like and the contention that all programs are different because of unique local circumstances. Future research will continue to explore both the diversity of programs and people and the patterns of circumstances and behavior. In addition, the research will continue to explore whether and how library literacy programs have come to understand the attractions of participation for students and the barriers they face and have crafted effective strategies to increase the benefits and reduce the costs of participation.

The findings of this interim report set the stage for further analysis to be presented in a final report scheduled for the fall of 2003. That report will focus on five questions:



1. *What are the key factors supporting and inhibiting participation in adult literacy programs? What are the implications of these factors for the design of strategies to improve learner persistence?*
2. *Over time, how did the sites in the persistence study change their operations to support student persistence more effectively? What innovations were strengthened or put in place during the second and third year of the initiative? What operational lessons emerged as programs worked to support improved persistence?*
3. *As the reforms took effect, did student persistence improve over time? Did learners who entered the LILAA programs during this later period persist longer or participate more intensely? Were there differences among types of students? Were there differences across the sites?*
4. *Are there types of innovations that appear to be especially promising as ways to improve student persistence? What efforts and resources were needed to put these innovations in place? What are the implications for future program design and operations?*
5. *What is the relationship between participation in library literacy services and improved literacy skills? What were the gains in literacy achievement test scores between the initial testing of students and a follow-up test? Did students who participated more in services show greater gains? Were there types of students who showed especially strong gains? Who showed little or no gains? What are the implications for program design?*

The upcoming research will also explore how library literacy programs fit within the broader adult education system.

Each of these questions breaks new ground for program operations and research on adult literacy. The answers will help program operators and funders more effectively serve adults who face serious barriers to full participation in the nation's economy and civic life.