

“I DID IT FOR MYSELF”

Studying Efforts to Increase
Adult Learner Persistence
In Library Literacy Programs

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Overview

Learning to read and write is a serious challenge for adult students, many of whom enter literacy programs with low skills, special learning needs, or negative past experiences in school. Adult responsibilities make it especially challenging for these students to persist in a literacy program long enough to make meaningful progress toward reaching their literacy goals.

Launched in 1999 and funded by the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Funds, the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative is aimed at helping literacy programs at public libraries across the country implement strategies to improve persistence among adult students. These strategies aim to make program attendance easier by offering child care, transportation, and expanded hours of operation. Instructional priorities include making program instruction more engaging and relevant by adapting curricula (often designed for children) to adult interests and needs, improving teacher and tutor training, and identifying potential barriers to persistence at program entry.

As part of the LILAA initiative, in 2000 MDRC and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) began a three-year study of the implementation and effectiveness of strategies to increase student persistence in the adult literacy programs of five public libraries: Redwood City Public Library and Oakland Public Library in California, New York Public Library and Queens Borough Public Library in New York City, and Greensboro Public Library in North Carolina. Researchers are (1) collecting and analyzing data on demographic characteristics, program retention, hours spent in literacy activities, and student goals; and (2) studying students’ experiences in the programs by conducting extensive ethnographic interviews, observations of classes and tutoring sessions, and focus groups.

This report describes the design of the LILAA persistence study, the strategies that participating libraries are using to increase student persistence, and emerging implementation issues. It describes existing patterns in student persistence, identifies factors that support or inhibit persistence, and begins to explore the relationship between program strategies and persistence. Early emerging findings, to be tested in later analysis, suggest that three categories of themes and their related strategies are particularly important in explaining student persistence:

- **Programmatic.** The programs in this study are able to provide individualized attention to students because they have stable leadership, access to technology, solid financial support, and relatively small student populations. Differences among the literacy programs do emerge, however, in terms of their integration into the larger library organization, which can affect program strategies.
- **Instructional.** The programs in this study try to be innovative in tailoring instructional methods to students’ needs while maintaining an assessment system that allows them to measure learning gains. Relevant, high-quality instruction, appropriate to the reading level of students, is important.
- **Student-based.** Because the programs must address the needs of highly diverse students, they seek to develop strategies that can accommodate students’ cultural and personal identities, goals, and learning disabilities as well as the interests of those who encouraged them to enter the program.

Further lessons about the implementation and impacts of persistence strategies in library literacy programs will emerge over the next two years — through reports on program implementation, levels of student persistence, and the relationship between persistence and literacy test scores — and will culminate in recommendations for program design and policy.

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Internet Sites Relating to the LILAA Persistence Study

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Greensboro Public Library

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Redwood City Public Library

<http://www.redwoodcity.org/library/rcpl.html>

Queens Borough Public Library

<http://www.queenslibrary.org>

Oakland Public Library

<http://www.oaklandlibrary.org>

Preface

This report on student persistence in five public libraries that are taking part in the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative is an important addition to MDRC's growing portfolio of education program evaluations. From its studies of adult education provided to welfare recipients, MDRC has found that many adult students do not participate long enough to reap substantial learning gains. In response to this challenge, the library literacy programs in the persistence study are offering new types of services and instruction, such as child care and curricula designed for adults, that are intended specifically to foster persistence among the adult students whom they serve.

An evaluation of library-based literacy programs on the scale of the LILAA persistence study is a new endeavor for the literacy field. The effort is already yielding a sharper picture of the unique approaches that library-based programs bring to adult literacy instruction, and the stories presented in this report reveal the unique contributions of these programs. The report also explores common themes that are emerging as the library literacy programs implement strategies to increase persistence and characterizes each program and its students through detailed case studies. The lessons learned by implementing persistence strategies in these library programs may be useful also to other, non-library-based literacy programs, which often struggle with student persistence as well.

The process of defining student persistence and devising ways to measure it has created a lens through which to examine the effectiveness of literacy programs and a framework for exploring numerous issues and problems affecting them. The literacy programs in this study are developing a new understanding of their own operations — information that will help them not only to promote student persistence but also to address other challenges, such as increasing the effectiveness of the instruction they provide.

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The Authors

Executive Summary

This report describes the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) persistence study, which is concerned with increasing the persistence of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in library literacy programs. In the context of this study, “persistence” is defined as students’ ability to continue their learning efforts long enough and at a level that is intensive enough to ensure significant progress toward their literacy goals. Improving one’s literacy is a challenging and time-consuming endeavor, especially for adult students with low initial literacy levels. To be successful, programs that provide literacy instruction to adult students must support not just their learning but also their ability to persist. The efforts of five such programs to improve student persistence are the primary focus of this study and this report.

Many public libraries in the United States provide literacy instruction or arrange for tutors to help patrons improve their literacy skills. Library-based literacy programs are an important component of the national adult literacy system, because libraries are often able to serve adult students who do not have access to literacy instruction elsewhere, either because their literacy skills are too low or because they are unable to attend classes at the times when other education providers offer them. Funded by a special grant from the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Funds, this study evaluates a set of strategies initiated by five library-based literacy programs to enhance persistence among their students. Those strategies include better student orientation, more tutor training, enhanced communication between the program and the students, more computer-based learning resources, and better monitoring of student activities, progress, and goals. This study will evaluate and document these strategies over a period of three years, and its findings not only will help the five programs learn from their experiences but also will share those experiences with the larger field of adult literacy.

I. The Library Literacy Programs in This Study

The five libraries participating in the LILAA persistence study are the New York Public Library in New York City; the Greensboro Public Library in Greensboro, North Carolina; the Redwood City Public Library in Redwood City, California; the Queens Borough Public Library in Queens, New York; and the Oakland Public Library in Oakland, California. In the two New York City-based libraries, the study focuses on specific literacy programs operating in six branches: Fordham and Wakefield in the Bronx, Seward Park in Manhattan, and Flushing, Rochdale Village, and Central in Queens. In Greensboro, the study focuses on the Glenwood and Chavis branches.

The library literacy programs in the persistence study differ substantially in many aspects of their operations. Some programs primarily provide ESOL services, while others provide literacy instruction and adult education for students who are native English speakers. Some of the programs are fairly small, serving fewer than a hundred students, while others are much larger and serve hundreds. Most of the programs use volunteer tutors to provide individual one-on-one tutoring, but several programs also provide classes and other forms of group instruction. All the programs have computer labs where students can practice their literacy skills using educational software, but the relative importance of computerized instruction varies across the programs.

II. The Research Team and the Research Design

The evaluation of the LILAA persistence study is being conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), a private nonprofit organization that tests initiatives to improve the well-being and self-sufficiency of poor people, and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), based in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. The reports from this study reflect the ongoing collaboration among the two research organizations, the literacy program staff, and the students.

The evaluation has two distinct components. The NCSALL team members lead a *qualitative* research effort to study in depth the workings of the individual programs, their efforts at improving student persistence, and the factors affecting student persistence. Data collection for the qualitative component includes extensive ethnographic interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis, photography, focus groups, and Internet discussions. The MDRC team leads a *quantitative* research effort to collect and analyze program data over time. These data include such measures as students' demographic characteristics, retention in the program, hours spent in literacy activities, and personal goals. By studying how these measures change over time and relating such changes to the strategies to improve persistence, the quantitative research aims to document the effects of those strategies. The two components of the research are highly integrated and will inform one another at all stages of the study.

III. Themes Related to Student Persistence

Student persistence is a multidimensional concept. For students in literacy programs to be successful, they must remain active in the program long enough, participate for enough hours every week, receive instruction that fits their needs, and overcome barriers and distractions that may interfere with their ability to persist in achieving their goals.

Much of the persistence study is centered on three categories of “themes” that are developed for the first time in this report. Such themes describe student persistence and its patterns, the forces supporting or inhibiting persistence, and the relationship between program interventions and persistence. *Programmatic themes* explore the organization and integration of the literacy programs within the larger library systems and the programs' reflection of such core library principles as open access, privacy, and the respect and care that library programs show for adult students. *Instructional themes* that have been identified in the research include the quality of curricula and student assessment, the roles of technology, and the use and experience of volunteer tutors. Lastly, *student-based themes* focus on learning disabilities, students' cultural and personal identities, their sponsors, and their personal goals. All of these themes, and their manifestation in the five libraries' literacy programs, are described extensively in this report.

IV. Strategies to Improve Student Persistence

Staff members at each of the five sites in the LILAA persistence study have identified specific strategies that they plan to implement to increase student persistence in their literacy programs. These strategies fall into four categories: informational strategies, support strategies, operational strategies, and programmatic strategies.

A. Informational Strategies

As a first step in addressing the issue of student persistence, the library literacy programs have been asking their students (and sometimes staff members and tutors) how the programs can better support student persistence; such information was gathered by using focus groups, interviews, surveys, E-mail, List Serves, and staff meetings. For example, staff at Oakland's Second Start program conducted five focus groups with students and tutors during the first half of 2000, interviewed individual students who had left and returned to the program, and sent out a survey to all students and tutors. The staff compiled this information and discussed the results, finding few surprises. As expected, students asked for longer program hours, more classes, and a shorter wait to be matched with a tutor. The research did, however, produce two promising new insights: (1) students were more responsive to the idea of quarterly or semiannual reassessments of their literacy progress than staff expected them to be; and (2) students asked for more services for the entire family, focused not only on literacy but also on such critical topics as violence prevention, nutrition, hygiene, and manners. Thus, Second Start's implementation of informational strategies suggested new program components that might increase student persistence.

Informational strategies also include quantitative data collection, such as tracking students' participation records and demographic characteristics. Two of the sites, Oakland and Greensboro, worked directly with the research team to develop a new database system for collecting quantitative data. This system will benefit both the research effort and program management.

B. Support Strategies

As this report was being prepared, a number of new support strategies were under consideration by the programs, and several had been implemented. Lack of child care is often mentioned as a barrier to participation, but providing child care is expensive and potentially exposes programs to liability issues, so it is not yet a widely adopted support strategy. One exception is Redwood City, where Project READ offers preschool activities in the library for young children whose parents are meeting with a tutor or using the computers. Programs also have initiated family-based literacy activities, such as "family literacy night" in Oakland, which help address child care issues and at the same time offer valuable learning opportunities for the children.

Transportation problems are another barrier to participation, more so in some of the programs than in others. Oakland already provides transportation vouchers to its students, and other programs have considered doing so, but internal logistical reasons are making implementation difficult in some programs, and the inadequacy of the public transportation system in general is a problem in other programs.

Other support strategies that have been implemented or are under consideration include stress reduction classes, better information and referrals to outside agencies, and special services for prospective students who are on waiting lists.

C. Operational Strategies

Staff members at most of the programs are considering operational strategies that include increasing the hours of operation, improving student access to technology, and hiring

more staff. Some programs already have extended their operating hours, which is easier to do when a program is located in its own space, rather than within a library building where hours may be less flexible.

Second Start in Oakland and the New York Public Library have both expanded their operating hours in order to be more accessible to students who work. This is an increasingly important consideration as more adult students move from welfare to work. In January 2000, Second Start added three more night sessions per week. Similarly, Saturday hours are now offered at the Fordham branch of the New York Public Library, and library staff at this site will monitor student participation to determine whether persistence increases.

D. Programmatic Strategies

Potential programmatic strategies to increase student persistence include making the curriculum more relevant to students, recruiting students in innovative ways, redesigning tutor training, redesigning student and tutor orientations, focusing on student and program goal-setting, and marketing other library services.

Beyond the literacy program's services, students may be unaware of the variety of resources available to them in the library, such as help with tax forms, access to the Internet, and various social and cultural events. Greensboro Public Library has begun to develop a campaign that will market many such library opportunities to students and potential students. This campaign began with a community-wide effort called Community of Readers, the goal of which is to increase both persistence rates and the use of library resources.

In another example of programmatic strategies, Redwood City's Project READ is paying special attention to the problems facing students who have learning disabilities and other special needs. During each student's initial assessment, staff members ask a series of questions designed to discover that person's learning challenges. Later, a learning specialist discusses these challenges with the student's tutor, identifying teaching strategies and making recommendations for individualized instruction.

For many students, tutors represent the face of the literacy program. Tutors need training and ongoing support to provide high-quality instruction, and several programs in the study are seeking to increase student persistence by improving their tutor training. For example, in the fall of 2000, the New York Public Library program completely redesigned its tutor training process.

The Queens Borough Public Library program is seeking to improve student persistence by making goal-setting an explicit part of the program experience and by creating specific benchmarks based on the traditional school calendar. The program will be structured around modules of instruction, and students and tutors will be encouraged to focus on completing the modules. Students will also set goals in the fall and will check on their progress toward these goals several times during the year.

Orientations for new students entering the program are another focus of programmatic strategies to increase persistence. At Second Start in Oakland, orientations for new students are planned and implemented by current students, whose participation in this activity is part of an effort to increase their voice in setting the direction of programming.

V. What to Expect from the Persistence Study

Specific lessons regarding the implementation and outcomes of persistence strategies in library literacy programs for adult students will emerge as the study continues. The present report describes the five library literacy programs and their efforts to increase student persistence through the fall of 2000. In 2002, an interim report will describe the first full year of implementation and present an early analysis of quantitative persistence data. A final report, to be completed in 2003, will present analyses of all the data collected, including an analysis of how persistence affects student performance on a battery of standardized literacy tests. The final report will also include estimates of the costs of implementing persistence strategies and will advise program designers and policymakers about how to increase student persistence.