Two for the Price of One! A Study of Persistence of Adult Education Students pursuing a High School Equivalency Credential and a Study of the Researcher's Experience Conducting that Study.

Jacqueline Lynch

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Two for the Price of One!

A Study of Persistence of Adult Education Students pursuing a High School Equivalency Credential and a Study of the Researcher’s Experience Conducting that Study.

Jacqueline Lynch

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education Higher Education Leadership

National College of Education
National Louis University
October, 2021
TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE!
A STUDY OF PERSISTENCE OF ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS PURSUING A HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY CREDENTIAL AND A STUDY OF THE RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE CONDUCTING THAT STUDY.

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the National College of Education
National Louis University

Jacqueline Lynch
Higher Education Leadership

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October 8, 2021
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Kevin O'Connor, PhD
ABSTRACT

This two-in-one study was an exploration of persistence. The quantitative study explored the relationship between the self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing a high school equivalency credential. Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy and Lewin’s Force Field Analysis offered an effective framework for considering this relationship. The findings of this study were statistically insignificant due to the low response rate.

The second study, a qualitative study, was added to understand my experience trying to gather data during the quantitative study and to explore the implications of data collection, sharing, and use in the adult education field. Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) and Equity Theory offered helpful frameworks for considering how program staff responded to the request to participate. Findings suggest that 1) a wide variety of communication methods are used by programs to connect with students, both current and former and communication challenges exist at every stage of enrollment; 2) adult education practitioners wish they had a better understanding of the factors that impact student persistence so that they could devise appropriate interventions and 3) the field of adult education exists in a “data desert” which has multiple lush “data oases” but they are difficult to navigate to and through. Resources, or lack thereof, have a key role to play in how programs respond to challenges in these three areas. The findings in this study have direct implications for adult education practitioners, funders, policy makers. Specific recommendations for action are provided, as well as implications for further research.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am incredibly grateful to so many people who are responsible for getting me to and through this doctoral journey.

− Dr. Jay Dee, my first advisor at UMass Boston, who instilled the confidence in me that I could do this work.

− My committee members, Dr. Nathaniel Cradit, Dr. Stravroula Erfourth, Dr. Kevin O’Connor, and Dr. Jaclyn Rivard. I appreciate all of your time, feedback, and insight throughout this process. Go raibh mille maith agat Nate, my faculty advisor, and committee chair, for always seeing light at the end of the tunnel, even when I didn’t!

− The students who participated in this study and the adult education administrators who took the time to share their perspectives. This is a finished manuscript because you shared.

− My parents, who were my first teachers, mentors, and always the greatest supporters. Dad, you would be very proud to tell your friends your daughter is a doctor! Mom, even though you don’t remember that I am on this journey, I know you are proud.

− My husband, who willingly picked up the slack these past six years. I am so very grateful for your support.

− My wonderful son, Bryan, and daughter, Amy. I began this journey because you left us with an empty nest and I needed something to fill my time! Being your mom is the greatest honor of my life.

− My family and friends who encouraged me along the way. You were there when I needed you and you understood when I couldn’t be there for you. I am all yours now!

− The adult education students I have had the privilege of teaching and supporting for the last 32 years. You are the reason I remain in this field.

    Is fearr mo shaol mar tá tú ann
    My life is better because you are in it.
DEDICATION

To my family.
Even though it was my road to walk,
you walked it with me from start to finish.
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CHAPTER 1: ADULT EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

Introduction

The benefits of education, even at the most basic level, are clear. Education increases employment options and decreases reliance on government support. Adults without a high school diploma are nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than those with a college degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Moreover, employed adults without a high school diploma earn approximately $8,000 a year less than high school graduates and approximately $26,500 a year less than college graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018). Furthermore, “education can yield earnings and employment gains that ultimately bolster state tax collections” (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, 2019). The National Skills Coalition (2019) suggests that “the U.S. workforce finds itself at a crucial inflection point” (p. 9). The US labor market is largely made up of middle-skill jobs for which education beyond high school, but not a four-year degree, is required. “Yet too few workers can access the skills, training, and education for middle-skill jobs, resulting in a middle-skills gap” (p. 9). By preparing students to learn the technical and workplace skills that business and industry need, adult education helps to develop a pool of qualified candidates from which employers can recruit. The bottom line is better-educated populations are good for the economy.

Better-educated populations also strengthen communities. Berkman et al (2004) found low literacy levels to be associated with adverse health outcomes, including increased rates of chronic diseases like diabetes and asthma and increased mortality. Education can lower incarceration and recidivism rates and thus potentially save millions in corrections costs over time (Illinois Adult and Continuing Educators Association, Inc., 2017). Additionally, a link exists between parental education levels and child outcomes including educational experience
and academic achievement (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.).

The number of United States residents who do not possess a high school diploma or its equivalent is alarming. Data from United States Census Bureau (n.d.) indicate that almost 26.5 million US residents (12% of the population >25) do not possess a high school diploma or its equivalent (Table 1). 937,042 (10.8% of IL population >25) reside in Illinois, 441,944 (9.3% of MA population >25) reside in Massachusetts. Furthermore, there are 6.7 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. “They represent untapped potential and cost taxpayers $93 billion each year in lost revenues and increased social services” (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore & Fox, 2010, p. 6).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 9th grade</td>
<td>11,284,290</td>
<td>419,259</td>
<td>208,460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th to 12th grade, no diploma</td>
<td>15,187,971</td>
<td>233,484</td>
<td>233,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26,472,261</td>
<td>937,042</td>
<td>441,944</td>
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The number of high school non-completers who enroll in formal High School Equivalency (HSE) preparation programs is disturbing. According to the National Reporting System for Adult Education (n.d.a, n.d.b.) Illinois adult education programs served less than 2.5% of its residents without a high school diploma in FY 2018. That fell to less than 2% in FY 2020. In the same time period, Massachusetts served 1.4% of its residents without a high school diploma (table 2). Table 2 also shows a declining trend in enrollment. Between FY 2018 and FY 2020, HSE enrollment in Illinois dropped by 26%. During the same time period, HSE enrollment in Massachusetts fell by less than 5%. It is important to note that while the number of Illinois
residents without a high school credential is twice that of Massachusetts, Illinois programs serve three to four times as many HSE students as programs in Massachusetts.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FY 2018</th>
<th>FY 2019</th>
<th>FY 2020</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>24,161</td>
<td>20,806</td>
<td>17,813</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>6,485</td>
<td>5,734</td>
<td>6,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30,646</td>
<td>26,540</td>
<td>24,002</td>
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Origins of Persistence Interest

My interest in student persistence was borne from participating in the 2008 New England Learner Persistence Project, an action research study conducted by a team led by John Comings, Ed.D., Senior Research Associate, Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Director of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NSCALL). Quinsigamond Community College’s Adult Community Learning Center (ACLC) in Worcester, Massachusetts was one of 18 programs in New England recruited to participate in the research project. The study was based on the underlying assumption that “persistence is the underpinning for academic progress that ultimately results in positive outcomes and an improved quality of life for adult learners” (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009, p. 1).

At adult education programs across the county, student persistence and completion in High School Equivalency (HSE) programs is a challenge, making a study of persistence a logical area to explore. Anecdotally, adult education programs report higher attrition among HSE students than other populations served. However, data that categorize students as course “completers” (still attending class the last week of semester, that is, they did not withdraw from
class before the end of semester) or “non-completers” (did not attend class on the last week of semester, they withdrew before the end of semester) is not readily available at either the state or federal level. Table 3 provides an example of program level data on course enrollment and completion rates in HSE Language Arts classes at Killeen Community College over the course of three years. Of those who enrolled in class, between 58% and 69% completed their course(s) which means that between 31% and 42% withdrew prior to completing their course(s). These are important data points to unearth and understand in order to make informed persistence and retention decisions at the program, state and national level.

<table>
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<th>Table 3</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Language Arts Enrollment, Drops and Completion Rates, FY 2017, FY 2018, and FY 2019</strong></td>
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<td>FY 2017</td>
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Motivations for persistence are complex. Students are faced with many barriers that hinder their persistence and research indicates that these barriers fall into three categories: institutional, situational, and dispositional (Fairchild, 2003). The literature suggests that there is a relationship between self-efficacy, a dispositional factor, and persistence. This research study
was conducted to explore the relationship between the self-efficacy of students pursuing a high school equivalency certificate and their persistence. The research question for this study, therefore, was what is the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of HSE students? In other words, does a student’s level of belief in their ability to do something impact their ability to stay in a program long enough to reach their goal of attaining a High School Equivalency credential. The findings of this study may inform the revision of existing and the creation of new adult education program policies, processes, and structures that support the development of the drivers of persistence which include 1) sense of belonging and community, 2) clarity of purpose, 3) agency, 4) competence, 5) relevance and 6) stability (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). These will be explained in a later section.

During, and upon completion of, this retrospective research study, I shared existing the persistence research, this project and its findings with colleagues, funders, and the broader adult education community. Integral to any new program policy or procedure that is informed by this research study will be strategies, activities, and interventions that develop students’ agency and self-efficacy. The goal for programs should be to do more than just “encourage others to believe in their own capacities” (Comings, 2007, p. 191). Rather, it is to facilitate the development of students’ awareness of and confidence in their capabilities. This will contribute to what McNiff (2013) called “good social order”. McNiff also pointed out that “each one of us who is able to think and speak bears the responsibility of speaking comprehensively, authentically, sincerely and appropriately … on behalf of ourselves and of others who are not able to do so” (p. 177). I hope that the knowledge generated in this research project will strengthen the ability of practitioners and students alike, to advocate for and promote the benefits of adult education, to
educate internal and external constituents, and to influence decision-makers at the program, institutional, local, and state levels. Additional context will be shared in chapter two.

**What is Adult Education?**

This section provides an overview of adult education as a field. It is important to provide context at the macro level in order to understand the environment in which adult education departments/programs function at the local level.

In the United States today, one in six adults has low literacy skills and one in three has low numeracy skills. In addition, 60 million Americans do not possess the credentials and skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary education (Coalition on Adult Basic Education, 2018). Adult education and literacy programs throughout the country serve those who wish to improve their literacy, numeracy, or language skills in adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a Second (ESL) classes so that they can become successful contributors to their families and communities, the economy and society.

Throughout the history of the United States, adult education has played a continuous role in helping adults reach for better lives (Dann-Messier, 2011). The federal government has been involved in adult education in one way or another for over 230 years, even though federal legislation for adult education did not begin until 1964 (Rose, 1991; Sticht, 2002; Dann-Messier, 2011). The federal government has directed policy, enacted laws, and been a benefactor of programs to assist educationally disadvantaged adults in overcoming “educational deficiencies that would hinder their productivity and responsible participation in the life and growth of the nation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013 p. 1). The federal government has also provided a large percent of program costs, however, local and state educational agencies have maintained clear administrative control of adult education.
In 2008, President Obama presented an ambitious challenge to Americans -for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Dann-Messier, 2011). While the K-12 system is charged with ensuring the children of our nation are prepared for college, the Adult Education (AE) system is charged with doing the same for adults by providing literacy and numeracy skills and English language instruction to hundreds of thousands of students every year - 535,000 in 1970; 2 million in 1980; 3.5 million in 1990; and 2.9 million in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In 2010, the federal government allocated $640 million to adult education, which benefitted 2,179,781 adults enrolled in over 4,000 ABE programs in the US (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Unquestionably, the AE system has an important role to play in meeting the aforementioned 2020 challenge.

**Adult Education: Structure**

At the federal level, the “Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) administers and coordinates programs that are related to adult education and literacy, career and technical education, and community colleges…[OCTAE’s Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) is]...“responsible for enabling adults to acquire the basic skills necessary to function in today's society so that they can benefit from the completion of secondary school, enhanced family life, attaining citizenship and participating in job training and retraining programs” (US Department of Education, 2020). DAEL distributes federal funds allocated to adult education and family literacy to states via state eligible agencies. State eligible agencies, in 57 states and regions, pool federal funds with state appropriations for adult education and provide grants to more than 2,500 adult education programs. These programs deliver instruction through local education agencies (LEAs), community-based and faith-based organizations, volunteer literacy organizations, institutions of higher education (IHEs), public and private
nonprofit agencies, libraries, public housing authorities, and other nonprofit entities. While state eligible agencies are solely responsible for administering and supervising statewide policy for adult education and literacy, DAEL supports states to ensure and support the improvement of program quality, accountability, and capacity. Investment in adult education has increased by almost 50% over the past twenty years (Table 4). However, along with increased funding has come increased accountability, performance outcomes, and reporting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal Funding Allocations (in millions) to State Eligible Agencies. FY2000 to FY2020 (US Department of Education, 2020)</th>
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<td>$442</td>
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In many ways, adult education programs/departments exist in cocoons within their larger host agencies and institutions. They have separate processes for most functions including outreach, intake, placement testing, advising, enrollment, scheduling, curriculum and professional development, many of which are not tied to host agency processes, scheduling or staffing. Budgeting and finance is usually one of the few exceptions.

The field of adult education does not have a specialized regulatory body to provide accreditation, oversight, quality assurance, etc. State eligible agencies, e.g., Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) unit of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) unit of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MADESE) assume the role of monitor, auditor, and evaluator. These units also provide extensive support to programs to ensure fiscal, curricular, and grant compliance.

Challenges for the Field
The future of work has significant consequences for underprepared adult learners (Illinois Community College Board, 2018). Hanover Research (2014) pointed out that adult education is being increasingly driven by the needs of the workforce; that participation in adult education programming can be sporadic, and that adult education providers are creatively trying to prevent and remediate persistence issues. Programming trends indicate an increase in contextualized instruction and the acceleration of student progress using Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs, career pathways, and pre-apprenticeship programs. These also help programs address issues related to access, program length, and student motivation. The Hanover Research report also noted that one of the fastest-growing markets for adult education programming is immigrants and “acclimating to life in the United States involves linguistic, economic, and civic components” (p. 12). In addition, this diversity of Limited English Proficient (LEP) population makes a one-size-fits-all approach unrealistic and challenging for providers nationally.

There is a lack of research on literacy, numeracy, and language learning in adult education programs and this has implications for tracking students through developmental education courses in order to remediate their skills (National Research Council, 2012). Rubenson & Elfert (2015) pointed out that “adult learning and education has come to the forefront of public policy...[and]... adult education research is becoming of vital interest to a broader community than the traditional group of adult education scholars” (p. 126). Yet, practitioners and the policy community alike have voiced disappointment with adult education research.

An additional challenge is funding. Fiscal resources and sources are limited, and grant allocations often fluctuate. While adult education has been supported by the federal government for decades, there is a constant worry in the field that should outcomes not meet targets, grant
funding will be cut. Those impacted the most from funding cuts would be those who need the services that adult education programs provide the most.

Staffing has long been an area of concern for adult education administrators. Current compensation and working conditions in adult education result in high staff turnover, which can be costly and destabilizing. The vast majority of adult education programs do not have full-time faculty positions. Part-time, non-benefitted, adjuncts often juggle multiple teaching positions at multiple locations and do not have time to engage in extended opportunities for professional growth. Part-time status impacts employee turnover and often results in a poor return on investment in professional development which can result in a great variation in the quality of teaching. Attracting and retaining professional staff will involve a philosophical shift and investment of funds to stabilize the workforce so that programs can prepare the underserved to meet the demands of the modern labor force, thereby promoting economic security and self-sufficiency, and building thriving communities (Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, 2019).

COVID 19 has exacerbated many of the challenges historically faced in the field of adult education. Enrollment, which had been in decline over the last decade, was significantly impacted by the transition to online learning in March 2020. Technological barriers (access to devices, connectivity and technology skills) made it difficult for students to stay engaged in virtual classrooms so many opted out. Adult education programs disproportionately serve minoritized students and those from low-income backgrounds, populations whose access to education and basic necessities was threatened by the pandemic. Student persistence, “the underpinning for academic progress that ultimately results in positive outcomes and an improved quality of life for adult learners” (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009, p. 1) was challenged by competing
pressures – physical and mental health, employment, housing, and uncertainty about what the future would bring. While adult education practitioner dedicated their talents, energy, and resources to address the needs of their students, the pandemic deepened disparities in educational opportunity and achievement (Office for Civil Rights, n.d., p. iii).

**Adult Education in Two States**

As mentioned, State Eligible Agencies in Illinois and Massachusetts are the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) respectfully. These agencies award grants to adult education programs across both states to design and implement instructional programming and support services that align with the purpose of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II—Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) and to bear responsibility for preparing under-prepared adults for the world of work. In FY 2020, ICCB allocated almost $52 million in grants to 78 adult education programs, while ACLS allocated $39,504,386 to 85 programs (table 5). Both states are accountable to the same federal grant mandates and while funding models differ, budget guidelines and performance outcomes are consistent.

### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eligible Agency</th>
<th>Allocation</th>
<th>No. of programs supported</th>
<th>No. of students served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICCB</td>
<td>$51,728,825</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>17,813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLS</td>
<td>$39,504,386</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>6,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>$91,233,211</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>24,002</td>
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**Need for Persistence Study**

The topic of student persistence in HSE programs warrants substantial inquiry for a number of reasons. Attrition is a pervasive, systemic problem that affects the lives of thousands
of adults, across the state and the nation, who drop out of class each year. O’Neill & Thomson (2013) suggest that “there is a tendency to attribute any want of persistence to the individual’s lack of motivation or interest because they are adults, rather than to understand the crucial role that the instructor and the instructional environment play in supporting adult learner achievement” (p. 162). By engaging in this inquiry, the hope is to pull back the curtain and expose these assumptions for what they are – false. Adult education students face a large number of barriers to persistence – institutional, situational and dispositional. Adult education practitioners and stakeholders need to understand what these barriers are, what can and cannot be done to manage them, and how to support the positive forces and remediate the negative forces that impact persistence.

Financial considerations are a second reason. There are reduced costs associated with higher persistence rates, e.g., marketing, onboarding, etc. Additionally, federal funding to states is based on enrollment and completion rates so poor performance in these areas has the potential to influence future funding and consequently, the ability to serve future generations of adult education students. Finally, for students, persisting long enough to meet their goals improves their chances for economic and social mobility. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that “adults who have attained higher levels of education are generally more likely than those with lower levels of educational attainment to report stronger civic engagement, in terms of voting, volunteering, political interest, and interpersonal trust” (Davis, 2013, para 5).

Persistence is a multifaceted concept and there is little consensus in the literature or in the adult education field as to what supports and hinders it. Is “grit” the missing component (Duckworth & Eskreis-Winkler, 2013)? Is possessing a growth mindset the key (Hochanadel &
Finamore, 2015)? Is motivation the driving factor (Liao, Edlin & Ferdenzi, 2014)? Most adult education practitioners agree that there is no silver bullet so the challenge for me as a researcher was situating this research study within existing theories and models and addressing the tensions between them.

In the development of this research study, I identified making the connection between theory and practice as the biggest gap that the study would fill. There are a plethora of theories related to persistence - Atkinson's expectancy-value theory, Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy, Rendon’s theory of validation, Tinto's theory of departure, Lewin’s force field analysis, goal theory, self-determination theory, to name a few. Theory can sometimes be perceived as remote, abstract, too academic, and difficult to conceptualize procedurally. Spending time in safe and supportive environments (e.g., in professional development workshops), engaging with the theory and research presented in this study, will increase faculty and staff’s level of comfort with the material and contribute to a greater understanding of persistence. In addition, faculty and staff may find it validating to be able to attach a theoretical “label” to an existing practice anecdotally found to be successful.

**Study Significance**

This research study has practical significance. The findings will be shared with peer adult education practitioners and funders. The research compiled and discussed in the literature review may inform persistence-supporting practices, policies, and structures in adult education programs and has the potential to bridge the divide between persistence research and on-the-ground practice, between the conceptual and the concrete.

Prior to engaging in any persistence initiative, practitioners need to have a complete understanding of the barriers, drivers and supports to persistence (Comings, Parrella &
Soricone, 2000). All practitioners, regardless of role, should identify and reflect on the part they play in fostering the development of one or more of the persistence supports. This could result in more intentional attempts to support persistence. Adult education practitioners may be well served by gaining an understanding of the findings of this research project. It may be beneficial to review program policies and practices, to inventory the resources available to them and devise new ways to maximize resources in light of these findings.

This study will also serve host agencies/institutions and funders, who may consider the broader implications of the study and its potential scalability. Increased persistence, which leads to course and program completion results in increased student outcomes, increased transition to college and training programs, a greater return on investment, a reputation “boost”, and if scaled to other programs it could impact student learning outcomes at the state level which affects federal funding allocations. Ultimately though, the population that will be best served by this research project will be the students who persist long enough to reach their goals.

Conclusion

Going back to school after an extended absence can cause much anxiety for HSE students. Students often sign up for class without giving serious thought to what that actually means or what it entails. They bring with them unrealistic expectations of time to completion and are unaware that their academic goals can require hundreds, if not thousands of hours, of learning to achieve (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 2000). They have also not considered how juggling school with life and work responsibilities will impact their success. Despite the best of intentions, large numbers of students do not stay in programs long enough to meet their academic goals.
In this chapter, I explained the genesis of my interest in the topic of student persistence, provided a brief overview of adult education, with special reference to adult education in Massachusetts and Illinois. Finally, I shared the need for this persistence study and its significance.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of the origins and development of adult education as a field. It is important to provide context at the macro level in order to understand the environment in which adult education programs function.

Historical Context

During the Lyceum Movement which began in the 1820s, most adult education was conducted for the self-improvement of the educated middle classes, e.g., women's literary clubs (Sticht, 2002). According to Shawen (1979), the lyceum was a “sort of adult learning center … which used the lecture-teaching-learning approach with community study circles to share experience and knowledge” (p. iv). Within a few decades, these institutions began to provide basic literacy and in 1878, the Chautauqua Institution in New York became the "first integrated core program of adult education organized in this country on a national scale" (Knowles, 1994, p. 37). By the mid-19th century, the term adult education was used to describe the “organized and institutional provision of learning opportunities, principally for the lower classes of the community” (Sticht, 2002).

The involvement of the military in adult education can be traced back to the Continental Army which used federal funds to provide instruction in mathematics and military skills to their soldiers. “This modest effort marks the beginning of federal attention to providing funds for the education of persons employed by the national government” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 5). Before the Civil War, it was illegal to educate slaves, however, abolitionist whites taught many to read and write. Then, during the Civil War, the Union Army used its chaplains and hired teachers to teach former slaves. Subsequently, after the Civil War, Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, which provided education to former
slaves (Sticht, 2002). Settlement and neighborhood centers were also involved. They were established to help immigrants adjust to American life and provided basic education to local residents. They were the forerunners of community-based organizations (CBOs) which today comprise 14% of the Adult Education Literacy System (AELS) (U.S. Department of Education, 1998 as cited in Sticht, 2002).

In the early 20th century, the United States experienced extensive growth resulting in an abundance of employment opportunities. At the same time, there was an expanding immigrant population in the country, and it became apparent that in order to create a stable and productive workforce and to acculturate immigrants to their new country, the language and literacy needs of these immigrants had to be met. This led to the creation of “night schools” to provide English instruction to the newly arriving immigrants (Dann-Messier, 2011). Many different types of organizations - businesses, government, libraries, museums, and proprietary schools - promoted literacy, numeracy, and language learning for adults, and contributed to the rise of the Adult Education Literacy System (AELS) (Sticht, 2002). Organizations that had a significant impact at this time included the National Education Association (NEA) as well as the Carnegie and Ford Foundations which worked to establish adult education as a “profession” advocating for educating and training professionals, doing research, etc. (Sticht, 2002). In 1870, three professional organizations – the National Teacher's Association, the American Normal School Association, and the National Association of School Superintendents – amalgamated into the National Education Association (NEA) which went on to play a major role in the emergence of Adult Education Literacy System between 1900 and 1950 (Sticht, 2002). In his 1992 report, Luke presented the findings of his examination of NEA’s 50-year involvement in adult education
and concluded that the NEA was one of the principal contributors to the development of adult education in the United States.

Local Education Agencies (LEA) were also involved in adult education but the literacy instruction they provided during this time was fragmented, inconsistent, and unstandardized. However, these agencies were important because they provided the majority of the instruction available. They were not helped though, by the fact that few states had formal administrative offices dedicated to adult education because many states were either unwilling or unable to earmark or allocate funds to adult education (Rose, 1991).

Some key individuals promoted adult literacy during this time among whom Cora Wilson Stewart was the most noteworthy. In the early 1900s, she started a program to eliminate adult illiteracy in Kentucky and this "might well be classified as the official beginning of literacy education in the United States" (Sticht, 2002, p. 47). Stewart’s “Moonlight Schools” were staffed by volunteer K-12 teachers whom she trained on how to teach and motivate adults. She believed that adults should not be instructed using children's books, so she developed instructional materials especially for her adult students (Stewart, 1922). This is considered standard practice to this day.

Adult Education Legislation

It is not possible to explore the history of adult education without examining the legislation that has impacted it. The earliest legislation was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century when a number of discrete pieces of legislation alluded to the need for and importance of adult education. However, none explicitly targeted adult education for development or funding. The 1918 US Immigration Act did provide limited federal funds for literacy programs to work with naturalization candidates, but the funds were to be used to
provide information to candidates about the availability of instruction (not to provide actual instruction) in the English language, history, government, and citizenship and for curricular materials (Eyre, 2013). During the Great Depression in the 1930s, provisions for several employment-related educational programs were included in the Federal Emergency Relief Act which included adult and vocational education; and the Works Projects Administration which provided literacy, citizenship, and college preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Despite best intentions, neither had a measurable or lasting impact on adult education.

During World War II, it was discovered that hundreds of thousands of American adults were functionally illiterate, that is possessed literacy skills below 5th grade (Sticht, 2002). The thousands of illiterate men who joined the U.S. Army during World War II were offered a 90-day literacy program to bring their skills up to a fourth-grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Because of the concern about the skill deficit in service personnel, the U.S. military proactively developed and administered mass standardized testing. This practice brought the need for basic skills and literacy education in the general civilian population to the forefront. In 1942, the test of General Education Development (GED) was developed to allow service members to use their military experience to qualify for high school equivalency so that they could get jobs or go to college with the GI Bill (Sticht, 2002). In An American Heritage (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), the authors acknowledge the impact that the military has had on adult education - “the methods, materials, and diagnostic techniques developed for these programs were widely adopted by civilian educational programs throughout the country” (p. 5).

It is important to note that 18,251,070 GED credentials were issued between 1941 and 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 91), and only a small percentage went to service men and women.
With so many uncoordinated efforts by different agencies, individuals, and the military to promote and provide adult literacy, there was bound to be tension. On one side, the advocates for a broad, liberal education (e.g., local education authorities) promoted general education for all social classes and educational levels. On the other side, the advocates for literacy (e.g., community-based organizations) campaigned for basic skills training for the least educated and most needy citizens and immigrants (Rose, 1991).

To a considerable extent, the history of the rise of the … [Adult Education Literacy System] … in the latter half of the twentieth century is the history of the struggle between and the mutual accommodation of these two philosophies of adult education that made possible the passage of the Adult Education Act of 1966 (Sticht, 2002).

In the early 1960s, the Kennedy administration became concerned with the issues of poverty and adult literacy and the connection between them. In 1962, the Committee on Education and Labor conducted hearings on the need for the federal government to support adult basic education (ABE). A bill was proposed which would provide states with seed money for the development of their own adult education programs and would place control firmly in the hands of state, not federal governments (Rose, 1991). However, the bill was defeated in 1963. Opponents argued that the “separate but equal” practice in the South would inhibit equal access to adult education programs and the question of providing federal funds to programs in parochial schools was contentious. Rose (1991) also suggests that it might have failed because the adult education community and professional organizations did little to promote its passage.

In the mid-1960s “powerful economic and social forces resulted in legislative responses to previously neglected educational and training needs of poor, unemployed, unskilled, and undereducated adults” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 7). An economic recession at the
time resulted in rising unemployment rates with disproportionate numbers of black, non-native speaking and undereducated adults unable to secure gainful employment. In addition, the civil rights movement brought a mandate for equal opportunity for all in the United States. The focus of adult education which had been largely on the “night school” for several decades was about to be redirected.

1964 was a milestone year as that was when federal statutory involvement in adult literacy began (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) mobilized the human and financial resources of the nation to combat poverty in the United States. This was the first Act to include provision for Adult Basic Education (ABE) under Title II B: The Adult Basic Education Program. Sandlin (2009) explains that “this [act] was the centerpiece of Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative, and it focused on decreasing poverty in the United States through providing educational and job training opportunities for all” (p. 1009). Basically, it was an attempt to remedy the inequities of educational disadvantage.

This Economic Opportunity Act established federal/state partnerships and provided $18.6 million to fund adult literacy skills training for adults. Congress authorized the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to award states grants (minimum of $50,000) which were based on the number of adults (over 18) in the state with less than a 6th-grade education. Funds were allowed to be used for instruction, program development, and curriculum development, but not for professional development or teacher training. The US Departments of Education gave responsibility for program planning, implementation, and supervision to State Departments of Education. To be eligible for services, a person had to be 18 or older, not have completed high school, and have educational deficits which impaired their ability to obtain employment (National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium, 1998). Local education
authorities, e.g., public school systems, again bore primary responsibility for the provision of educational services given that they already had delivery systems in place for K-12. In the first year after its passage (FY 1965), almost 38,000 adults enrolled in ABE classes in the US (Rose, 1991). This legislation was impactful because it motivated states to provide adult education in a deliberate and more coordinated way. Within two years of its passage, all 50 states had adult education program delivery systems identified and many had programs underway (Rose, 1991).

In July 1965, the White House Conference on Education convened with 600 education, industry, labor, and government leaders in attendance. This proved to be “one of the impetuses that resulted in landmark education legislation in 1966” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 11). The following year, the Adult Education Act (AEA) was passed. Policymakers did not believe that the Adult Education Program should share “poverty funding” so it was transferred from the US Office of Economic Opportunity to the US Office of Education broadening the purpose of the Act and deemphasizing the vocational focus (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 11). The Adult Education Act continued to focus on helping eradicate poverty through providing educational opportunities and expanded on the Economic Opportunity Act by offering educational services to adults with limited English proficiency and to those with less than a 9th-grade level education (previously had been 6th grade) thus widening the catchment population. Emphasis was placed on helping undereducated adults prepare for and obtain a high school diploma, which was often a requirement for work (Sticht, 1998; Rose, 1991). Unlike its predecessor, it allowed funds to be used for program improvement (instruction, professional development, in-service training, outreach and recruitment, and administration) and for research of pilot and promising practices. According to Sticht (2002), “the acorn from which the AELS would grow had finally been planted” (p. 62).
Rose (1991) noted that there was “remarkable consistency to the Adult Education Act (AEA) and its amendments” (p. 2) and “the program has been remarkably free from attack, partly because the sums involved were so small, and partly because the need was great, as well as obvious” (p. 4). In the twenty years following the enactment of the AEA, several amendments to the AEA of 1966 directed the trajectory of adult basic education in the US.

When the EOA came up for legislative review in 1966, the NEA lobbied for and was successful in securing a change in title from the Adult Basic Education Act to the Adult Education Act in order to further broaden its scope with regard to the population it served (Sticht, 2002). Allocations for special projects "involving the use of innovative methods, systems, materials, or programs of national significance or special value" (Jackson, 1980, p. 15) were added allowing programs to develop and pilot new (or improve existing) practices, procedures or policies. Adult educators argued that adult education was a new field that required specialization, so they welcomed funding for teacher training (Rose, 1991) and looked to several post-secondary institutions which began to offer graduate and professional development courses.

The eligible age to access adult education services was reduced from 18 to 16 in 1970, which allowed programs to serve youth who dropped out of high school when they passed the age of compulsory school attendance. The minimum allocation was increased from $50,000 to $150,000 per state and additional agencies were added to the list of those eligible to apply for grants. The mandate was expanded from providing basic skills proficiency to completion of Adult Secondary Education (ASE). The legislation also established the National Advisory Council on Adult Education (NACAE) which proved to be influential and instrumental in the growth of adult education in the United States (Sticht, 2002. Rose, 1991).
Two specific populations were targeted in the subsequent amendments. In 1972, educational opportunities were expanded for Native American Indians and two years later, incarcerated adults were included in the eligible population. In 1974, bilingual adult education programs were funded, and state plans were required to “make provision for cooperation with labor force development and training programs, occupational educational programs, and reading improvement programs” (Rose, 1991, p. 19). Furthermore, provision was made for the establishment of state advisory councils. An increase in allocation for special projects and teacher training included in the amendment was welcomed and was attributed to the evidence of its need provided by a Columbia University's Teachers College study in the early 1970s (Mezirow, 1975, Rose, 1991).

In 1978, an amendment extensively revised the Adult Basic Education Act. The purpose of adult education was expanded to enable not only those below a specific grade level but all adults who "lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills to enable them to function effectively in society" (Rose, 1991, p. 23). Private nonprofit entities were added to the list of those eligible to apply for grants; special consideration for certain populations was included; and in an attempt to standardize across programs and states, a competency-based approach to assessment which used functional competencies measurement was emphasized. The amendment also authorized the establishment of a clearinghouse to collect and disseminate information about ABE.

Young’s 1980 study of the operation of the Adult Education Act State Grant Program found that the legislation had achieved the goal of opening up ABE delivery systems and that a large number of adults were benefitting at a low cost to the federal government. However, it identified a need for “clarification of the program's intended target population, more innovative
and aggressive outreach and coordination efforts, more appropriate institutional settings, increased teacher recruitment and training, expanded supportive services, and greater assistance to the states in the area of planning” (Young, 1980, p. 2). The amendments that followed thereafter addressed most of these gaps.

A significant contributing factor to the growth of the Adult Education and Literacy System during this period was a large influx of immigrants which created high demand for English-language education, especially from 1981 to 1990 when some 7.3 million immigrants came to the United States (Sticht, 1998, p. 10). Adult illiteracy, in native and non-native residents, was again a hot discussion topic at the national level stemming from the concern about national productivity (Rose, 1991). In 1981, the Coalition for Adult Literacy was established and made several recommendations regarding the use of volunteer tutors (to supplement, not supplant teachers) and the need for fundraising. The National Advisory Council on Adult Education (NACAE) held hearings “to ascertain grassroots sentiment about the act and its provisions” (Rose, 1991, p. 23). Among other things, the NACAE recommended that the term bilingual education be replaced by the term English as Second Language (ESL) and the change was adopted in a 1981 amendment. Responding to business/industry lobbying, the amendment also allowed for-profit agencies to apply for ABE grants thus making available certain services (e.g., workplace-specific training) which had not been previously available in the non-profit sector (Rose, 1991).

In the 1960s and 1970s, adult literacy education was enacted as part of a social safety net designed to help individuals become self-sufficient. However, in the mid-1980s, adult literacy education was promoted as a way to increase individuals’ human capital in order to increase the competitiveness of the United States in the global marketplace. Thus, in
the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, adult literacy was increasingly linked to workforce training (Sandlin, 2009, p. 1010).

This important shift continues to impact the direction and operation of adult education systems today at all levels – federal, state, local, and program.

The final reauthorization of the Adult Education Act in 1988 had a strong workforce development focus. $200 million (more than ten times the 1965 amount) was appropriated to adult education increasing the minimum state awards from $150,000 to $250,000. Funds were made available for workplace programs to enable workers to increase their skills and knowledge so they could either retain or advance in their current employment. The reauthorization established the National Workplace Literacy Partnerships Program to support ABE/workplace partnerships. It also provided funding to identify best practices in teaching and programming and mandated further improvement of state planning and evaluation efforts (Rose, 1991; Sticht, 2002).

The Adult Education Act was successful in that “it has contributed to the growth of the field, both in terms of program development and the training of professionals” (Rose, 1991, p. 34). However, a persistent problem throughout the history of the Act had been the percentage of the target population that was actually reached despite the fact that amendment after amendment broadened student eligibility, expanded those eligible to apply for funding, and encouraged business and industry partnerships in order to allow local programs to cast a wider net and reach more students (Rose, 1991).

The National Literacy Act (NLA) of 1991, signed by President George H.W. Bush, replaced the Adult Education Act and further strengthened the ties between adult literacy and workforce training. President Bush hoped that the legislation would help attain the National
TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

Education Goal of every American being literate by the year 2000. It established the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and charged it with “maintaining a national clearinghouse for literacy, providing technical assistance and training to adult education providers, fostering research-based activities that would identify and validate effective instructional practices, and disseminating information regarding those practices” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 19). The National Literacy Act also established State Literacy Resource Centers which were authorized to provide grants that would create new or improve existing, capacity to provide literacy services (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). To address concerns that businesses and industry leaders had about the availability of a skilled workforce, the legislation provided funding for the National Workforce Demonstration Programs – to develop and support business/industry/union/ABE partnerships that would directly provide literacy education to employees in an attempt to improve job performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The National Literacy Act also established a national Workforce Literacy Assistance Collaborative under the Department of Labor. The role of the collaborative was to provide technical assistance to businesses interested in workplace literacy programs (Rose, 1991). Increased emphasis was placed on quality and evaluation resulting in the development of the Indicators of Program Quality (IPQs) which were developed to be used to demonstrate that programs were meeting goals. The three IPQs included recruitment, retention, and learner educational gain. By the mid-1990s IPQ data were being used to identify and remediate ABE program weaknesses. In 1997, the National Reporting System (NRS) was launched to provide outcomes-based reporting for all programs receiving federal ABE monies (Rose, 1991; Sticht, 2002).
The National Literacy Act also provided grants for public housing authorities; increased funding for teacher and volunteer training; and provided a new definition of literacy (which had been requested two years previously). Literacy was redefined as an individual’s ability to read, write and speak in English, and to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (US Department of Education, 1991, as cited in Rose, 1991).

Furthermore, the Act added a focus on workplace literacy and addressed correctional institution education. Dann-Messier (2011) pointed out that the Adult Education State Grant Program was one of the first federal education programs to build a national system that gathers performance information on the programs that states fund with federal assistance in order to determine the return taxpayers were getting for their federal investment. For the past two decades, ABE programs have been held more and more accountable for their data collection and accuracy. Data from state and national databases are used extensively by State Departments of Education in program evaluation and funding decisions. The US Department of Education now uses aggregated data to evaluate states’ performance. To motivate local adult education providers to improve the quality and effectiveness of their services, some states are adopting performance-based funding models to allocate both federal and state adult education funds (Dann-Messier, 2011, p. 5).

In the early 1990s, workforce development again became an area of emphasis. By the end of that decade “adult education was increasingly pushed toward serving employment-related purposes” (Jurno, 1998, p. 8). Critics argued that ABE programs did not have a track record of teaching workforce readiness skills and were concerned that programs did not have sufficient
intensity, rigor, or duration. Basic skills advocates argued that focusing only on job placements did not adequately reflect the work being done in programs (Jurno, 1998). Discussions at the federal level which revolved around education, labor, workplace/workforce resulted in the Employment, Training and Literacy Enhancement Act of 1997. “Its purpose was to consolidate, coordinate, and improve employment, training, literacy, and vocational rehabilitation programs in the United States” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 23). It was followed a year later by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) which replaced the Adult Education Act. WIA subsumed adult literacy under the larger umbrella of workforce training, providing adult education services “in order to assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency” (Sandlin, 2009, p. 1007). WIA was the legislation that had steered the ABE field for almost twenty years. The driving force behind WIA was the belief that the economic needs of the country were tied to the success of education and employment programs in helping youth and adults achieve maximum success. This, coupled with general efforts to foster greater cooperation and collaboration among agencies with common clients and program funding issues, led to this major shift in the provision of education and training (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

WIA mandated the establishment of strong links between Adult Basic Education (ABE) systems, job training, and social service agencies which lead to one major change to the way ABE “did business”. WIA introduced the “One-Stop” delivery system “where information about and access to a wide array of services would be available at a single location” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1998). ABE was a required and a vital partner in this new delivery system, but states grappled with this monumental shift.
Other provisions in WIA included an additional emphasis on preparing adults for post-secondary education and employment; the creation of career pathways leading adults to further education in order to increase employment status and income; the endorsement of concurrent enrollment (ABE and training program) and contextualization of curriculum; the reconfiguration of allocation formula; the recommendation to create “unified” state plans to avoid duplication of efforts between various entities; the addition of national incentive grants awarded to states that exceeded levels of performance; the expansion of research and pilot grants; and the establishment of a 21st Century Workforce Commission (Jurmo, 1998; Sticht, 2002). Again, a closer alignment of new performance measures with employment and training outcomes was evident. The Indicators of Program Quality were expanded to include entry into and retention in postsecondary education or employment and data tracking using the National Reporting System (NRS) took on even greater importance.

The adult education arena was once again expanded with the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in June 2014. The goal of WIOA was “to strengthen the United States workforce development system through innovation in, and alignment and improvement of, employment, training, and education programs in the United States, and to promote individual and national economic growth, and for other purposes” (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, p. 1). WIOA mandates included the creation of single Unified State Plans to cover all core services; the development of partnerships between all agencies (industry, education, career centers) involved; an emphasis on providing occupational training, industry-recognized credentials, and contextualized curriculum; a focus on Career Pathways as an important vehicle to move individuals from a starting job to a sustainable wage job; the
elimination of the incentive for performance introduced in WIA and the addition of sanctions for underperformance (Van Kleunen, 2014).

In 2021, six years post-implementation, one of the challenging components that agencies at the state and local level are grappling with is the single set of common performance measures (all related to employment, income, and credentials) which ALL agencies providing core services now use. Data and metrics are expected to be consistent across agencies yet the services each provide are very different. The education partner (ABE programs) has identified two populations for whom these new measures will not capture outcomes: 1) those who do not have college or career goals (many students attend ESL classes for personal or family reasons) and those whose skills are so low (entry-level ABE or beginner ESL) that they will not be able to meet education or employment measures for many years. The dilemma programs will be faced with going forward is whether or not to serve students who do not provide countable outcomes and consequently impact that program’s performance on the Indicators of Performance Quality.

The changes included in WIOA were necessary because WIA failed to keep pace with changing economic conditions (Van Kleunen, 2014). Dann-Messier (2011) pointed out that when WIA was passed, there was a federal budget surplus and an unemployment rate of 4.5%.

The present economy and demands on our public workforce system have changed dramatically. As our economy continues to strengthen and recover, the administration will be working with Congress to promote innovation in the workforce system, build on its strengths, address its weaknesses, and update and better equip the system (Dann-Messier, 2011).
The agenda proposed in WIOA is indeed ambitious and requires a concerted effort to create and maintain strong working relationships between the core partners and to engage in lock-step actions that will result in making a meaningful difference in the lives of adult learners.

A Study of Persistence: Part 1

Comings, Parrella & Soricone (1999) suggested that an important difference between adults and children is that adults “choose to participate in educational programs while children participate because of legal mandates and strong social and cultural forces that identify schooling as the proper “work” of childhood” (p. 3). It is exactly because adult participation is voluntary that persistence and retention are so challenging for adult education programs across the country. Not only do adults need to overcome significant barriers to participation, but goal attainment (e.g., getting a High School Equivalency certificate, speaking English) can often require “hundreds if not thousands of hours of learning activities to achieve” (p.3). When students’ educational pursuits become unmanageable with their work-family-life balance, or the time to completion is too distant, students opt out.

“Task persistence is a uniquely human strength” (Jaynes, 1976, as cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 230). While most animals do not persist on a task for more than 20 minutes, “many human accomplishments require individuals to persist at one task for an extended period—days, weeks, and even lifetimes” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 230). In addition, those who persist expect that their efforts will be rewarded with the outcome that they seek and those who expect to be successful in task performance are generally more persistent (Bulman & Brickman, 1982, as cited in Peterson & Seligman).

This section of the literature review explores the factors that affect the persistence of High School Equivalency (HSE) students in adult education programs. The review begins by
defining seminal terminology used throughout the chapter. It is followed by an examination of select studies in the adult education field, albeit limited. What follows is organized in four sections 1) barriers to persistence; 2) persistence supports, 3) drivers of persistence and 4) a theoretical framework which will be employed to explain, predict and understand the phenomenon of student persistence.

**Definitions**

Persistence can be defined in many ways. Merriman Webster defines it as staying until one graduates to “the state of being able to go on resolutely or stubbornly in spite of opposition, importunity, or warning”. Peterson & Seligman (2004) define persistence as the “voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement” (p. 229). In their adult education research, Comings, Parrella & Soricone (1999) defined persistence as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to programs as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 3).

Researchers of traditional higher education have a clear definition of persistence, that is, “of the students enrolled in any given term, what percentage return in the subsequent term? We think of students persisting in programs over the course of terms or years” (Evans & Baker, 2016, p. 71). However, describing student attendance patterns in adult education programs requires a different vocabulary and framework. In their research on MOOCs (massive open online courses), Evans & Baker (2016) suggested that because the structure and purpose of MOOCs are different from that of traditional higher education, this definition is not appropriate to use when measuring MOOC persistence. MOOCs have “very low barriers to entry and exit, and most MOOCs function independently as a single course” (p, 71) therefore, persistence in
MOOCs is not a matter of looking at term-to-term enrollment, but a matter of dropping or withdrawing from a single course. “Within-course outcome becomes the important measure of success in the course” (Evans & Baker, 2016, p. 72). Adult education programs are similar to MOOCs in that there are no barriers to entry and exit, and for the most part, courses function as single courses. In general, there are no course prerequisites nor credentials or certificates of completion; pace and content are widely adapted by instructors; starting and stopping attendance (open enrollment) is allowable; and success measures are not consistent, e.g., promotion to the next level can be determined by attendance, grades, standardized testing, or teacher recommendation.

Evans & Baker (2016) maintained that “every measure of course persistence is a simple quotient: the number of students who succeed divided by the number of students who begin the course” (p. 72). Success for HSE students is ultimately measured by passing the HSE exam, which can take a long time to achieve. For the purposes of this study, being physically present in class on the last week of semester will be used as an interim measure of success.

“Because of the complex and multi-faceted nature of their motives and orientation” (Falasca, 2011, p. 585), it is difficult to arrive at a simple definition of adults as learners. In fact, Galbraith (1990, as cited in Falasca, 2011) maintained that “it is erroneous to speak of the adult learner as if there is a generic adult that can represent all adults” (p. 585). Despite that, Comings, Parrella & Soricone (1999) succeeded in identifying five types of adult learners based on their pattern of attendance. The first group, *long-term students*, participate over long periods of time. They usually view education as their goal and they are able to manage the factors that support and inhibit their persistence. Their persistence is facilitated by stable situational circumstances.

In their 1999 study, Comings, Parrella & Soricone found that most students in this category were
over the age of 30. The second group, *mandatory students*, are required to attend classes (per public assistance or law-enforcement agency requirement) and their goals, which are extrinsically determined, are usually those of the mandating agency. They overcome barriers to persistence because they have no choice but to attend. Attendance is usually regular while the mandate is in effect, but students depart quickly once it expires. The third group, *short-term students*, participate for short periods of time and have specific, immediate, short-term goals in mind that they wish to accomplish. They tend to transfer from one program to another until they find the one that best meets their needs. They are usually able to manage their barriers to persistence for the short bursts of time they attend. The fourth group, *try-out students*, “have barriers to persistence that are insurmountable and have goals that are not yet clear enough to sustain their motivation” (Comings & Cuban, 2007, p.40). While they enroll with the best of intentions, they are not ready to make a long-term commitment. Deferring enrollment until they have clear goals and can manage their barriers to persistence is often the best option for these students. The fifth group, *intermittent students*, have barriers that limit their ability to attend on a regular basis, so they come and go, start and stop, transfer and return to until they reach their goals. Some disappear without notice while others maintain a connection with the program while not in attendance. These students see themselves as “stop-outs”, not “drop-outs” because they fully intend to return when they are able.

**Barriers to Persistence**

Adult education learners “do not have poor attendance or lack persistence for frivolous or trivial reasons. Instead, they face an array of conflicting challenges, barriers, and responsibilities” (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999, 2000). Cross’ (1981) framework
TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

categorizes the barriers to attendance that students face as situational, dispositional and institutional.

Family, job and civic commitment all play a part in determining situational barriers.

Dispositional barriers are intrapersonal and consequently much harder to define, and they include dissonance among role demands. Institutional barriers are systemic barriers that exclude adults or make it difficult for them to successfully navigate through their higher education (Fairchild, 2003, p. 12).

**Situational Barriers.** The types of situational barriers that adult education students face are many, including but not limited to work, finances, family commitments and responsibilities, childcare, transportation, housing, and health (including mental health). Unfortunately, exploring more than a few of these obstacles is beyond the scope of this literature review.

The nature of some students’ work-life presents a clear barrier to persistence. For many, the number of hours they work does not leave time for class. They may work long, unstable hours, or need to work two jobs to meet their household expenses and accept additional work when it is available. There may be an employer expectation that they work late or do overtime. Others may not want to divulge to an employer that they are attending class as there is a stigma associated with being a high school dropout. Furthermore, working takes vital time away from study time (Tillman, 2002).

Finances also impact persistence (Fairchild, 2003). Even though adult education programming is free, that does not mean that there is no cost associated with attendance. There is a cost associated with transportation; parents with young children have the burden of the cost of childcare while they attend class; or students may experience a loss of income because time spent in class could potentially take from time spent at work. Additionally, Fairchild (2003)
points out that “time and energy spent trying to “make ends meet” can drain the most dedicated student” (p. 13).

Schieman & Glavin (2011) examined the relationship between education and work-family conflict which they suggest is “a form of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from each domain are incompatible in some way” (p. 1341). They found that those with less than a high school education experienced more role conflict as a result of precarious and irregular work. Similarly, Markle (2015) suggests that inter-role conflict is a significant barrier to persistence, but it is not often considered. Students can experience four types of role conflict

1) family-school role conflict when family demands make it difficult to meet school demands; 2) school-family role conflict when school demands make it difficult to meet family demands; 3) work-school conflict when work demands make it difficult to meet school demands, and 4) school-work conflict when school demands make it difficult to meet work demands (p. 270).

Markle (2015) posited that even though there is no significant difference in persistence between men and women, the factors that influence persistence differ by gender (p. 280). For example, “women experience high levels of conflict due to their internalization of the intensive mothering and ideal student roles” (p. 270). As a result, they can often view their educational goals as selfish and feel guilty about taking time away from their family. Furthermore, mothers with young children interrupt or stop their education more often than those with older children (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002, as cited in Fairchild, 2003, p. 13).

Interrupted formal education is another significant barrier that makes returning to school after an extended period of time very challenging for adults. K-12 researchers studied learning loss that occurs when children are out of school for an extended period of time, e.g., summer
months, and found that when children do not have access to the school’s learning resources, the achievement gap widens (Pitcock, 2018, p. 5).

The difference in reading and math outcomes over the summer is likely related to the fact that reading is more naturally embedded in a child’s life …. On the other hand, math may not be a naturally occurring part of day-to-day life in many households, making math knowledge and skills more difficult to practice and quicker to decline (Pitcock, 2018, p. 5).

This appears to hold true for adults who have been out of school for an extended period of time evidenced by data that shows that returning adult learners tend to score lower in Math placement tests than in English Language Arts (Illinois Community College Board, n.d.). Furthermore, for some students, a learning disability may have been a contributing factor to their decision to withdraw from high school. A 2005 study of adult persistence in library literacy programs identified a concern among staff that many students had undiagnosed learning disabilities, which hampered them in their educational endeavors (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005). The challenge for adult education practitioners is that, unlike K-12, there is no mandate to test students for suspected learning disabilities, and higher education institutions are not required to provide accommodations without documentation of a disability, which is expensive to secure.

**Institutional Barriers.** Institutional barriers are those that students experience because of institutional structures and systems, including class size, program design, quality of instruction, mode of instructional delivery, program processes and procedures, and availability of advising. Benshoff & Lewis (1992, as cited in Fairchild, 2003) suggested that even though adult education programs serve adult students, they are often not structured to accommodate adult students’ lives and needs. Tolbert (2005), for example, pointed out that some students do not remain in
programs because of the limited access to the courses and services they need. Fairchild (2003) noted that class and semester schedules often conflict with those of employed adults or those who have caretaking responsibilities within their families. Additionally, the curriculum may focus on content and academic standards as opposed to relevant and practical life and occupational skills for which students have an immediate need. Furthermore, program policies (e.g., attendance and promotion policies) and processes (intake, testing, registration, and orientation) are often an impediment to persistence. Additional institutional barriers include advising, program culture, physical setting and in-class forces such as the teacher, peer support, and positive and negative feedback (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 1999, p. 29). Despite facing such institutional barriers, Sandler (2000, as cited in Fairchild, 2003) found that “adults persist against difficult odds in an institutional system that does not recognize them for who they are and is not designed to meet their needs” (p. 24).

A two-year study by the National Council on Adult Literacy (2008) found institutional factors such as high teacher turnover, lack of high-quality instruction, and poor student support services to be significant contributing factors to student persistence and attrition problems. Workforce instability in the adult education field resulting from high teacher turnover is a challenge for many programs. High-quality instruction is essential to student persistence, but adult education programs find it difficult to recruit and retain high-quality instructors since the working conditions are not conducive to making long-term commitments – the vast majority of instructors are contingent, part-time employees who work multiple jobs which have no benefits (National Council on Adult Literacy, 2008). In Illinois, adult education instructors are required to move along on a 4-step Instructional Staff Professional Pathway. However, each step requires a considerable investment in professional development (10-20 hours per level) which can be a
deterrent to a part-time workforce. Massachusetts’ Adult Basic Education Licensure presents similar challenges. Teachers are required to meet minimum educational requirements, pass two parts of the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (Communication and Literacy Skills Test and the ABE Subject Matter Test), and complete a performance assessment in order to secure a Professional License. While the state does not require adult education instructors to hold a license, individual programs can elect to require their instructors to be licensed. Licensure and credentialing make instructors more marketable, which presents a challenge for programs whose instructors may leave for higher-paying positions at other adult education programs.

**Dispositional Barriers.** Dispositional barriers are those related to personal attitudes about participation. Mellard, Krieshok, Fall & Woods (2013) suggested that the study of individual dispositional factors, as opposed to situational and program factors, could yield insights on reasons adults, who had sufficient motivation to enroll in adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE), do not persist in these programs (p. 1).

Students’ dispositional barriers are varied in type and in the impact they have on persistence. Barriers can include students’ attitudes about education (especially daunting for students who have had a prior negative educational experience and may be skeptical about the value of learning), students’ goals, motivation, self-efficacy, mindset (fixed or growth), the presence of goal-directed thinking and action, as well as their perception of the external and internal obstacles to learning (Mellard, Krieshok, Fall & Woods, 2013). Additional dispositional barriers include low self-confidence, social disapproval by friends and family, negative attitudes towards adult literacy, low personal priority (Hayes, 1988, as cited in Comings, Parrella, & Soricone,
1999), low perception of need, perceived effort and dislike for school (Beder, 1990, as cited in Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). There are perceptions by some adults that they may not benefit from participation, may not be able to learn, do not like participating in formal learning programs, and are unwilling to overcome the many barriers to participation. This describes a powerful set of negative forces that keep adults from entering or persisting in adult education programs (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999, p. 23).

Quigley (1997, as cited in Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999) suggested that the societal factors involved in situational influences are largely beyond the control of adult education programs … institutional influences … are areas that practitioners need to work on continuously…[and]… dispositional influences… provide a place from which program reform might begin to affect persistence (p. 25).

Moreover, of all the barriers that hinder persistence, dispositional barriers may be the least understood and least often addressed by practitioners (Goto & Martin, 2009). A student’s disposition influences how they perceive and react to the situational and institutional barriers they face; therefore, it warrants consideration. And even though it is not possible to alleviate all barriers to persistence, it is possible for practitioners to influence how students perceive their barriers.

Ziegler & Durant (2001) suggested that persistence is strongly influenced by students’ degree of engagement, a factor most directly under the influence of the instructor. Three themes emerged in their interviews with study participants, 1) beliefs about teaching and learning – the instructor’s belief in students’ ability to learn and students’ belief that they could make something of themselves; 2) relationships – the connections between students, instructors and
peers, belonging to a group, being cared about and helped through difficulties; and (c) the learning environment – accessible to those with interrupted formal education, classroom physical layout, opportunities for leadership, relevant content that meets learners’ needs

**Persistence Supports**

Student barriers to persistence are many and complex, but there are a number of supports, which can help alleviate student barriers to persistence. The New England Learner Persistence Project, a seminal persistence study of adult learners, conducted by Harvard researchers Comings, Parella & Soricone, was conducted in 2008 and involved 755 students in 18 programs across New England. Across all phases of participation (pre-enrollment: intake and orientation; instruction; advising; and re-engagement), the researchers examined four key supports to persistence which they previously identified in a 1999 study with Pre-GED students. These supports include

1) establishment of a goal by the students that is then used as context for instruction and reviewed and possibly revised over time;

2) helping students develop an understanding of the negative and positive forces that affect their persistence and building on that understanding, helping them make plans to manage those forces and build up positive ones;

3) fostering students’ self-efficacy regarding goal attainment and the academic achievement it entails; and

4) instituting assessment procedures that allow students to assess their progress toward their goals on a regular basis (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009, p.4).

The researchers recognized that aspects of the four supports existed in many of the programs studied, but suggested that more intentional efforts to implement a combination of
supports may provide a more supportive environment to persistence. Similarly, the National Research Council (2012) suggests that persistence supports interact with each other in complex ways to influence motivation to persist (p. 131). Moreover, Goto & Martin, (2009) found that a combination of robust motivation, strong self-efficacy and a clear understanding of their pathway strengthened student’s resolve to overcome situational barriers in their lives.

**Goal Setting.** The first support to persistence is the establishment of a goal by the student (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 1999). Austin and Vancouver (1996 as cited in National Research Council, 2012) proposed that “goals are extremely important in motivating and directing behavior” (p. 135). Students often have large overarching long-term goals, which they view as important enough to make the decision to enter an adult education program. Goto & Martin (2009) examined persistence in students they refer to as thresholders, defined as “those who are considering additional education but face various challenges in their lives” (p. 10). They suggested that it seems logical that these students would pursue a GED® if they had definitive goals for their lives, which involved receiving a high school equivalency certificate. However, proximal goals are just as important and have been shown to enhance self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991, as cited in National Research Council, 2012). For that reason, a number of researchers (Manderlink and Haraciewicz, 1984; Schunk, 1991, 1996 as cited in National Research Council 2012) have suggested helping learners “set short-term, or proximal, literacy goals that are optimally challenging and reachable within a short period of time” (p. 135) as an effective persistence strategy.

At the program level, adult education practitioners need to recognize the value of students understanding why they are enrolling in a program and develop processes and practices to increase student awareness and understanding of those reasons. Consequently, the goal-setting
process should begin as early as possible, preferably at the pre-enrollment stage. The first step is to identify the event in the student’s life that caused him/her to enter a program. This provocation may be something as dramatic as needing a high school equivalency certificate to retain a job, or as subtle as wanting to shed the “high school dropout” label or wanting to be a role model for their children. This is an important step, even though “the idea of life transitional events, while it has its uses, does not form a suitable basis upon which to build satisfying, explanatory theories of adult participation” (Blaxter & Tight, 1995, p. 231). Student goals can be used to develop Individual Education and Career Plans (IECP), providing students with a roadmap to measure their progress. Moreover, instructors should use student goals to inform instruction.

A study by Snider (1999) at an adult literacy-tutoring program in Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, examined the development and implementation of an orientation process that focused on goal setting. Snider found that “although many students already had made their mind up as to what goals they should pursue, an overwhelming number of students found the … [goal setting activities] … to be very helpful in deciding what their goals were going to be” (p. 5). Program staff should assist students to clearly define their primary goal and understand what it will take (time, resources and commitment) to attain that goal. Students often enter adult education programs with unrealistic expectations of time to completion. In fact, many adult learners “need hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of study and practice to raise their skills to a level that would make dramatic changes in their ability to perform the adult roles of worker, parent, and citizen” (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 1999, p. 17). Despite the fact that a “reality check” message is difficult to deliver, students should be made fully aware of what they are signing up for.
Management of Forces that Impact Persistence. Adults have a variety of positive and negative forces that support and hinder their persistence in educational pursuits. While negative forces, discussed previously in the barriers section, thwart persistence to various degrees, positive forces help students to continue their participation as they strive to reach their goals. Furthermore, “any intervention meant to increase persistence must help adults strengthen the positive forces and lessen the negative forces” (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 1999, p. 6).

Identifying the positive forces (supports) and negative forces (barriers) that could impact their persistence is an important first step for students to take prior to enrollment or at the beginning of program participation. With the help of program staff, e.g., during an intake and orientation process, students can engage in activities that allow them to identify such forces in their lives, and a comprehensive process should help them identify many that they were unaware of. Once these forces are identified, staff can help students select the ones that are likely to have the most significant impact on their persistence as well as to determine which positive forces can be made stronger and which negative forces can be made weaker. That is followed by developing a plan which includes concrete ways to 1) to manage barriers, e.g., provide resources or referrals for childcare, housing, transportation, and 2) to maximize the supports that are present in their lives, e.g., family, friends, and aspirations for a better future (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 1999; Comings, Parella & Soricone, 2000). It is important to note that the New England Persistence Study found that students experience more positive than negative forces. Furthermore, in an earlier study with Pre-GED students, Comings, Parella & Soricone (1999) found the support of family, friends, instructors, and peers to be the strongest positive force that students identified. This finding is consistent with that of Zaleski (1988, as cited in Peterson & Seligman) who found that “people who had close, supportive relationships were better able to
persist and exert effort than those without such relationships” (p. 241). The next strongest positive forces identified in the 1999 study were self-efficacy and personal goals, which will be discussed in the next two sections.

The suggestion that building up positive forces “may be more critical to increasing persistence than is the removal of barriers” (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009, p. 4) has important implications at the program level. It suggests the need for programs to reconsider the allocation of resources (staff, time and financial) on efforts that alleviate negative forces (e.g., transportation, childcare, etc.) and to increase efforts that support the positive forces in students’ lives (e.g., forming and deepening relationships between students and staff). It is also important to note that one student’s negative barrier may be another’s positive support. For example, being a parent may be a barrier if a student does not have or cannot afford childcare, while it may be a motivator and positive support for other students whose reason for going back to school is to be a role model for their children.

**Self-efficacy.** The third support to persistence is student self-efficacy (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 1999). The difference between self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence is often misunderstood as they are conceptually similar. The difference is that “self-efficacy refers to learners’ beliefs about their abilities in a certain area … self-esteem refers to how one feels about oneself generally … self-confidence is a global feeling of being able to accomplish most tasks” (National Research Council, 2012, p. 134). The Council suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and an educational outcome is weak but that self-efficacy is positively related to educational outcomes.

In the New England study, Comings, Parella & Soricone (2000) drew on Bandura’s (1986) theory of self-efficacy and suggested that adult education programs should provide a
variety of experiences for students to build self-efficacy. These include 1) mastery experiences, 2) vicarious experiences, 3) social persuasion, and 4) addressing psychological and emotional states.

First, mastery experiences allow students to experience (feel) success and see evidence of their success. Providing opportunities for success, especially in the early stages of participation, is essential. Equally important is supporting students as they experience and overcome failure, an important part of the mastery process, in order to help students, realize success through sustained and persistent effort. Peterson & Seligman (2004) suggest that “persistence in the face of failure is relatively difficult …. people are often inclined to give up and turn their attention elsewhere. Failure is unpleasant and discouraging, and so persistence requires overcoming the natural tendency to quit” (p. 234). Furthermore, after students experience initial failure “high self-efficacy and favorable expectancies of success produced the biggest increase in persistence” (Jacobs, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 1984, as cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 231). Recognizing and celebrating progress as a way to develop students’ expectations of success is an important consideration when working with students who have prior negative school experiences and are familiar with failure.

Second, vicarious experiences, provided by role models e.g., peers or past students, help adults to acquire the skills necessary to manage the demands of learning. Role models are those who “provide an example of the kind of success that one may achieve and often also provide a template of the behaviors that are needed to achieve such success” (Lockwood, 2006 as cited in McCullough, 2011, p. 28). HSE students should have opportunities to engage with students who have been successful in the program. Having similar lived educational experiences in HSE classes, program graduates have unique contributions to make in that they can listen with
understanding and validate student life experiences and social perspectives in ways that others cannot. “By identifying with an outstanding role model, individuals can become inspired to pursue similar achievements” (Lockwood, 2006 as cited in Du Toit & Muofhe, 2011, p. 5).

Third is social persuasion, the self-efficacy reinforcing support that students receive from practitioners, peers, family, and friends. Students, who retain self-doubt and perceive self-deficiencies as insurmountable, can benefit from positive reinforcement and verbal persuasion about possessing the capability to master activities (Bandura, 2010). Social persuasion is especially important for students who possess negative self-efficacy about learning as a result of prior negative schooling experiences.

Finally, addressing physiological and emotional states is “the acknowledgment that negative feelings can result from poor self-efficacy and can also lead to low self-efficacy” (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 2000, para.18). Students experience a number of negative emotions including stress, tension, anxiety, and fear prior to and during participation and they need help to identify and interpret their emotions so that these emotions do not impact their self-efficacy. Furthermore, students often express “learned helplessness” which Peterson & Park (1998) describe as the state of thinking that bad things are going to happen regardless of what one does. This state does not support persistence as the expectation of a negative outcome fosters a tendency to withdraw from the task whereas positive outcome expectancies can increase motivation to try and persistence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 231). The literature points to the fact that just acknowledging these feelings can help reduce their negative impact. Peterson & Seligman (2004) suggested that a large body of literature exists that suggests that people sometimes “self-handicap, or put barriers in the way of their own success, to protect and enhance their self-esteem and the esteem in which others hold them” (p. 233).
Nash & Kallenbach (2009) propose an array of best practices that programs can adopt to help adult students build self-efficacy about reaching their goals. They recommend expanding student roles and responsibilities in the program, e.g., involving them in orienting peers and providing them with opportunities to be included in decision-making; providing multiple opportunities for students to engage in conversations about their learning, aspirations, goals, and persistence; and offering academic support services, e.g., tutoring.

**Progress toward Meeting Goals.** The fourth persistence support is progress toward reaching a goal (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 1999, p. 9). Self-efficacy increases when students see progress, attain goals and set new challenges (Schunk, 1990). That makes the process of measuring progress, as well as making students aware of and celebrating progress toward long-term goal attainment, so important. Recognizing achievements, e.g., meeting milestones and self-identified benchmarks toward distal goals, on a regular and consistent basis allows students to see their progress on the path to reaching their long-term goals (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 2000). This can motivate students to set additional interim goals and stay the course to ultimate goal attainment (National Research Council, 2012). Conversely, when students only focus on long-term goals, they can become frustrated sensing that they are making little or no visible progress which impacts self-efficacy and persistence (Comings, Parella & Soricone, 2000). “Proximal goals result in greater motivation than distant goals … and perception of progress raises self-efficacy” (Schunk, 1990, p. 73).

At the program level, high-quality instructional and advising services are crucial. Staff should support students in setting a combination of long-, medium- and short-term goals, which are realistic and attainable. If students set goals that are too lofty, they may not see progress, which lowers self-efficacy and may result in them giving up. On the other hand, goals that are
too easy do not challenge students so they do not develop self-efficacy (Schunk, 1990, Schunk, 2001). Furthermore, programs should develop and implement assessment tools and practices, other than those required by accountability systems e.g., grant funders, which make smaller increments of achievement meaningful and motivating for students.

**Drivers of Persistence**

In a widely distributed report, *Making it Worth the Stay*, Nash & Kallenbach (2009) built and expanded upon the findings of the New England action research study. They suggest that “persistence strategies derive their power from the fact that they meet these affective needs of adults: 1) sense of belonging and community, 2) clarity of purpose, 3) agency, 4) competence, 5) relevance, 6) stability” (p. 1). There is a high level of interconnectedness between each of these drivers of persistence, and they reinforce one another in a myriad of ways. The authors recommend that programs employ a variety of strategies to support students develop each at all stages of enrollment, i.e., pre-enrollment, enrollment and re-engagement (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013a).

First, students need to feel welcomed, respected and cared about in order for them to feel that they belong and are part of a community. This begins at the pre-enrollment stage. Walking into an unfamiliar educational institution after an extended absence can be anxiety-provoking so a welcoming first impression is crucial. In addition, programs should implement community-building activities and cohort learning models during the enrollment period to increase students’ sense of belonging and community (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013b). Furthermore, feeling a connection with the program and the people in it may increase re-engagement if students need to stop out.
Second, students need to have a clarity of purpose, which is related to goal-setting and program fit. When students articulate their intentions and aspirations and their reasons for returning to school, they gain clarity not only about their desired outcome, but they are in a better position to make an informed decision about the value and relevance of the program and whether it can meet their needs. Goal setting is an important strategy that programs should employ to increase this driver of persistence (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013c).

Third, persistence is supported by agency, which is closely related to self-efficacy. Agency is “the capacity for human beings to make things happen through their actions” (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013d, para 3) while self-efficacy is the perceived ability to make things happen through actions. Agency is directly affected by self-efficacy, that is, how well a person thinks they can do something will impact what decisions and actions they take to make it happen (Bandura, 1982). For that reason, adult education practitioners should identify ways to develop and reinforce student’s beliefs that they are able to be successful (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013d).

Fourth, students’ sense of competence impacts persistence. Competence is closely related to agency and self-efficacy.

Adults’ beliefs about and realistic assessment of their competence in … [academic domains] …can have a profound effect on their persistence and achievement. … People who have high self-efficacy visualize success whereas those who doubt their efficacy typically visualize failure. These beliefs affect motivation and the types of aspirations and goals people set for themselves, which in turn, affect persistence and ultimately, academic achievement. Students with more self-efficacy are more willing to persist in the
face of adversity and reach their goals. (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013e, para 3)

Program staff as well as instructors play a key role in developing student’s perception of their competence by providing persuasive comments, vicarious and mastery experiences as previously described.

The fifth driver of persistence is relevance. “Relevance is one of the most frequently mentioned expectations adult learners have of instruction” (Donaldson, Flannery & Ross-Gordon, 1993, as cited in New England Learner Resource Center, 2013f, para 1). Unlike children, adult learners have responsibilities and competing priorities they need to juggle in order to attend class. If the program does not provide what students perceive as meaningful and in alignment with their goals, it will not take precedence over other demands in their lives. From a learning perspective, students commit meaningful content to long-term memory more easily (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013f).

The sixth and final driver of persistence is stability. Poverty and trauma cause many adult learners’ lives to be unstable and unpredictable. It is important that adult education programs “furnish the structure, predictability, and sense of safety that can help [students] begin to feel safe enough to learn” (New England Learner Resource Center, 2013g, para 4). Program design should move from open enrollment, which is challenging for lesson planning, teaching, community building, and classroom management, to managed enrollment which offers predictable, consistent programming allowing students to engage with greater ease and less uncertainty. Stability in terms of consistency of program scheduling, staffing and policies also play a role, albeit less significant.
The drivers of persistence have the potential to have a significant impact on program decisions and design. Practitioners need to be aware of students’ barriers to persistence as well as the supports they can provide to provide an environment that enables students to remain in the program long enough to meet their goals. It starts with programs examining its processes and policies at phases of participation (pre-enrollment: intake and orientation; instruction; advising; and re-engagement) to identify ways that it is and is not meeting their student’s needs. The fact that the factors which impact persistence are closely interrelated and interconnected means that it is possible for programs to employ one strategy or intervention that can potentially address a number of student needs.

The benefits of persistence are well known and widely recognized. Peterson & Seligman (2012) pointed out that persistence “increases one’s chances of attaining difficult goals…. may enhance the person’s enjoyment of subsequent success…may improve the person’s skills and resourcefulness… [and]…. can enhance the person’s sense of self-efficacy, provided that success is ultimately reached” (p. 248). In addition, persistence begets further persistence as students who have already reached a number of milestones on their path toward their goals often feel too invested (in terms of time and resources) to drop out (Shaw, 1976 as cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2012, p. 240).

Theoretical Framework

Two theories serve as the theoretical framework for this study: Kurt Lewin’s dynamic theory of force field and Albert Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. The theoretical construct which is outlined here makes it possible to look at the persistence struggles that HSE students face in a new way.
Kurt Lewin’s Force Field Analysis. Psychologist, Kurt Lewin’s theory maintains that “the stability of human behavior …[is]… based on "quasi-stationary equilibria" supported by a large force field of driving and restraining forces” (Schein, 1996, p 1). Basically, he suggests that individuals exist in a field of forces that are driving and restraining change, supporting and inhibiting action along a particular path (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 1999, p. 6). Lewin proposed using a force field analysis as a way to identify opposing forces that influence a social situation. His process of isolating and categorizing forces that drive an individual toward meeting a goal (called helping or positive forces) or prevent his/her progress toward a goal (called hindering or negative forces) also allows an individual to identify the magnitude of those forces (figure 1).

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**Figure 1.** Levin’s Force Field.

When students enter an adult education program, there are a number of forces acting upon them, positive ones that support and negative ones that hinder persistence. Interventions at the program level should focus on helping students strengthen the former and lessen the latter. Students need help identifying the forces acting upon them so completing a force field analysis is an important step in the pre-enrollment or early enrollment stage. Different forces impact individuals in different ways, therefore once identified, the significance of each force for each
individual needs to be ascertained and those which are identified as having no effect should be eliminated. In addition, some forces can be managed (made stronger or weaker) and some cannot. This theory suggests that “improvement in one force that can be influenced might offset the effects of another force that cannot be influenced” (Miller, 1967, p. 2). Therefore, ensuring that students understand their own forces, having them identify the strongest ones and those they think they will be most able to influence, will help program staff identify or design interventions to assist students to move toward meeting their educational goal (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 1999, p. 6).

Schein (1996) proposed that “all (bold in original) forms of learning and change start with some form of dissatisfaction or frustration generated by data that disconfirm our expectations or hopes” (p. 2). Even though disconfirming information functions as a primary driving force in Lewin’s quasi-stationary equilibrium (Senge, 1990 as cited in Schein, 1996) disconfirming information is not sufficient in and of itself to motivate an individual to change. The individual must accept the disconfirming information as relevant and valid and connect it to something they care about. Furthermore, Miller (1967) asserted that there are patterns of interaction between student’s personal needs and social forces

1. When strong social forces and strong personal needs move people toward a particular educational objective, the congruence should result in a high level of participation in programs relevant to that objective.

2. When strong personal needs among a particular group of people move them toward an educational objective, but there are no supporting or facilitating social forces, the participation level will be low generally, but erratically and spottily high.
3. When personal needs in a particular group are weak, but social forces are strong, participation originally will be fairly high, but may drop sharply after an initial period.

4. When personal needs and social forces conflict, the participation level will depend on the strength of the social force in the given situation, but there will be a considerable amount of tension within the program itself (p. 4).

This theory exhibits similarities with the constructs of transformative learning. A sense of dissatisfaction is commonly referenced as a catalyst for change in many adult learning and adult development theories. For example, Marsha Baxter Magolda’s student development theory of self-authorship suggests that young adults come to a crossroads where something happens that causes them to question the stories, values, and perspectives of their elders. Extracting themselves from what they have uncritically assimilated from authorities to define their own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings involves far more than information and skill acquisition. It requires a transformation of their views of knowledge, their identity, and their relations with others (Baxter Magolda, 2007, p. 69).

When faced with academic disequilibrium, students often experience "learning anxiety", described by Schein (1996) as “the feeling that if we allow ourselves to enter a learning or change process, if we admit to ourselves and others that something is wrong or imperfect, we will lose our effectiveness, our self-esteem and maybe even our identity” (p. 2). This often results in defensive avoidance, which can be a significant restraining force for students who enter HSE programs with negative prior schooling experiences and are fearful of risking failure or loss of face. Lewin suggested that learning to deal with learning anxiety is key to producing change.
This has important implications at the program and classroom level. Fortunately, strategies that create psychological safety for students abound. For example, providing practice fields in which errors are embraced rather than feared, providing positive visions to encourage the learner, breaking the learning process into manageable steps, providing online coaching and help all serve the function of reducing learning anxiety and thus creating genuine motivation to learn and change (Schein, 1996, p.2).

Bandura’s Theory of Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a theoretical framework that has been successfully used in the literature to study academic persistence and success. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391) and hypothesized that “it affects an individual's choice of activities, effort, and persistence” (Schunk, 1991, p. 208). This theory suggests that those who doubt their capabilities may avoid tasks, consistent with Levin’s defensive avoidance, while those with high self-efficacy readily engage in tasks and persist longer even when they experience challenges. In addition, self-efficacy can influence an individual’s choice of activities, how they prepare for an activity, the level of effort expended during an activity as well as thought patterns and emotional reactions (Phipps, Prieto & Ndinguri, 2013).

In general, success increases efficacy and failure decreases it. Bandura (1986) theorized that failure may not have much impact when an individual possesses strong self-efficacy. Similarly, Jacobs, Prentice-Dunn & Rogers (1984) found that when faced with failure, high self-efficacy and favorable expectancies of success produce an increase in persistence (as cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 231). Individuals evaluate their efficacy based on information acquired from their “performance accomplishments, vicarious (observational) experiences, forms
of persuasion, and physiological indexes” (Schunk, 1999 as cited in Okoro, 2017, p. 306). The fact that mastery experiences have a greater effect on self-efficacy than vicarious experiences; that positive persuasive comments enhance self-efficacy but only temporarily if subsequent efforts result in failure; and that physiological responses which signal anxiety (e.g. increased heart rate, breathing or sweating) can be interpreted by students as a lack of skills and impact self-efficacy (Schunk, 1999,) are important considerations for program and instructional design.

Even though the idea that high self-esteem fosters confidence, which in turn fosters perseverance, which fosters success is intuitive, it is not absolute (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). There are many confounding complications and contributing factors involved in the complicated self-efficacy/persistence equation. For example, some individuals persist longer when they are told a task is difficult; others self-handicap to protect the esteem in which others hold them; and optimists have higher self-esteem and persistence rates (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The literature supports the presence of an alternative goal. At the program level, staff should help students think through and record all their reasons for and benefits of enrolling, not just the ones first articulated. Equally important is ensuring that students learn how to identify growth in these areas so they can become self-aware of their progress toward meeting each goal.

Given the fact that the majority of students entering HSE programs in Illinois are between 25 and 50 years (Illinois Community College Board, n.d.) it is important to consider the relationship between age and efficacy beliefs. Martocchio (1994 as cited in Schunk & Usher, 2012) found that age was inversely related to positive self-efficacy. This implies that as individuals grow older, they perceive their level of competence to diminish (p. 22). In addition, fear of failure may increase as adults age, a factor that could inhibit older persons from seeking and participating in educational opportunities (Colquitt, LePine & Noe, 2000 as cited in Phipps,
Prieto & Ndinguri, 2013, p. 16). At the program level, practitioners should deliberately address any perception of diminished aptitude or ability that older students might consciously or unconsciously maintain as well as provide multiple opportunities for mastery experiences to help students overcome the fear of failure.

Academic self-efficacy is strongly associated with academic success, that is, the stronger the student’s academic self-efficacy, the more likely that the individual will be successful. However, high self-efficacy will not result in academic success if requisite academic skills are lacking (Schunk, 1991, p. 208). An understanding of the practical implications of increasing student efficacy belief can inform the development of policies, practices, and supports in adult education programs in order to foster an environment that increases the probability that students will remain in the program long enough to realize academic success and meet their goals.

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*Figure 2.* Quantitative Study’s Theoretical Framework.
The two theories outlined here provide a theoretical framework for the quantitate portion of this research study. Lewin’s force field analysis affords us an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of how the positive and negative forces that exist in the adult learners’ lives can support and hinder their persistence. In addition, an understanding of Bandura’s self-efficacy theory illustrates the importance of one key positive force, self-efficacy, and its role in supporting student persistence to goal attainment. Using this theoretical framework (figure 2) will lead to a greater understanding of HSE student persistence in adult education programs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the barriers to persistence that adult education students face, the factors that have been identified as persistence supports and drivers, as well an exploration of the work of Bandura and Lewin to formulate a theoretical framework, which will help to explain, predict and understand the phenomenon of student persistence in adult education. This study is significant in light of the fact that almost 1 million adults in Illinois and almost half a million adults in Massachusetts do not possess a high school diploma or its equivalent (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Many adults who prematurely exited formal education turn to adult education programs for a second chance. The purpose of this quantitative study is to obtain an in-depth understanding of the factors that affect the persistence of HSE-seeking adult learners and to use that understanding to develop processes and policies that better support persistence and re-engagement. The broader goal is to share the lessons learned with peer institutions in Illinois, Massachusetts and across the country and bolster efforts to make concerted efforts to make adult education programs places where students can be successful the first time, every time!

A Study of Persistence: Part 2
Because the findings of my quantitative study were not statistically significant, I devised a second study to understand my experience trying to gather data. An additional review of the literature was undertaken to inform the analysis of the data-access challenges I encountered and to assist with placing the findings in context. Bess & Dee (2012) suggested that because organizations cannot produce all the resources they need and they cannot get the resources they need at will, they are dependent on the eternal environment. For that reason, Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) is an appropriate theory to explore my experience and the lived experiences shared by the interviewees. Equity Theory suggests that employee’s motivation to work is largely driven by their perception of fairness in the workplace (i-researchnet, 2016). Given the staffing challenges that interviewees shared, equity theory is a helpful framework for exploration of the causes and consequences of people’s perceptions of equity and inequity at their program.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories serve as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study: 1) Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), one of many theories of organizational studies that characterize organizational behavior, and 2) Equity Theory, one of the many theories of justice. The theoretical construct which is outlined here makes it possible to look at the challenges that I faced in phases I and II of this research study in a different way.

Resource Dependence Theory. In order to understand the relationship between grant funders and adult education programs, one must explore resource dependence theory (RDT). RDT suggests that “all organizations depend on their environments for resources” (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 148). External dependencies are part and parcel of the adult education world. As a field, adult education is most dependent upon grant funders (suppliers) and students (consumers) for
survival and for success. These external entities have two sources of power over the focal organization. First, they can determine whether the organization receives the resources it needs, and second, they can determine how the organization uses the resources (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 149).

Adult education students do not pay tuition or contribute financially to the instructional or support services they receive, therefore programs must rely on external sources (grants) to supply the financial resources needed to run their program. Funding options and sources are very limited. This presents a challenge, as Bess and Dee (2012) point out, “the level of an organization’s dependence on external entities varies based on how important the resource is to the focal organization (its criticality), and how many alternative sources of resources are available (its scarcity)”. Furthermore, “when a resource is both critical and scarce” as is the case with adult education, “the organization is highly dependent on the supplier of that resource” (p. 149). For that reason, adult education programs in Illinois and Massachusetts are inextricably linked with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) respectively.

Adult education programs are also dependent on the students who attend classes. With the enrollment decrease discussed earlier, programs might attempt to reduce their dependence on the traditional or repeat/returning students, by diversifying its student pool, e.g., offering courses outside the traditional structure (on weekends, at 6 am for local shift workers) or by using different delivery methods (online, blended, HyFlex) while continuing to support their existing student base. That has certainly been the trend since the pandemic.

Bess and Dee (2012) also point out that increasing the dependence of other organizations on the focal organization is a good way to manage resource dependence. In practice, adult
education programs may consider partnering with local businesses, industries and employers who want to increase the language, literacy or numeracy skills of their workforce. Providing classes that are targeted towards the specific needs of the employer increases the reliance of that business on the local adult education program. Local businesses, in turn, might advocate for additional funding or policy change in adult education.

To further mitigate external resource dependencies, adult education programs might attempt to reduce the scarcity of funding resources by alleviating dependence on ICCB and ACLS funding. This would require a concerted effort by program administrators to research and seek additional sources of funds. The advantage of diversifying funding sources is that programs would have more flexibility to innovate, or fund initiatives which do not fall under “allowable costs” per grant guidelines. For example, programs may wish to provide direct financial support to students (pay for HSE exam fees) or serve Spanish-speaking students functioning at a less than 9th grade level who wish to pursue their HSE in Spanish. Additionally, by reducing reliance on one funder, adult education programs would protect themselves from scarcity should state grant funding be reduced. This is a recurring concern for programs, especially those who do not meet state and federal performance standards. One final strategy proposed by Bess and Dee is advocacy, lobbying and coalition forming. In adult education, we have a number of organizations that facilitate such efforts. The Illinois Adult and Continuing Education Association (IACEA) and the Coalition for Adult Basic Education (COABE) are active and constant participants in advocacy efforts at the state and national level.

**Equity Theory.** Equity theory suggests that “members continually assess the personal return they receive for the investment they put into the organization … The extent to which
people feel they are being treated in a fair and equitable manner profoundly affects their motivation” (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 299).

![Diagram showing Job Inputs and Job Outputs: Education, Commitment, Work performance, Salary, Recognition, Promotion.]

**Figure 3: Equity Theory, Job Inputs and Job Outputs.**

Individuals compare their job inputs (education, time, effort, loyalty, commitment, ability, adaptability, flexibility, skill and ability, determination) and outcomes (salary, benefits, job security, recognition, responsibility, sense of achievement and praise) with those of others and make a determination of perceived fairness (figure 3). This has significant implications for programs that are understaffed and for programs whose staff are overextended. “When people feel that they are being dealt with inequitably or unfairly, equity theory predicts that they will act to restore their feeling of equity” (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 299). They can do that by 1) producing lower quality work, 2) seeking to increase outcomes (praise, money, autonomy), 3) attributing some of their work to others, 4) asking others to reduce their productivity, or 5) leaving their job. This theory also suggests that some people are more sensitive to equity issues than others and that organizational culture affects how people attempt to restore equity.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I first shared an overview of the history of adult education and the legislation that has impacted it. Then, I reviewed the literature on student persistence and
presented a theoretical framework to explore HSE student persistence in adult education programs. Finally, I presented two theories which served as the theoretical framework for the qualitative portion of my research study, trying understand my experience gathering data for my quantitative study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This is the methods section of two independent but related research studies which explored 1) the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of students pursuing a High School Equivalency credential in adult education programs in Illinois and Massachusetts and 2) my experiences conducting the study. This chapter includes a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, the methodologies which were employed and a discussion of why and how they were the most useful to answer the research questions. After providing a detailed data collection plan, which includes a description of participants and the recruitment process, data sources and methods utilized, the chapter details the strategies and frameworks used in the data analysis process. Additionally, ethical assurances including confidentiality, anonymity, and minimizing harm to any human participants are discussed. I also describe the steps taken to ensure validity and reliability. Appendices include recruitment materials and the survey instrument.

To facilitate flow and understanding, this chapter is divided into two sections. Section I describes what I refer to as “A Quantitative Study of Persistence” which took place in two phases - phase I and phase II. Section 2 describes what I refer to as “A Qualitative Study of my Experience” which took place in phase III.

Research Study 1: A Quantitative Study of Persistence

As discussed in chapter one, adult education programs across the states of Illinois, Massachusetts and beyond, bemoan the common challenge of high attrition among adult education students pursuing a High School Equivalency (HSE) credential. Many factors impact student persistence and persistence barriers fall into three main categories - institutional, situational (environmental) and dispositional. The literature examined in chapter two, suggested
that there is a relationship between students’ self-efficacy, a dispositional factor, and students’ persistence. This research study was conducted to determine if a relationship exists between HSE student self-efficacy and persistence. This relationship was measured through an analysis of ten self-efficacy constructs with course completion (not dropping out). The research question for this study therefore is, what is the relationship between HSE students’ self-efficacy and persistence in an adult education program?

A quantitative study was an appropriate method to answer this research question as it allowed me to conduct in-depth research by gathering data with parallel measures to compare those data and evaluate the relationships between them.

**Study Design**

Analysis of these data (self-efficacy constructs and course completion) provides information about the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of students pursuing an HSE certificate. The independent variable was student self-efficacy which refers to perceptions an individual has about his/her capabilities to perform at an expected level and achieve goals or milestones. It was measured using the General Self-Efficacy Scale, developed by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer in 1979. The tool’s 20 items were reduced to a 10-item psychometric scale in 1981. This tool has been translated into 28 languages (Scholz, Doña, Sud & Schwarzer, 2002) and used in many studies with thousands of participants (Schwarzer, 2012). This tool assesses optimistic self-beliefs to cope with a variety of difficult demands in life (Nrkoehler, 2019, para 1). I determined that this was the most appropriate tool to use after an extensive online search. It differs from other tools that assess optimism in that it “explicitly refers to personal agency, i.e., the belief that one's actions are responsible for successful outcomes. Perceived self-efficacy is a prospective and operative construct” (Schwarzer &
Jerusalem, n.d.). The higher the score, the more self-efficacy a person possesses. Schwarzer (2012) does not endorse the view that people should be categorized as being high or low self-efficacious and maintains there is no cut-off score. Rather, he suggests establishing “groups on the basis of the empirical distributions of a particular reference population. One could do a median split, which is to dichotomize the sample, for example, at the cut-off point of 30 (if this is near the median in your sample)” (p. 1).

The tool was designed for the general adult population to be used as a standalone tool or as part of a more comprehensive questionnaire. Additionally, because it is self-administered it is easy to administer online; it requires four minutes on average to complete (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, n.d.); the items are sufficiently concise and simple for students to understand and provide accurate answers; it is free; and it is written at a sixth (Flesch-Kincaid) grade reading level.

The dependent variable was persistence, which was challenging to define and quantify. Long-term attendance, course completion, and persistence are key to ensuring student success. In HSE programs, success is ultimately measured by earning the HSE certificate. However, with multiple courses in the Language Arts and Math sequences of most adult education programs, that success is a long way off for most students. Along the way, success can be measured by 1) making measurable skill gain (MSG) in standardized testing, 2) passing a class (making academic progress determined by final course grade, independent of MSG); or 3) completing a course (not dropping out).

In this study, using test outcomes as the indicator of success and measure of persistence (options one and two) was problematic for a number of reasons. First, tests measure achievement, not persistence. Second, test anxiety or personal stressors can impact test
performance. Third, Language Arts and Math courses have Grade Level Equivalent (GLE) ranges of between two to four grade levels and hours per course are not consistent across programs or states. As discussed in chapter two, approximately 100 hours of instruction is needed for students to increase one GLE on a standardized test (Sticht, 1982; Darkenwald, 1986 as cited in Comings, Cuban, Bos & Taylor, 2001, p. 26). That means that a student in a Language Arts level 2 (GLE 4-5.9) course could need up to 200 hours of instruction (multiple semesters) to make the academic progress needed to move to the next level, and up to 800 hours to be ready to take the HSE exam (table 6). For that reason, it is common for students to retake a course a number of times because they do not demonstrate mastery of the course content the first time around.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample HSE Course Sequence, Grade Level Equivalent (GLE) Range and Hours to Complete</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours of instruction to get to the next level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours of instruction to be ready to take HSE exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third option, completing a course (not dropping out) was an appropriate measure to consider. Defining drop out, however, can be challenging and according to Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón (2014) is context-sensitive. Astin (1971) maintained that “the term ‘dropout’ is imperfectly defined: the so-called dropouts may ultimately become non-dropouts and vice versa” (p. 15). My definition was grounded in the work of Castles (2004) and Dupin-Bryant (2004). Castles (2004, as cited in Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón, 2014). They defined dropout as “students who had formally withdrawn, had left without notifying the university, or did not
complete a course during a semester” (p. 294). Similarly, Dupin-Bryant (2004, as cited in Grau-Valldosera & Minguillón, 2014) defined dropout as “student who did not complete a course during a semester” (p. 294).

The dependent variable, persistence, therefore, is inversely related to dropout. Persistence was measured by the completion of a single course, regardless of whether the student was promoted to the next level or not. A student was classified as persistent (“completer”) if they do not drop out before the course ended. Conversely, a student was classified as not persistent (“non-completer”) if they dropped out before the course ended.

**Instrumentation**

The web-based survey was comprised of three parts. In the first part, the informed consent form, students provided consent to take part in the research study. The second part gathered general student information including age, gender, race, length of time out of school, course enrollment and completion, impetus for pursuing a High School Equivalency certificate, and self-identified persistence barriers and supports. The third part included a 10-item General Self-Efficacy Scale plus three researcher-generated questions.

**Data Collection**

**Target Population.** The target population for phase I (the original quantitative study) was 300-400 students who were enrolled in High School Equivalency (HSE) Language Arts classes at an adult education program in Illinois in Fall 2018, Fall 2019, and Fall 2020. Those who exited by completion or by choice prior to completion were invited to participate. Students grouped as “completers” attended HSE classes and did not drop out of their course, those grouped as “non-completers” attended HSE classes but dropped out prior to the last week of class. The sample was not limited by race, gender, marital, parental or employment status,
placement or classes attended, citizenship, or length of time out of school. Only adult students over the age of 18 were included in the study. No incentives, including financial incentives, were provided to students for their participation.

In phase I, participants were identified by program staff at the research site, Kerry Community College in Illinois. Using the institutional student management database, the names and email addresses of 1,069 students who attended HSE Language Arts classes between FY2018 and FY2020 were retrieved. Using student attendance records from DAISI (Data and Information System-Illinois) program staff then manually added course enrollment and completion data to the excel worksheet. The worksheet was shared with me in May 2021. I removed duplicate records and 665 unduplicated records remained (32 with personal email addresses and 633 with college student email addresses). On May 21, 2021, I sent the invitation to participate to 665 students via SurveyGizmo’s email campaign feature. An automatic reminder was sent two weeks later. Two responses were received, both from students contacted on their personal email (<0.05% response rate).

I hypothesized that the response rate was low because 1) students who were not actively attending class at that time might not be checking their college email and 2) students did not recognize my email address and might have treated it as spam. For those reasons, I submitted a study revision request to the National Louis University Institutional Research Board on May 26, 2021, requesting to expand the participant recruitment pool by reaching out to colleagues in all grant-funded adult education programs in Illinois and Massachusetts.

The target population for phase II of the study was all students who enrolled in High School Equivalency (HSE) classes in Massachusetts and Illinois in FY2018, FY2019, FY2020 and FY2021. As mentioned in chapter two, 81,118 students (duplicated) enrolled in HSE classes
in Illinois and Massachusetts between FY 2018-FY2020 (table 2). FY21 data was not available at the time of writing. In phase II, AE program staff were asked to invite their students to participate, if they were comfortable doing so, in the hopes that students would be more likely to participate if the invitation came from a familiar source. Once IRB approval for the revised study was secured, I emailed 59 programs in Illinois and 68 programs in Massachusetts. A reminder email was sent to program administrators one week later. Despite the large pool of potential participants, only 49 additional participant responses were received for a total of 51 (<0.06% response rate).

Perplexed by the very low response rate, I decided to change course and add a qualitative component to the study in an attempt to understand 1) my experience trying to collect data, 2) program-level data collection and sharing experiences of adult education peers, 3) why data were not available/inaccessible, and 4) the implications of lack of access to program-level persistence data and the ensuing inability to identify state-wide trends.

In phase III of the study, four adult education program administrators, serving in roles similar to mine, e.g., Dean or Director of Adult Education, were identified using master lists of grant-funded adult education programs posted on ICCB (Illinois) and ACLS (Massachusetts) websites. Upon approval of a third iteration of my research study from the National Louis University Institutional Research Board, I invited two adult education administrators from Illinois, and two from Massachusetts to participate in a semi-structured interview (Appendix D). I chose semi-structured interviews because they allowed me to elaborate on the parts of respondent’s answers that were meaningful thereby driving the conversation deeper. Participants were not coerced or influenced by any prior relationship with me and no incentives were offered. The purpose of the study and interview format was explained to participants. Those wishing to
Two for the Price of One

participate completed the informed consent form (Appendix E). Participants were asked some/all of the interview questions (Appendix F) in order to gain an understanding of program-level experiences and to identify shared experiences.

Methods. One method of data collection, an online survey (Appendix A) was used in phase I and phase II of the quantitative study.

Prior to engaging in data collection for phase I, I created an informed consent form which was written at a fourth-grade reading level, without technical jargon or acronyms (Appendix A). I shared the form with a colleague to check for comprehension before submission with the IRB application. It contained contact information for me, my committee chair and the Institutional Research Board in the event that participants had questions about the study. The form was the first page that participants accessed when they clicked on the research study’s survey link. Providing consent was required in order to access the survey questions.

Online Survey. The survey was created in Survey Gizmo. The first part, General Information, collected information about students’ age, race, gender, length of time out of school, impetus for pursuing a High School Equivalency certificate, self-identified barriers to persistence, course enrollment and course completion (Appendix A). In the second part, the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Appendix A) was used to assess students’ self-efficacy. The tool assesses a general sense of perceived self-efficacy with the aim in mind to predict coping with daily hassles as well as adaptation after experiencing all kinds of stressful life events… Perceived self-efficacy facilitates goal-setting, effort investment, persistence in face of barriers and recovery from setbacks. It can be regarded as a positive resistance resource factor. Ten items from the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) are designed to tap this

Participants were asked to respond to the questions by self-rating items on a 4-point Likert scale indicating whether the statement is “not at all true” (1 point), “hardy true” (2 points), “moderately true” (3 points), or “exactly true” (4 points).

1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.
2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to achieve what I want.
3. It is easy for me to stick to and reach my goals.
4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with events that I don’t expect.
5. I know how to handle unforeseen situations.
6. I can solve most problems if I put in the effort.
7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
8. When I am faced with a problem, I can usually find a number of solutions.
9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.
10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.

Three additional researcher-generated questions were added to elicit information about the student’s impetus for pursuing an HSE certificate and the barriers that affected their persistence (Appendix A).

11. When you were taking classes, what made it hard for you to come to class? In other words, what caused you to be late for class or what caused you to be absent?
12. Of the things that you listed in question 11, which one was the main reason that you stopped coming to class?
13. What was the main reason you wanted to get your High School Equivalency certificate?
Procedure

Phase I. Upon approval from National Louis University’s Institutional Research Board, I created a three-page survey tool using Survey Gizmo which included 1) informed consent, 2) general student information, and 3) online survey. I uploaded the informed consent form (Appendix A) on page 1 and made all the fields required thus making completion of page 1 necessary to access page 2. Fields included first name, last name, and a checkbox to provide consent. On page 2, I uploaded the General Student Information questions (Appendix A) again making all the fields (age, race, gender, length of time out of school, impetus for pursuing a High School Equivalency certificate, self-identified barriers to persistence, course enrollment and course completion) required. On page 3, I included the questions from the General Self-Efficacy Scale and added additional questions on motivations and barriers under the heading My Experience.

I contacted Kerry Community College’s (KCC) adult education department and requested contact information and course enrollment and completion data for HSE students, age 18 and above, who were enrolled in HSE class between FY2018 and FY2021. Generating a single file with student name, email and course enrollment/completion proved to be more difficult than anticipated at KCC. Unbeknownst to me or program staff, it was not possible to generate a report which included student name, email, course enrollment and course completion in DAISI (Data and Information System-Illinois). The adult education staff reached out to KCC’s Institutional Research Department and was able to secure student names, email addresses and course enrollment. However, course completion data had to be added manually by data entry staff in the adult education program. Data on 1,069 students was shared with me in May 2021. Duplicate student records were removed leaving 665 potential participants.
The potential participants were invited to take part in the study (Appendix B) via email. At that time, the Survey Gizmo link; instructions on how to complete and submit the questionnaire; and completion deadline were shared with the participants. Participants were asked to complete the survey using their first and last name so that I had the ability to connect their online survey with course completion rate and view meaningful individual results. In order to allow students who did not have access to technology at home to take part in the study, I also included locations where students could complete the survey. Students who did not complete the survey after one week received an automatically generated reminder email from SurveyGizmo. The survey was closed on the deadline (two weeks after the original invitation).

Phase II. Because of the low response rate in phase I, I expanded the outreach pool to include all grant funded HSE programs in Illinois and Massachusetts. In late June 2021, I emailed 71 administrators in 59 programs in Illinois and 74 administrators in 68 programs in Massachusetts. In total, 127 programs were invited to participate. Program administrators were asked to contact their HSE students who attended class between 2018 and FY2021 and invite them to participate in the study. A sample “invitation to participate” letter was included (Appendix C). Two weeks later, a reminder email was sent. Two programs requested a deadline extension of one week which was granted. The survey was then closed. Repeating the processes in phase I, I retrieved the data, stored it in the cloud (Google Drive) using an account with two-factor authentication and only the committee chair and I had access to the data.

Data Analysis

Prior to analyzing the data, I created data preparation and organization processes, e.g., combining collected data from all sources, checking data accuracy, developing a file naming system and identifying a secure file storage device. All participant names were replaced with
researcher-generated study ID codes. The measures used to measure the variables and student characteristics are presented in table 7 below.

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<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Age                  | Question: How old are you?  
                      · 18-25  
                      · 25-40  
                      · 40-55  
                      · Over 55  
                      This measure was self-reported |
| Time out of school   | Question: Prior to this program how long had it been since you were enrolled in high school or formal education?  
                      · Less than 5 years  
                      · 5-10 years  
                      · 10-20 years  
                      · 20-30 years  
                      · More than 30 years  
                      This measure was self-reported |
| Gender               | Question: What is your gender?  
                      · Male  
                      · Female  
                      This measure was self-reported |
| Race                 | Question: What is your race/ethnicity? (Choose all that apply)  
                      · American Indian or Alaska Native  
                      · Asian  
                      · Black  
                      · Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
                      · White  
                      · Hispanic / Latino  
                      This measure was self-reported |
| Persistence          | Persistence is inversely related to drop out. It was measured by completion of a single course. A student was classified as persistent if they did not drop out before the course ended. A student was classified as not persistent if they dropped out before the course ended. |
| Completer            | Student who did not drop out of a course. This measure is a 1/0 binary (1 = yes/completer). |
This measure was self-reported in Phase II.

Non-completer
Student who dropped out by choice (not by completion) before the course ended. This measure is a 1/0 binary (0 = no/non-completer).
This measure was self-reported in Phase II.

Self-Efficacy
Students’ self-efficacy was determined using the General Self-efficacy Scale. Responses were assigned a point count:
- not at all true = 1 point
- hardy true = 2 points
- moderately true = 3 points
- exactly true = 4 points
The total score was calculated by finding the sum of all the items, with a final composite score range from 10 to 40.

In the data analysis process, I used frequencies and descriptive statistics to get an overview of the data by demographic group and completion status. Descriptive analysis, analysis of variance and analysis of correlation were used to examine the relationships between variables. Finally, multiple linear regression was used to understand the relationships between the variables.

Validity and Reliability

Data validity is necessary in order to determine whether the data collected actually measures what it is intended to measure. Data reliability is tested to determine if the data can be generalized outside of this research study (Field, Miles & Field, 2012). Generalizability, the ability to generalize the findings to the entire population without significant discrepancies, was an important consideration as I planned to disseminate the research findings at adult education conferences and professional journals.

The General Self-Efficacy Scale (SES) has been used in numerous research projects and “typically yielded internal consistencies between alpha = .75 and .90. The scale is not only
parsimonious and reliable, it has also proved valid in terms of convergent and discriminant validity” (Schwarzer, Baler, Kwiatek, Schröder & Zhang, 1997, p. 72).

**Research Study 2: A Qualitative Study of my Experience**

This section outlines the methodology for phase III of my study. In this second study, a qualitative component was added in an attempt to understand 1) my experience studying adult education, 2) why data were not available or inaccessible, 3) the implications of lack of access to program-level persistence data and the ensuing inability to identify state-wide trends, and 4) program-level data collection and sharing experiences of adult education peers and related barriers.

**Data Collection**

**Target Population.** The target population for this phase of the study was adult education administrators, serving in a similar role to mine (Director of Adult Education or Dean of Adult Education) in 59 adult education programs in Illinois and 68 in Massachusetts.

**Methods.** One method of data collection, semi-structured interviews (Appendix F) was used in this phase of the study.

**Procedure**

In selecting interview participants, I considered location, program size, tenure in their leadership role and whether they participated in phase I or phase II of the study. Four adult education administrators were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews in August 2021. The purpose of the study and interview format was explained to participants. Those wishing to participate were asked to complete and return the informed consent form to me (Appendix E). The interview date and time, and zoom meeting link were emailed shortly thereafter. On the day of the interview, participants were welcomed, I reviewed the informed
consent form, answered any questions they had. The interview began as did the recording. I asked some/all of the interview questions (Appendix F), following up with probing questions when appropriate.

Data Analysis

Creswell & Poth (2018) point out that data analysis occurs in three stages: preparing and organizing data for analysis, reducing data into themes through a process of coding, and finally representing the data in discussion. After the interviews, the video and audio files were downloaded, named and saved to two-factor authentication cloud storage. Interview audio recordings were subsequently transcribed using Temi, a fee-based online application. Each transcript was synced to the audio recording in Temi which allowed me to review and edit the transcription for accuracy. I added notes about body language, tone, intonation and pauses to the transcriptions. The process, which allowed me to become very familiar with the data and to engage in preliminary coding, occurred within 24 hours of each interview. With my theoretical framework in mind, I reduced the data into fourteen themes through the process of coding in Dedoose, a fee-based web-based application that also allowed me to organize and analyze the data. I further reduced the fourteen themes into four.

Confidentiality

The informed consent form, which was shared with and signed by interviewees, clearly outlined the steps I planned to take to ensure confidentiality. Within 24 hours of each interview, I anonymized the interview participants and program names to ensure that issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, and minimizing harm to human participants were addressed. I chose to use pseudonyms to facilitate understanding for the reader.

Ethical Assurances
There are many places in the research process e.g., planning, design, data collection, data processing, data analysis, presentation, and interpretation where ethical concerns might have arisen. I worked closely with the dissertation committee at all stages of the research process to address concerns and to avoid data misuse.

In the data collection, processing and analysis stage, I paid special attention to data records with missing information and only removed records after careful thought and justification which will be described in chapter four. In addition, I worked with the dissertation committee to ensure that the most appropriate statistical methods were used. I presented findings objectively, avoided unsupported statements and presented only valid interpretations of the study results since future research and practice might be falsely influenced by misleading conclusions (Jones, 2000). I anonymized the research sites and the individuals involved in the study and ensured that issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, and minimizing harm to human participants were addressed. Of critical importance was Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval which I secured multiple times in the process of conducting this research study. An informed consent form at the beginning of the survey explained participants’ rights.

**Conclusion**

This chapter laid out the framework for two independent studies, a quantitative study that attempted to determine the relationship between self-efficacy and student persistence and a qualitative study that attempted to understand my experience and inability to collect sufficient data to conduct a study with statistical power. The research questions, data collection, and analysis procedures were presented as well as ethical considerations and limitations. The findings of this study have implications for practitioners in adult education programs as they make programming and instruction decisions that impact student success.
CHAPTER 4: QUANTITATIVE STUDY FINDINGS

In the quantitative portion of this study, I attempted to explore the relationship between self-efficacy and the persistence of adult learners pursuing their High School Equivalency certificate. The hypothesis statement is as follows:

\[ H_0 = \text{There is a relationship between the self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing their High School Equivalency certificate} \]

\[ H_1 = \text{There is no relationship between the self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing their High School Equivalency certificate} \]

Data was collected via an online survey distributed to 127 state and federally-funded adult education programs offering High School Equivalency classes in Massachusetts (59) and Illinois (68).

**Participant Pool**

Sixty-one current and former High School Equivalency students responded to the invitation to participate in the online survey. 84% of the surveys received were complete (n=51). Twenty-seven participants attended programs in Illinois, 24 in Massachusetts. Survey data were reviewed for accuracy and five responses were removed (students reported completing more courses than they enrolled in). Forty-six survey responses remained, 70% female (n=32) and 30% male (n=14).

82% of participants fell between ages 25 to 55 (n=38), with the remainder falling equally in the 18 to 25 (n=4) and over 55 (n=4) age range. The two largest racial-ethnic groups were Hispanic/Latino (n=16) and white (n=15). Six students self-identified as black, 3 as Asian and 6 as multi-racial. One-third of participants (n=16) had been separated from formal school for less
than 5 years, 26% of participants (n=12) between 5 and 10 years, 17% (n=8) between 10 and 20 years, 17% (n=8) between 20 and 30 years and 4% (n=2) for more than 30 years.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Participants enrolled in an average of 2.978 courses and completed an average of 2.261 courses (table 8). The largest number of students, 18 (39%) self-reported being enrolled in one course, with all but one reporting having completed their course. Eight participants (16%) self-reported being enrolled in two classes, five completed both courses and three completed one course. Three participants (6%) self-reported being enrolled in three classes, one completed all three, one completed two and one completed one course. Seven participants (14%) self-reported being enrolled in four courses, five completed all four courses, one completed two and one completed one course. One participant (2) self-reported being enrolled in five classes and completing two courses. Two participants self-reported being enrolled in six classes and completing all six. Seven participants (14%) self-reported being enrolled in seven classes, three completed all seven, four completed only one course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Courses Enrolled</th>
<th># Courses Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>2.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fifty-one participants completed the Self-Efficacy Scale (SES) questionnaire in its entirety. Question 2 (If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want)
had the lowest mean score of 2.565 and the highest standard deviation of 0.981. Question 6 (I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort) had the highest mean score of 3.478.

Question 9 (I can usually handle whatever comes my way) had the lowest standard deviation of 0.652 (table 9). The mean overall SES score was 31.522 on a scale of 10 to 40, the top quartile.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics. SES Individual Question and Total Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
<th>Q10</th>
<th>SES score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.785</td>
<td>0.981</td>
<td>0.904</td>
<td>0.729</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>0.722</td>
<td>0.839</td>
<td>0.762</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>5.612</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of barriers to persistence, the two barriers that had the highest mean scores were situational - family responsibilities (n=23, mean = 0.522) and work (n=24, mean = 0.511). Work had the highest standard deviation of 0.506 (table 10).

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics. Participant’s Situational Barriers to Persistence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th>Childcare</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>COVID-related</th>
<th>Technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.511</td>
<td>0.522</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td>0.505</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>0.417</td>
<td>0.285</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>0.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The three institutional barriers included in the survey had the lowest mean scores, class level (n=2, mean = 0.043), program quality (n=3, mean=0.065) and schedule (n=5, mean = 0.109). Class level also had the lowest standard deviation score of 0.206 (table 11).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Class Level</th>
<th>Program Quality</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>0.250</td>
<td>0.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dispositional barriers, motivation, and self-confidence had identical mean scores of 0.152 and standard deviation of 0.363 (table 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Self-Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>0.363</td>
<td>0.363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

Field, Miles & Field, (2012) suggest that “testing hypotheses involves building statistical models of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 33) and continues that “the bigger the sample, the
more likely it is to reflect the whole population” (p. 36). Because of the small sample size
gathered in this study, the null hypothesis was not supported by the data.

\[ H_0 = \text{There is a relationship between the self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners} \]

pursuing their High School Equivalency certificate

\[ H_1 = \text{There is no relationship between the self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners} \]

pursuing their High School Equivalency certificate

The data gathered in the online survey, albeit limited, supported the alternate hypothesis, that is, there is no relationship between the self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing their High School Equivalency certificate. This finding is not significant because of the small sample size and therefore is not generalizable.

For that reason, I pivoted to a qualitative study in an attempt to understand the challenges I encountered in the data collection portion of the quantitative study.
CHAPTER 5: QUALITATIVE STUDY FINDINGS

Introduction

Because the response rate to the online survey was so low, data analysis lacked statistical power and did not yield significant findings. I was both disappointed and puzzled as to why I hit so many roadblocks in the data-gathering processes. For that reason, I revised my study and pivoted to a mixed-methods study.

The focus of the qualitative study was on trying to understand my experience. My research questions therefore were

1) Why did students not respond to the “Invitation to Participate”?

2) What reasons might program administrators have had for not sharing the “Invitation to Participate” with their current and former students?

3) Why was data collection both at the program level and for the research study so challenging?

4) What does all this mean in terms of access to, sharing, and use of data in adult education?

Glossary of Terms

Below, the reader will find a table to explain the common acronyms that will be used in the sections that follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary of Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants

After receiving approval from the National Louis University Institutional Research Board, I identified four adult education administrators serving in the role of dean or director of an adult education program who were willing to be interviewed and to share their experiences with me. Of the participants, two were female and two were male; two were from Illinois and two were from Massachusetts; two of the programs were located in community colleges, one in a Community Based Organization (CBO) and one in a Local Education Authority (LEA); three of the HSE programs was classified as small (<150 HSE students), one as large (>300 HSE students); one of the adult education programs was classified as small (<300 students), one as medium (<800 students) and two as large (>800 students); two were veteran administrators with over ten years’ experience in program leadership roles and two were newer to their position (<4 years), but not new to the adult education field (table 14).

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Freda</th>
<th>Kristiana</th>
<th>Oliver</th>
<th>Sam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in current/similar role</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host Agency</td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>LEA</td>
<td>Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Size:</td>
<td>All programs: Small Medium Large Large</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HSE program: Small Small Large Large</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore data gathering, use, and sharing at the program level and not to evaluate any aspect of the participant’s program. Participation included one semi-structured interview (approximately 30 minutes) via zoom. Participants were asked some or all of the ten questions prepared (Appendix F). Each interview was recorded in Zoom and saved to two-factor authentication cloud storage. Interview audio recordings were subsequently transcribed using Temi, a fee-based online application. Each transcript was synced to the audio recording in Temi which allowed me to review and edit the transcription for accuracy. Coding was facilitated by Dedoose, a fee-based web-based application that allowed me to code, organize and analyze research data.

Three major themes revolving around communication, persistence, data were identified during the coding and analysis phase. Underlying each theme was a constant reference to resources which I determined to be a significant, overarching theme that impacted the three major themes.

1) Communication: A wide variety of communication methods are used by programs to connect with current and former students. Communication challenges exist at every stage of enrollment.

2) Persistence: Adult education practitioners wish they had a better understanding of the factors that impact student persistence so that they could devise appropriate interventions
3) Data: Adult education practitioners exist in a “data desert” which has multiple lush “data oases” but they are difficult to navigate to and through. Access to, sharing and use of data in the field of adult education is challenging because of the lack of research data available; inconsistent program-level processes for data collection, retrieval, analysis, use, and sharing; and lack of access to “big data” at state and national level.

An additional overarching theme that was evident during the interviews and codified during the analysis process was resources. Adult education administrators are heavily reliant on the external environment for resources and challenged by a lack of resources (financial, personnel, technology, data, time, etc.). The cyclical nature of the relationship between performance and resource is illustrated in figure 4. Program performance is resource-dependent and contingent on staffing levels and expertise, tools, and data. These in turn are dependent on funding.

---

**Figure 4.** Funding Cycle.
Themes

In this section, I will explore the themes in greater detail and identify the resource challenges unique to each area. Finally, I will discuss specific resource challenges, resources and growth areas.

Communication

The first theme relates to communication. When asked about their program’s usual protocol for communicating with students, administrators, consistently across all four programs, described how they use multiple tools. The overarching message was - we will try anything and everything. Prior to the pandemic, most programs relied heavily on in-person communication, “when they [students] came to class, that was the easiest, although not the most effective, because if they are not coming to class, then you cannot see them.” Oliver relied on communicating through teachers. So, if it was something really nuanced, we would go into classes and tell them ourselves, if there's something that didn't have quite as much detail to it, we would ask teachers to explain it to their class.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic programs have pivoted to communicating with students by phone which provides a variety of options.

a) Phone calls: Students are required to provide the program with a phone number as part of the application process and for many programs, phone calls were a staple of their communication protocol, “telephone obviously is the first means, we will contact students via their cell phone.” While Freda noted that “they know the phone number [of the program], they pick it up”, Kristiana pointed out that “we call them on the phone, which is hit or miss, because if they're screening their calls, I mean, so many different reasons, whether or not they pick the phone.” All programs reported that their advisors
often need to call students. Oliver’s program has an emergency number on file for all
their students and they will reach out to that contact if all other methods fail. When
working remotely, many program staff use Google Voice when calling students in order
to safeguard their personal cell phone information. Common challenges reaching students
by phone were phone numbers were disconnected or temporarily not in service (pay-as-
you-go phones).

b) Texting: All four programs reported texting their students regularly and experiencing
different levels of success depending on the texting method used. “When we have people
register over the last few years, several years, we've really made sure that we get people's
phone numbers and ask, "is it okay to text" because you can't text someone if you didn't
ask that question” (Oliver). In the absence of additional financial resources, free texting
apps are used widely in all four programs. WhatsApp was the most commonly mentioned
app but seemed to be used more for class-level rather than program-level communication.
Two programs used WhatsApp as the sole instructional delivery method when the
pandemic first hit. It continues to be used to supplement instruction, “teachers have their
own WhatsApp group for their class, which is useful for getting out things like homework
class, starting classroom discussions.” Programs also use Remind, another free app.

Oliver’s program uses a fee-based texting application, EZ Text for mass texting. The low-
cost app suits his budget, “we ended up paying about a third of a penny per text,
something like that. It's pretty short money to send text messages to people through a
third-party app” (Oliver). The benefit of the fee-based app over the free apps is that the
program “can tell right away which texts bounce, and then we follow those up with a
phone call” (Oliver). Even though Freda admitted to her dislike for texting, she
acknowledged “that's quite frankly where our students are at.” The common challenge programs have with texting apps is that students have to opt-in in order for the program to communicate with students, “the caveat is they have to opt into it [remind] … they get the text messages to opt-in. And if they don't, if they ignore it, then it's useless … not everybody opts into it, even though we explain it to them.”

While all programs now ask for an email address as part of the intake process (not a pre-COVID requirement for some), they reported having little success reaching students via email. “Emails is just not the medium they're interested in.” Sam pointed out that “with the filters that are on … Gmail and Yahoo, now, it almost became counterproductive because it would all just end up in their spam anyway.” Kristiana shared that “the return rate on emails is particularly low for us.” It was also pointed out that students often have multiple emails, many of which they don’t check. Both community colleges provide college email addresses to their adult education students. Students in one college get an email address automatically, while the other does not pursue that communication option,

just trying to walk them through how to set up their [college] email and another password that they have to remember. We don’t, we don’t use the college emails at all. We stick with personal email … we wait until … [the transition to college] class because we know these are students who are transitioning onto college. But for the majority of our students, we don't even touch it. (Freda)

It is interesting to note that six out of six online survey responses received from students attending HSE classes in a community college were submitted using a personal email address, not a college email address (table 15).
Table 15

| Community College Students Invited to Participate, Outreach Method and Responses |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                 | Number of students invited | Invited by Method of Outreach | Response Rate |
| College A                       | 665                         | Researcher College email (633) | <0.5%          |
|                                 |                             |                             |                |
| College B                       | 80                          | Program Director Remind (all) | <3.5%          |
|                                 |                             |                             |                |

Only one program mentioned using social media, another free resource, to connect with students, albeit former students. That program reported having 5,000 followers on Facebook, most of whom are former students. “For former students and graduates, it's mostly through Facebook. Making things known to the community, then it's Facebook. We use Facebook, we use the website” (Oliver).

Anecdotally adult education programs use “old school” communication tools on a limited basis and usually only for very specific purposes. Sam noted, “If your [only] ways of communicating with students are the old ways of communicating with students, i.e. bulk mail flyer, you're not going to get a good ping rate.” In a similar vein, Oliver pointed out that traditional ways of getting a hold of students, sending a letter to their house, don't work with adult education students. It's just, like I said, their lives are far more contingent. They're changing addresses a lot more than I would. I would imagine in my anecdotal experience; they're changing addresses a lot more than your average American.

When asked what communication method was most and least effective, texting was the clear winner as most effective. “Texting is better, much better. We get more responses than emails.” “Text messaging is the medium that they [students] prefer and they're most likely to respond to.” Oliver commented, “They won't answer the phone, they'll answer a text in two
seconds”. On the other hand, email was also identified as the least effective. “Email is just not the medium they're interested in and how many email addresses do they have anyway?” Sam pointed out that “it’s standard that everybody has one …we use it extensively, they [students] have one to apply for jobs probably, but that's about it. And now everything else is through social media or text.” Similarly, Oliver said, “For knowledge workers like you and I, we check our email all the time. But that is not our students, they don't really live on email.”

The final question in the communication section asked about their ideal form of communication with students if resources were not an issue. Responses differed. “I think the ideal way would be multi-tiered… I really like text messages since the vast majority of students have a cell. I think WhatsApp is a really good way to do it too, but I also think it's really important.” Oliver said he would choose to bolster staffing levels and expertise, “if I had world enough in time, I'd have full-time advisors with benefits who speak the languages of the students”. Sam said he would purchase “SalesForce, which is a really, really robust client management system”. However, it is expensive.

It is clear that programs are attempting to communicate with their students “any way that … [they] … can”, using “whatever medium … [students] … respond to”. In general, they choose the communication method based on the type of message (information sharing vs. response needed), its importance, its audience, and their experience with its effectiveness. Katarina is not sure what else her program could do to connect with students, “so I don't think that it is us, and I don't want to take the responsibility off our shoulders, but I don't know what more we would be doing, except for going to their houses.”

**Participation in the Research Study**
The second theme revolves around student and administrator participation in the research study. The response rate to Phase I of the study (the invitation to participate in the online survey was sent to students via my National Louis University email address) was <2% (3 responses from 665 invitations to participate). In Phase II (the invitation to participate in the online survey was sent to students by program staff), the potential participant pool was expanded to include all HSE programs in Illinois and Massachusetts. The response rate to Phase II was <0.1% (51 responses from a potential participant pool of 50,000).

The main reason the original study, “To believe or not to believe. The relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing a High School Equivalency credential” was revised was to understand the lack of participation, both of students who were invited to participate, and program administrators who were contacted requesting that they invite their students to participate. During the interviews, administrators volunteered that they expected a low response rate from HSE students. “I didn't have high hopes for a large response rate. Just knowing how our students are, that most likely this would be ignored” Freda revealed. Additionally, she pointed out that because her program was very small (fewer than 100 HSE students) she knew the number of responses would be small. In this section, I will examine student participation, student non-participation, program participation, and program non-participation.

**Student Participation.** The possible reasons administrators provided for students completing the online survey included personal outreach and using multiple communication methods. Oliver shared, “I'd like to think it was the connection to the program because the text message I sent out was from Oliver at [Springland Adult Education Program].” Oliver was impressed with the number of students who responded, “I wasn't sure what the response rate
would be, but I'm really pleased that it seems like a third got back to you” (23 responses from 80 potential participants). Similarly, Freda was pleasantly surprised by the number of responses from her students (3 responses from 65 potential participants). “I'm really surprised you got three. I am very honest about that. I am surprised you had three people respond. I kind of thought, gosh, nobody's gonna respond to this” She subsequently shared that she contacted students twice, using the free texting app *Remind* and students’ personal email.

**Student Non-participation.** In terms of non-participation, Kristiana summarized it well. “It’s kind of a black box, I mean, I can hypothesize, but I don't really know.” Administrators shared a variety of possible contributing factors, including timeline, situational factors, outreach method, relevance, and level of comfort responding.

**Timeline.** When asked about the low response rate to the online survey, the first thing most administrators mentioned was the study timeline. There was consensus that participation was probably low because the survey was distributed in the summer when HSE classes were not in session. Additionally, Kristiana pointed that it was

unfortunate that all of this had to happen during the pandemic. With the pandemic, people had different …. problems, different issues, and much bigger, and especially for our populations, very big problems, really very big problems. So, any attention to that [survey] is like, it would be too much.

Situational factors. Situational factors were mentioned by all administrators as possible contributors to student non-participation, such as Oliver:

I think it's far more situational factors than dispositional factors that kept students from getting back to you…. I mean, situational factors, like the phone number changed or they
were too busy, but I really don't believe it's dispositional factors like, “I don't like that. I never liked that program. I'm not responding!”

All interviewees agreed that the lives of HSE students are hard, they do “not have the luxury of time for additional things” as Kristiana shared.

People have no money. They don't have food on the table for their kids, for themselves. People who live all by themselves or are disabled, all of this … don't have any additional support. And so why would they care about an email like this or a text like that?

**Relevance.** The relevance of the research study to students’ lives was also alluded to in interviews. “Traditionally, this population does not respond well to a lot of other things that do not seem to be immediate to their needs, to their lives, to what it is that they study” (Katarina). Additionally, some students might have thought “why, how is this important to me? Why, why does this relate to me? ….. why is she even sending me this? What is this even about?” Two administrators wondered if their students just thought, “what’s in it for me?” “If they [students] don't see the value in that, ‘why would I do it? This isn't helping me because there's nothing in it for me’.” Similarly, the disconnect between the students and me could have also contributed to the low participation rate. Kristiana suggested that students might have thought “this is who? what kind of a person is she? why is she sharing these things? Who is she? Why does she want all of this? ….so, it's some research from somebody who wants to improve whatever.” She added that “if there was some kind of reward because I thought that too if there was some kind of reward, it might've been different.”

**Outreach Method.** All interviewees maintained that sharing the invitation to participate by email was probably not the best method of outreach. As mentioned earlier, students must provide an email address when applying for HSE classes, but most do not use email as a means
of communication. “Even though we use their personal emails, I don't think students use email, even if they listed it and ‘sure you can [contact] me by email’, but they probably never check it” Freda pointed out. “Email is just not the medium they're interested in.” Kristiana’s program does not use email that much “because not everybody has a computer, not everybody logs in, not everybody does that. Not everybody checks their emails.” Additionally, “with the filters that are on a lot of Gmail and Yahoo now, it almost became counterproductive because it would all just end up in their spam anyway. The return rate on emails especially is particularly low for us” according to Sam. Connecting with former students, who attended HSE classes in FY18 and FY19, via a college email address versus a personal email address presented its own challenges, Oliver explained. He asked 1) do former students check their college email when they were not actively enrolled? and 2) does the college even support email addresses for students once they leave?

**Student Tenure.** The “newness” of students might have also impacted participation. Kristiana explained that

new students are a little bit more cautious, a little bit more skeptical. Our advisors might have not gained the trust of the new students the way the old students, returning students have…. if you're new ……. I mean, you're just trying the water.

Sam’s perception was analogous, observing that “you have a certain level of engagement before you're willing to critique.”

**Administrator Participation.** When trying to make sense of the low student response rate (<0.1%), I began to consider the role of program staff as an intermediary between HSE students and me. After the release of the online survey in phase 1 of the study, I hypothesized that the reason students did not respond was that they did not know me. So, I decided to insert
program staff into the equation hoping that students would respond if the invitation to participate came from a familiar and trusted source.

The rationale that the four adult education practitioners/interviewees shared for participating in the qualitative study included personal connection with me, wanting to contribute, having an interest in the findings, and the need for research in the field. Wanting to contribute was mentioned or alluded to by all the interviewees. “I figure anything we can do, as probably the biggest publicly funded adult ed program in Massachusetts, to contribute data to that cause, we do.” Sam shared Oliver’s sentiment

I’m always happy to help any exploration of retention and the study of adult education. I mean, if the results of your research help us, as a discipline, get better at what we’re doing, better serving students, then I’m happy to participate and do whatever I can to help.

Interest in the findings was the second most mentioned reason, “I think this is really good information to find out about so I would like to know what answers you discover with this.” The need for research was also mentioned, “we have many assumptions about things, but in reality, we do not have that much research.”

**Administrator Non-participation.** Three themes related to administrator non-participation were reflected in the interviews and included the timeline, resources (staff to do the work, ability to access data requested), and protecting program data.

I emailed 145 invitations to participate to administrators in 127 programs in Illinois and Massachusetts. As with student non-participation, the timeline was presented as a possible reason for administrators being unable to share the invitation to participate with their students. Oliver shared “we all needed breathing space... [over the summer].” The idea that sharing the survey
with students was “just one more thing” for administrators with time and staffing constraints to do over the summer was shared by more than one administrator. Freda thought about the question for a few moments and asked,

Do you think it's just one more thing that they had to worry about doing? Maybe the idea of “how am I going to get this information in the best way out to my students” was just too, too big for them to think about. I don't know, for me, like anything, if we get something from another department in the college or [our funder], it’s another thing that we have to do, you just think, "oh gosh, okay, now when am I going to get this done?"

Being understaffed was another concern shared by all administrators at some stage in the interview. Oliver summarized the shared sentiment well.

Why didn’t more administrators respond? I mean, look at what I just said about that, the administration and staffing level in our program. Right, for 800 students, there are four full-time administrators. You know, every one of us is wearing multiple hats and doing a lot of jobs and trying to connect to get more resources and trying to be at every meeting we possibly can and try to magnify the impact of the small administration. So, for administrators to get something that's an unfunded mandate, even if it's something they believe in, it's hard for them to take on the additional task “OK, let me turn around and send this out to my students.”

In fact, being overextended and understaffed were the main reasons that administrators, those who responded/emailed upon receiving the original request to participate, shared for not being able to share the survey with their students. Sam presented an interesting thought about data protection as a reason for not participating,
maybe some institutions are more apt to share their data than others. Some programs are very protective of their, their data, I guess, or don't want to share any metrics with anybody there. that's just, …. like maybe it's like the suspicion, “why are you asking?”

Data

The third theme is data. Three types of data are addressed in this section, adult education research data, program-level data, and big data.

Research in the Field. As discussed in chapter two, there is a dearth of research in the field of adult education. Kristiana, who was involved in the New England Adult Learner Persistence Study concurred, sharing that “the study … that's the only one, basically. That was a big one, lots of participants, lots of students, lots of programs and substantial. But apart from that, how much more do you see in terms of research and data?” Oliver expanded on Kristiana’s point.

There's not a lot of research in adult education and what gets counted IS what counts, right? So, the more research there is for adult education, I think the more we can make the case for adult education as an important resource for the developing economy and for students' own lives. So, the more research out there, so we can have research base in adult education that's not trying to infer from K-12 education, but really is based on the data from adult education.

Oliver continued and was honest in his assessment of the status of adult education research,

The field needs more people like you and I working in it and giving it sort of cachet, right? To get published, to do research, to go to conferences that are more than just about how to teach, but actually to do research on adult education. There are very few of us out there. And it's very hard to do that research and get published. Like I said, adult education
is the third leg of the stool. But it's a little bit of a ghetto when it comes to educational research.

Oliver used Tom Schicht’s three-legged stool analogy to position adult education in the education realm. “There's, K-12, higher education, and then adult education … a third leg in the stool of education.” Unfortunately, adult education is under-studied and under-resourced compared to other education sectors.

**Program Level Data.** The difficulty accessing program data (student contact information, course completion data) in Phase I of the study led me to ask participating administrators about their data practices. In this section, I will discuss databases that programs use, data collection, retrieval, analysis, use, and sharing.

**Databases.** State- and federally-funded adult education providers are required to enter a variety of data into grant-funder databases, e.g., DAIS-I (Data and Data and Information System Illinois) used in Illinois and LACES (Literacy, Adult and Community Education System) used in Massachusetts and 20 other states. Funder databases present many challenges for administrators, from lack of comfort using them, to the databases’ inability to meet program data needs. Freda shared that data

is not my comfort zone. … I don't understand a lot that has to do with DAIS-I … with everything else that I had to learn, you know, I kind of just left that to her [data entry staff] and kind of shame on me for not learning more of it.

I offered to send each interviewee the transcript of their interview and they declined, saying it was unlikely they would have time to review it.

Even though training is provided by the funder, it does not alleviate Freda’s discomfort with using the database.
I do take advantage of trying to learn more of it, but I don't understand a lot of what happens in DAIS-I. I know [the trainer] did some really wonderful online sessions where she went through the different aspects of DAIS-I but she lost me on several of the digging deeper types of things. I did not even fathom understand, follow in one way, shape or form … It's a lot. It's a lot to absorb and make a connection to like, "okay, how is this going to help me in trying to put all those pieces together? It's is difficult … It feels like a foreign world to me, that world. It really does because it's not my comfort zone. Quite honestly, working with data and statistics is, I mean, I have to do it because it's part of my job, but it's not my comfort at all.

In general, administrators were in agreement that while funder-mandated databases may meet the needs of funders, they definitely do not meet the needs of programs. Because of this Oliver’s program devised a workaround, something he was able to do because of the expertise in one of his staff members.

It's hard that LACES doesn't really give us the granular level of data we need to, for instance, make a class list, right? So, we have our own database that we maintain through Microsoft Access, and we've got someone whose job it is to keep the data updated in LACES, but also updated in Microsoft [Access]…. The fact that we have that access database is really just a fluke, that one of our teachers was a retired software engineer and he did it. And he has made this for a hundredth of what it would cost to have someone else make it, but he did it as a labor of love.

Recognizing the unique and advantageous situation he finds himself in, Oliver acknowledged that creating an alternate database that delivers data in usable forms at the program level is not a viable option for programs who do not have this unique skill-set among program staff. And
realistically, programs do not have the financial resources to pay for database development, or for staff to maintain it.

**Data Collection and Entry.** Although the amount of data required by funders is expansive, Sam shared that when I submitted the request for student contact information and course completion (phase I), they found that their database was incomplete.

contact information is the hardest one for a long time … a lot of the information was missing in DAIS-I … our data entry was basically the minimum …we've definitely become more focused on collecting that data and entering that data into our databases…. we've increased our data collection in certain areas so that we can better report to people who ask for it.

A gap in data collection was cited as one of the reasons Oliver attributed to adult education programs’ inability to re-engage HSE students after they leave the program.

In Massachusetts, there are 85 different adult education programs, and they have 85 different ways of tracking [exited] students. Everyone goes into LACES, but when someone leaves, I don't know how many programs get their [students] updated information and update that in their database. So, they don't know where students went.”

Oliver explained how the Massachusetts K-12 system tracks students using State Assigned Student Identifiers (SASID).

If you work in K-12 and you have someone in kindergarten, you know where they're going to be for the next 12 years by in large. They're going to be in school, in your district, or in another district. They'll be tracked through No Child Left Behind. … they're going to have to sign out at 16 or the truant officer is going to come [look] for them. So, you know where they're going to be. Um, with adult education, you don't know. It’s not
an entitlement, right? It's not required. So, students will come, students will go. You don't know where they're going…. They could go on to college. They could be carried off by their lives.

Massachusetts has considered “looping in adult ed too just the last few years. And it hasn't really borne fruit, but it's a great initiative. …that would actually give us that kind of longitude track.”

**Data Retrieval.** There is a consistent concern among adult educators that we can’t access the data we need in the format or to the level of detail or specificity that we need from funder databases. Sam shared that they were unable to get the data I requested from either the funder database or the college database, so they had to manually combine data from the two databases, which was a considerable investment of clock hours, and took his staff away from other tasks. In Massachusetts, the experience is similar

[LACES] doesn't really give us the granular level of data we need to, for instance, make a class list…. It doesn't really let you put together this sort of, integrated minuscule pieces of data that, put together, give you a richer understanding of your program and your students.

For that reason, Oliver often turns to their home-grown database,

it's really a nimble way for us to parse our data. So, when we decided that we wanted to reach out to our students [for this study] who had just been HiSET students… I had to ask the database developer just to help me put together the query. It was a matter of a few minutes for him and pressed a button.

**Data Analysis and Use.** As mentioned, funder databases require users to enter a lot of data – student demographics, information about classes, testing, schedule, instructors, funding. Oliver explained, “you have a lot of data, but it's not making you smarter. You have to get your
data to be able to talk to each other.” Because databases provide limited reports and few options to customize reports, administrators need to “make do” with what the reporting software provides them. Additionally, staff skillset was an impediment to their ability to analyze and use data regularly,

I don't understand a lot that has to do with DAISI. It's a lot. It's a lot to absorb and make a connection to like, "okay, how is this going to help me in trying to put all those pieces together? It’s difficult.

Data Sharing. In seven of the programs I reached out to, some kind of permission was required to share their data, e.g. IRB. I pursued IRB approval at two institutions, but the process stalled in both places. I did not pursue the permission process at the other programs. The interviewees shared some insights into possible reasons for a program’s reluctance or receptivity to sharing program-level data with an outsider. There was a general consensus that resources were a contributor to the lack of program participation – staffing, time, competing priorities, an unfunded mandate. Additionally, Sam pointed out that “some programs are very protective of their data, I guess, or don't want to share any metrics with anybody…. like maybe it's like the suspicion, “why are you asking?”

Big Data. Oliver provided a concise rationale for the “big data” challenges faced by adult education practitioners. “Every program is collecting data. Every state is collecting data. No one is looking across the board at this data state by state. Really …. given that 21 states all now use Literacy Pro (LACES).” Additionally, “under WIOA rules, all of our WIOA partners' data systems are supposed to be talking to each other.” Five years post WIOA implementation, “our [core partner] data systems are still not talking to each other.” It is not surprising then that there are data challenges at the local program level,
even at a state level, when it's federally mandated for [core partner] data systems to talk
to each other, everything's siloed. So, it's hard for the data to talk to each other when the
systems are siloed. It's hard for you and me, as researchers to pull this data together
across states when even within the state with a federal mandate to do it... it's almost
impossible to pull that data together nationally and see trends and we can't even pull it
together in our region with a federal mandate telling us we're supposed to.

Oliver also pointed out that “in Massachusetts, there are 85 different adult education
programs, and they have 85 different ways of tracking students [once they leave].” Since not all
programs enter student exit data in a consistent manner, there are gaps in big data retrieved.

**Lack of Data – Implications.** Making assumptions is an implication of a lack of access
to research and data. Kristiana pointed out that adult education practitioners
have many assumptions about things, but in reality, we do not have that much research.
We don't have that much data that can substantiate what it is that we're saying…. For
many, very many years, we keep saying different kinds of things. Is any of this valid?
Does any of this help?

Lack of research and data also makes making an impact on outcomes difficult, as Kristiana
pointed out,

While we have read so much about persistence and while we are engaging students
before they come to class, while we go very personal with the students that we have,
while we make sure that the advisors are outside the doors and they greet, they meet with
the students. They do all of this while we check in with them, at least once per week,
especially now that people are not in the building and all of this. Again, we have not seen
a dent in this percentage [persistence].
Kristiana added,

if we're able to fine-tune and provide the services that students really are going to need, that's going to help all of us to be able to boost our completion rates, our retention rates our performance, I mean, so on and so on and so on.

Program Experience with HSE Persistence

Student attrition, characterized by the departure from or delay in completion of the HSE program, is a concern for adult education programs across the country. Even though persistence issues are as varied as the non-persistent student, programs’ experiences with HSE persistence were similar albeit nuanced, as summarized by Oliver, “It's multi-faceted and it's, it's just not the same for every person.”

Administrators had a lot to share about persistence, challenges and opportunities which will be discussed in this section. They mentioned persistence at every stage of enrollment (pre-enrollment, enrollment, exit); persistence differences based on the type of student (HSE vs. ESL); the role of instructional delivery methods in persistence; persistence characteristics in students; persistence interventions; the labels “stop-out” and “drop-out”; and deferred gratification.

Pre-enrollment Loss. Persistence prior to enrollment is just as perplexing as it is post-enrollment. Administrators shared the challenges that they experience at various stages of the enrollment pipeline. It is not uncommon for students to get lost along the pipeline at a number of leakage points or to be no-shows, that is, they complete an intake/application form, take a two-hour placement test, attend orientation, meet with advisors but do not show up to the first day of class. Freda sighed as she shared,
The sad reality is they took the time to come to orientation and be with me for two hours. They took the time to take a test, but I may not even see them tomorrow on the first day of class…. And then we're all out and it's just like, what happened? You know, this may be somebody I saw last week. "What happened? Like you were so ready for this.”

Sam expressed frustration also,

it's one of the most frustrating things, especially as we begin to start classes and we've already gone through this whole process where students have completed the pre-registration, they've gone to information sessions, they took a two-hour test, they came in to get a technology boot camp and then they missed the first day of class and don't show up, you know?

Once HSE students start class, persistence challenges persist. The funder benchmark of 12 hours of attendance to be considered a “participating student” presents a challenge, as Freda shared, “now these are 90 [students] that we've registered. I don't know how many of them are going to get to 12 hours.” In Oliver’s GED program, “the students we had in the summer were like, 25 enrolled in the two classes … eventually we had about 11 or 12.”

**Persistence Comparisons.** Most administrators talked about the difference between the persistence of HSE students and ESL students. Speaking from her decades of experience, Kristiana shared that

Historically, the high school diploma program students are not as persistent as their ESL counterparts. We'll have more students who drop out more easily, more often from this program. While this doesn't happen that much with the ESL population. It hasn't changed through the years, to be honest with you.
Freda’s experience was similar, “I don't have any data to back this up. Overall ESL students are more, are more persistent. We retain them at a higher rate.” She continued, out of the two groups, it is, it is harder to get them [HSE students] to persist for sure. …Not that our ESL students don't have the same stressors or responsibilities because certainly our ESL students are also raising families and working. But I don't know if, I don't know. I don't know if it's [pause] I just don't know.

In Oliver’s adult education program, the HSE program, is pretty small, and they don't stay with us as long as our ESL students. Our ESL students stay on average are two and a half years. That’s not the retention for our HiSET programs. HiSET students have a harder time staying on…. they weren't as longitudinally engaged with the program as our ESL students were.

He added that when ESL students move into the HSE program, their solid persistence pattern continues.

I would guess that the most persistent students in our high school equivalency programs are students who used to be our ESL students. And then they've graduated [the ESL program], they're fluent in English now, and now they're working on high school equivalency. And these are students who already have proven …. they're good at coming to school.

**Persistence and Delivery Mode.** Sam and Freda had differing experiences with online students after March 2020. In Sam’s program, persistence and completion rates went up, towards in the spring, a large number of [high school] students that were just fed up with being remote through their senior year and were fed up doing remote through the high
school. So, they said, “forget about it” and just signed up for our classes and got their GED done and just moved on. We saw we saw big, a big rise.

Freda’s experience differed. She shared that “we just did not see a high completion rate with our virtual HSE students last year.” I-pathways, a web-based system that provides HSE content is the only instructional software approved by ICCB for at-a-distance HSE instruction. Even though it is free, some programs have not had success implementing it in online courses. “Historically, our i-pathways students do not complete and it's not for lack of connection. Our teacher for that program is in constant contact with them. It's just, it's so easy for them to just disappear.”

**Persistence Characteristics.** Each student has a unique personality, but there are common traits among students that can help program staff gauge persistence patterns. As Freda shared, “you can almost tell the students that will be here and want to get it done and the students that are going to come and then drop and not persist.” Sam explained attrition as a process, you can build a picture of the non-persistent student. This is a student that already has two absences before X hours of instruction. Dropping out is a process. It's not a spur-of-the-moment decision. There's a buildup to the drop-off and that's true on the credit side as it is in adult ed. You'll see persistence for a period of time and then comes the first absence. Then the second absence. [When] they're new, they come, they don't want to miss. Then they miss and there's no consequences, so now it's easier to miss a second time and then it's easier to miss a third time and then they're dropped. Then they got to start all over again.

The importance of being aware of and allocating resources to students teetering on the verge of stopping out was pointed out by Katarina. “If you see students and not profiling, but you see a profile of students who tend to have the things that are correlated with a low persistence,
then you divert, you direct more resources to supporting those students.” Oliver maintained that when they are ready, students often “re-engage because of this connection that they felt [with the program or staff].”

**Deferred Gratification.** An important, but often unconsidered and unaddressed factor in student persistence is the students’ ability to postpone immediate gains in favor of later but greater rewards. This was referenced by Oliver who pointed out,

Right now, you tend to make choices that disadvantage the *later on* you. You don't think, “if I take this time right now and make less money and go to school, *future me* will benefit from this.” An interesting thing. … It's an inherent aspect of humanity that we tend to favor the short-term reward than the long-term investment.

**Persistence Interventions.** “It is not for the lack of trying” Kristiana said, as she expressed frustration at the lack of impact they are making on attrition even though staff members make a variety of efforts to keep students engaged with the program. Despite talking with them about motivation, talking to them about what's happening next to keep them motivated and see a future and see the light and all of this …, we have not changed in terms of the persistence. We have almost the same rate, the same percentage. But, what the heck? So, what is it? I don't know, [pause] I don't know.

Administrators agreed that a student’s reason for getting their HSE credential goes a long way to supporting persistence. “It always back to goals and why they are here” (Katarina). It is important to “work with students on an individual basis to help them plan out what their next steps are.” In Freda’s program, students complete what they call a success plan prior at orientation:
it's pretty much “why are you here? what are your goals? when do you want to be done?"
It's pretty bare-bones basic, but at least it gives me and gives the advisor a little bit of
backstory on the student. And hopefully, that can help them if we have to call them
because they're not attending. "Hey, remember when you said [on your success plan] you
wanted to be done by December. Remember?" You know, how can we get back to that
point? What can we do?
Interventions are key to addressing persistence issues, but students have an important role
to play in their own success, as pointed out by Katarina:

it's one thing, what it is that you [program staff] do. The other thing is how the other
person [student] responds to it. The person needs to understand that they need to do also
some part of it, whatever that is. Otherwise, it doesn't matter how many resources you
have. But I don't blame them for that because their lives are hard.

**Stop-outs or Drop-outs.** Then, there are those students who start and stop, start and stop
as their personal circumstances change. Kristiana shared a story about a student
who for so many years, again and again in the spring would drop out and would come
back in the fall and then would drop out again in the spring and would come back in the
fall. It was like a revelation to [the advisor] when she talked eventually with this student,
who we never took [back] willingly, but because she was begging or something like this
[we let her back in]. When [the advisor] talked with her, the student said that they had a
business that worked in the spring and she had to help. And that's when she had to stop.
We did not know that, or we never really paid attention to it. But this woman came, kept
coming back despite the fact that every time we would say, "yeah, but are you going to be
serious this time? Or are you going to do whatever you've been doing?" And this woman
eventually got her GED and I don't know what happened to her. So, what I'm saying is that circumstances are circumstances, but nobody is the same as somebody else.

Freda has had similar experiences and remembered a student who wanted to return to class after a five-year absence,

and I want to say, "what are you going to do differently now? What's different that you're going to finish it this time". You know, I have to bite my tongue sometimes…. [I say to myself] “stop just stop, because you don't know, you don't know exactly what's going on. This could be the time that they're ready for it.

These students are what John Comings (2007) refers to as “intermittent students”, those who attend when life circumstances allow, stop out when they have to, and when they can, they return and restart their program. To program staff, however, these students appear to be chronic drop-outs, while unbeknownst to staff these students most likely think of themselves as stop-outs, not drop-outs.

**Persistence Barriers.** All four administrators talked at length throughout the interviews about the barriers that HSE students face. As discussed earlier, HSE students face many significant situational barriers. “The experience of our students and the challenges they face do not change … and the pandemic upended a lot of things” Katarina shared; an opinion affirmed by Sam:

when you look at socioeconomics and the social aspects of many in the population that we serve, under a certain household income level the need to move rapidly is a constant. They may be in an apartment and then lose that or something else affects it. And then they have to move in with a family member that's now too far away and they can't get to campus. These are the issues that we face. It's just, we can't really affect them.
Katarina explained that HSE students have had so many closed doors on their faces, it's like the Pavlov dog, you know, they eventually get conditioned. "There's no point to even try because I got slammed with this one, the other one, the third one, the fourth one. So why, why would I try? I'll just try to live and survive.” … I think that because they have had so many closed doors in front of their faces, I think that they do not believe that they are able to do that [pass the GED].

She shared an interesting nugget from a book she had read which suggested people succeed when they have some but not everything. So, they can use the "some" that they have to step on, in order to do more and be successful. Those who have a lot, they don't need to make much effort at all. So, if it happens, it happens because they are privileged in this way … And then you have others who have absolutely nothing. If you have absolutely nothing, there's nothing for you to step on. … So, the people who have the odds against them, how do they manage to do it while others do not.

Many HSE students have had negative prior experiences in K-12 and left formal education for a variety of academic, social or emotional reasons. As a result, they enter adult education programs with a lack of self-confidence, as Katarina pointed out, “They don't even have confidence in themselves. ‘I failed so many times...... What the hell? What am I? How much confidence do I have in myself that this time will be different?’” Katarina, like many practitioners in the field, is puzzled by the outcome differences in students, people who have the odds against them, how do they manage to do it while others do not. … You may have people who grow up in the same environment with the same issue, sort of, and they have completely different ways of dealing with life. And one can be more successful than the other. And so, we have students, who've had all these doors shut on
their faces, but still keep going. And eventually, they do what they want. They do what they need to do.

HSE students are adults, but some do not feel empowered to ask questions in class, which Freda has experienced:

I try to dispel the feeling of, “I can't ask a question” and I tell them, “I understand it's not comfortable in front of a class to raise your hand and ask a question.” As adults, we have to get past this, [that] not understanding something or having a question is a weakness because it’s not. And you know, we can all say that till we're blue in the face, but getting past that fixed mindset, it's, oh, my word, that's so hard.

**Persistence Supports.** Supporting persistence can be stymied by budget constraints as Katarina pointed out, “in many cases we know what we know [about persistence barriers], but we don't have any resources to be able to affect that.” Feeling connected to the program and maintaining relationships with program staff was mentioned as an important persistence support for students throughout the interview, Freda talked a lot about students’ sense of belonging, making a connection with the program, so this was something that is clearly important to her.

Making that connection with us, that's something I try really hard to do. I do all of our orientations. I lead them and it's a lot of work. This whole month has been a whirlwind, but I do it on purpose because that's the only way I get to meet everybody. And I want them to know me. I don't want them to like, "who is that lady? What does she do here?"… I know most of them, I can recall who they are. I think that's so important when it comes to encouraging the student. And what I like is when we have graduation and I'm able to give them a certificate to be like, "Great job, Sally, I'm so proud of you" and have
that individual connection with them. It makes a lot more work for me, but I think it pays off when I'm able to help with retention.

Similarly, it is important to “begin to create that connection between the student and the instructor early on.” Katarina stressed the importance of faculty, “it’s the teacher, first of all, they [students] need to love the class. They needed to be able to say that this is a wonderful class” and the importance of advisors,

an advisor really can make or break the class. The advisors are very critical … whatever issues they [students] may have, that they can feel that there are people who care…. people need to know that people care about them. And this is a big thing.”

Developing and maintaining connections in person is easier than when students are not physically present as Katarina explained “we go very personal with the students that we have, while we make sure that the advisors are outside the doors and they greet and meet with the students. They do all of this while we check with them, at least once per week, especially now that people are not in the building.”

In Katarina’s final comment on persistence, she suggested, “but then again, there is a point after which they [staff] cannot really do anything. It's other things and they are not in our power.”

Resources

Throughout the interviews, administrators implicitly and explicitly expressed a variety of resources challenges and opportunities throughout all the themes. To varying degrees, they talked about how they are constrained by financial resources, staffing levels and expertise, not having enough time, data and databases. In this section, I will explore these resource challenges further.
**Financial.** Adult education programs across the country rely heavily on grant funding as a source of revenue. When planning expenditures, administrators must be attentive to “allowable expenses” stipulated by the 2014 Grant Accountability and Transparency Act (GATA) as well as funder guidelines. Even discretionary funds have constraints placed upon them. Programs often find it difficult to innovate without resource independence.

Funding presents a challenge when trying to serve all the eligible students who are interested in attending classes. Because of the funding model structure in Massachusetts, it is not uncommon for adult education programs to maintain student waitlists, such as in Oliver’s program, “we have a thousand people waiting … we have many people waiting for every slot in the program.” Oliver also expressed concern about his (in)ability to effectively serve students with special learning needs because of funding limitations.

So, if someone comes in with an IEP [Individualized Education Program from K-12] saying, they've got all these needs, my first thought is, "oh my God, how am I going to address these, with the limited budget that we have". This is more about funding. I'd like to know what I can do. Have students get tested [for learning disabilities]? If they have some sort of learning disability, [they’re] going to take the battery of tests, and it definitely feels like battery to get the battery of tests, in order to qualify for the accommodations on the [GED] test.

Katarina shared a similar sentiment, “in many cases we know what we know [about student needs], but we don't have any resources to be able to affect that.” Oliver described the student support service disparity between K-12 and adult education, caused by the difference in funding resources and sources.
If you're in a public school, you've got special ed; you've got an applied behavioral
department that helps you; you've got a bilingual department that helps you. We
[Springland Adult Education Program] don't have that. We've got one teacher for every
18 students, and we've got some volunteers that help and we've got some administrators
who are spread too thin. So largely if folks couldn't make it in K-12, it's going to be much
harder for them to make it an adult education. They've got hopefully some maturity on
their side now, we're dealing with them as adults, but we don't have the resources that K-
12 had to keep them going and they couldn't finish there either. So, it's very hard for
students who weren't able to persist until high school graduation in K-12, with all the
resources that are available, to persist to high school equivalency if that's their terminal
degree. And adult education is under-resourced as it is.

Hourly rates and salaries for instructors and staff are often dictated by grant funders.

Oliver pointed out that many do the work for the love of the job, not for the money. He added
that he would like to “have a lot more money to pay people what they really deserve.”

Technology presented barriers to communication and instruction during the pandemic.

One program had a bank of laptops that students could borrow. However, without additional
technology funding, the others had to make do with what students had. As mentioned earlier, two
programs used WhatsApp as the sole instructional delivery method when the pandemic first hit.
“Not everybody has a computer” (Katarina) so WhatsApp was the only way that programs had to
engage with students.

**Personnel.** The personnel challenges most often mentioned were - staffing levels, staff
performing multi-roles, and skill/expertise level of staff
**Staffing Levels and Multiple Roles.** As discussed earlier, being overextended and understaffed were the main reasons that administrators shared as a potential reason for not being able to share the survey with their students. Oliver, whose program is one of the largest in Massachusetts, discussed his challenge with the levels of staffing in his program:

> We're short-staffed … We have 800 students and we have only four full-time staff. We have more students than 25% of the colleges and universities in our state. And we have four full-time staff. We have 66 people [instructors and staff], and only four of us are full-time. So, the rest are part-time people. Coordinating them kind of becomes a second job, in and of itself.

Even though Freda’s program was the smallest of those who participated in the study, she also struggles with staffing levels. “I only have three full-time people in my whole program. And that includes me.”

In adult education, the enrollment pipeline is resource-heavy requiring staff at every juncture, processing intakes, scheduling and proctoring tests, conducting orientation, advising students, registering students in class, creating class rosters, entering data, implementing checks and balances, etc. The time and money spent on the enrollment pipeline is well-spent when students make it through the pipeline and start class. However, the return on investment is often affected by loss at leakage points along the pipeline and by students who do not show up to class as discussed earlier. Freda shares her frustration.

> We've invested so much. Just the time that I have spent, and my staff have spent, and we haven't even started class yet, but we've already invested a considerable amount into these students. Break it down, my time, the cost of a test, the pretest time, there's already been a considerable investment made. And the sad reality is they took the time to come to
orientation and be with me for two hours. They took the time to take a test, but I may not even see them tomorrow on the first day of class.

Since the pandemic, enrollment pipeline processes are being conducted both in-person and virtually. In most cases, processes and procedure have been adapted but staffing levels have not increased to meet the additional need for bi-modal delivery of enrollment steps. This further taxes staff capacity.

In every education sector (K-12, higher education and adult education) staff members are frequently required to wear multiple hats. The challenge in adult education is that, unlike K-12 which has a single funding stream, these hats are often supported by different funders. Oliver suggested that this funding structure may have been a contributing factor to some administrators’ decision not to participate in the study as he explained:

[We have a] braided system of funding. Our state funders want certain data. Our federal Community Development Block Grant funders want another level of data. You know, another funder wants another level of data …When asked to participate in the study, an unfunded request, we [would] have to pull them [staff] off of something that's actually paying the bills and put them on something that's not, it's hard.

On a positive note, the continuity of faculty and staff bodes well for most programs. Oliver shared:

One thing we have going for us is staff retention … what's amazing is, although they're part-time people, our turnover rate is remarkably low and it's not because people are getting rich doing this. 75% have been with us five years or more, probably half have been with us 10 years or more. Out of 66, last time I counted, I believe 15 of them were former students.
He continued, they stay “not because we give the benefits or anything, but, you know, because they really love it.”

**Staff Expertise.** The levels of expertise and skillset possessed by staff were alluded to by a few program administrators. In Freda’s program, many of her instructors were not comfortable teaching online. “Many teachers were not into virtual. They’re pretty much all retired teachers. They’re like, ‘Freda, this is not what we do … This is not the best way for us to teach.’” She also shared her own lack of comfort with the funder database but is fortunate to have data entry staff who make up for her lack of expertise:

I don't understand a lot that has to do with DAISI … with everything else that I had to learn, I kind of just left that to her [data entry staff member] … And I do take advantage of trying to learn more of it, but I don't understand a lot of what happens in DAISI.

She also reported that working with data was difficult for her.

It feels like a foreign world to me, that world, it really does because it's not my comfort zone. Quite honestly, working with data and statistics is, I mean, I have to do it because it's part of my job, but it's not my comfort at all.

The skillsets and expertise that Oliver would like to develop in his program are student-facing. If resources were not an issue, he would like to hire more multilingual and multicultural staff, especially “full-time advisors, with benefits, who speak the languages of the students.”

Katarina concurred. Her program has a significant number of full-time staff, but some perform dual roles, e.g., function as both advisors and instructors. She would like to hire full-time staff to serve solely as advisors.

**Data Resources.** As described in earlier sections, adult education administrators expressed a number of data challenges, specifically with data retrieval. Despite being required to
collect and enter a variety of data into funder-mandated databases, databases do not allow administrators to parse their data in the configuration needed for specific purposes. For example, Sam’s staff had to manually combine data from DAIS-I and the college’s database to respond to my request for data in Phase 1 of this study. He remarked that if resources were not an issue, he would like to purchase SalesForce, a robust, but expensive, client management system. Similarly, in phase 2 of the study, Oliver was unable to retrieve their program’s HSE students and email addresses using LACES. He was fortunate to be able to turn to their program’s unique Access database which was designed by a staff member who is a retired software engineer, noting “he has made this for a hundredth of what it would cost to have someone else make it.” Developing program-specific databases like Oliver’s is cost probative for the vast majority of adult education programs.

As discussed, Massachusetts uses SASID to track K-12 students throughout their educational journey. Nothing similar exists for adult education. Having the ability to track exited students would not only help programs connect with and re-engage exited students, but would provide valuable data to include in end-of-year reports, especially on outcome attainment, e.g., credential attainment of students during participation in or within one year after exit from the program.

Data sharing and data integration among WIOA four core partners (WIOA Title I. B: Adult, Dislocated Workers, and Youth, WIOA Title II: Adult Education and Literacy, WIOA Title III: Wagner-Peyser, WIOA Title IV: Vocational Rehabilitation) has been federally mandated since 2015. Oliver pointed out “even at a state level when it's federally mandated for data systems to talk to each other, everything's siloed.” Core partners are still running redundant systems that don’t talk to each other and present access roadblocks because of data siloing and
overlap. Anecdotally, funders have reported that the process of integrating core partner data systems is cost-prohibitive. Therefore, programs are left to absorb the increased personnel costs associated with pulling data and reporting. Having better data means that administrators can “better direct our resources to support those who need it most.” (Katarina). Oliver shared the same sentiment:

we could better target the limited resources we have for advising and administration to support the students who are on the bubble for dropping out. And if we could support those students who are on the bubble and keep them in long enough that they can make some progress and get some feedback and maybe that motivator will keep them going.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the data gathered during four interviews with adult education administrators in Illinois and Massachusetts. The interviewees shared common experiences and well as nuanced lived experiences around their challenges communicating with the HSE population; their rationale for student and administrator participation or non-participation in the research study; their own program’s experience with HSE student persistence; and how they access and use data, as well as the gaps in data availability. The overarching theme of resources was apparent in every theme and the implications of being under-resourced, under-staffed and under-informed (in terms of data, research, etc.) are outlined throughout.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study evolved over time. The original purpose was to understand the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence among adult learners pursuing a high school equivalency credential. When I was unable to gather sufficient data to complete the quantitative study, the study was revised. The purpose of the revised study was to understand my experience during the data gathering process and the broader implications of data collection, use and sharing practices in the field of adult education field.

Phase I of the quantitative study included an online survey that was shared with 665 current and former HSE students who had taken Language Arts classes at an adult education program housed in a community college in Illinois. With a response rate of <0.05%, I determined that the quantitative finding would be statistically significant, so I revised my study.

In phase II, I expanded the participant pool by including students who had taken any HSE class in approximately 150 grant-funded adult education programs in Illinois and Massachusetts. I also asked program administrators to share the invitation to participate with their own HSE students, in the hopes that students might respond to a familiar name and email address. Again, the response rate was low, 0.01%. With 51 useable survey responses, identifying findings with any significance was impossible as described in chapter 4.

A major shift in the study design was necessitated in phase III of the study. A qualitative study was added to help me understand my experience gathering data. I conducted four semi-structured interviews with program administrators in Illinois and Massachusetts. The major findings revolving around communication, persistence, data:
1) Communication: A wide variety of communication methods are used by programs to connect with current and former students. Communication challenges exist at every stage of enrollment.

2) Persistence: Adult education practitioners wish they had a better understanding of the factors that impact student persistence so that they could devise appropriate interventions.

3) Data: Adult education exists in a “data desert” which has multiple lush “data oases” but they are difficult to navigate to and through.

An additional overarching theme that was noted during the interviews and codified during the analysis process was resources. Adult education administrators are heavily reliant on the external environment for resources and are challenged by lack of resources, leaving programs under-resourced, under-staffed and overextended. The resource theme has significant implications for future actions.

Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: Communication. A wide variety of communication methods are used by programs to connect with current and former students, but communication challenges exist at every stage of enrollment.

Adult Education programs and students need to be able to reach each other when needed, but that is easier said than done! Administrators shared that it has always been challenging trying to communicate with HSE students, to a greater degree when classes are not in session when students are not actively attending or have exited from the program. Communication challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most programs now have limited opportunities for students to engage in-person with faculty or staff as intake and enrollment
processes have pivoted to online and instruction for the most part is being delivered online. As a result, programs have been innovating with low-cost or no-cost technology tools to communicate with students with mixed success.

Programs are attempting to communicate with their students “any way that we can”, using “whatever medium they respond to”. The challenges programs experience trying to contact HSE students may be predicated on the contingent lives that students may have. Oliver observed anecdotally that his students change addressees more often than the average American and Freda shared that student phone numbers are often disconnected or temporarily not-in-service if they are using pay-as-you-go phones.

It is apparent that the communication protocols that program staff experience success with when conducting business, e.g., email, are ineffective when trying to communicate with students. Students respond better to modalities that they can access easily and respond to immediately, e.g. texting. Programs need to keep that in mind when developing student communication protocols. The cost of developing and implementing new communication protocols can be prohibitive. Even if the texting app is free, there is a cost to dedicating staff time to compile student phone numbers, to request permissions to text, to sort those who opt-in from those who opt-out, to enter contact information in texting apps, to maintain that contact information as students enter and exit, to send and reply to text messages. Walking into a classroom and sharing information was not only easier but had the added benefit of providing opportunities to foster connection-building between program staff and students.

There are a number of reasons why programs might need to connect with students after they withdraw from the program. They may try to re-engage them, they may need post-exit data (credential attainment, employment, etc.) for reports, or they might just want to keep the lines of
communications open. Whatever the reason, communicating with exited students presented additional challenges to administrators, given that as a system, adult education does not track students longitudinally. After a number of years benchmarking, federal performance measures for adult education have been quantified recently and the expectation is that programs will contact students at six-month intervals to update employment and academic outcomes. In the absence of an official tracking system, each program will have to develop homegrown processes and systems to gather that information, which will also require staffing resources.

The pandemic has illustrated how critical technology has become in our ability to conduct business. It has also highlighted the inequity in access to technology and connectivity for our students. “What is painfully clear is that a disproportionate share of those who lack access to a reliable internet connection and devices are Black, Hispanic, live in rural areas, or come from low-income households” (Lake & Makori, 2020). The fact that some programs were using WhatsApp as the sole mode of instruction is evidence of this inequity. “Technology is meant to be the great equalizer, not a source of division” (Roese, 2021).

I was unable to locate relevant research or theory that warranted inclusion in this discussion. The main takeaway from this communication conversation appears to be that the best way for adult education practitioners to communicate with their HSE students is multi-tiered.

**Theme 2: Persistence.** Adult education practitioners wish they had a better understanding of the factors that impact student persistence so that they could devise appropriate interventions.

Adult education administrators were honest about what they didn’t know with many sharing their frustration about not knowing how to decrease attrition and increase persistence. They were also candid about not knowing what they don’t know. Overall, they seemed to feel
powerless in their attempts to turn the tide. They were, however, united in their desire to know more in order to engage in research-based and data-informed decision-making related to persistence interventions.

As discussed in chapter 2, adult education students “do not have poor attendance or lack persistence for frivolous or trivial reasons. Instead, they face an array of conflicting challenges, barriers, and responsibilities” (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999, 2000). In their persistence research, Comings et al. identified a variety of positive forces (supports) and negative forces (barriers) that support and hinder student persistence and therefore their ability to complete and transition to their next steps. Program administrators were lockstep with this concept and throughout the interviews, shared many ways their students are challenged and to a lesser extent how they are supported. They were especially aware of their students’ situational barriers (finances, employment, housing, etc.) and shared how they have been compounded because of the pandemic.

Administrators were united in their messaging that the situational barriers they observe in their students are often too large for the program to alleviate. This is consistent with Quigley’s (1997, as cited in Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999) suggestion that the “societal factors involved in situational influences are largely beyond the control of adult education programs.” Quigley continued that “institutional influences … are areas that practitioners need to work on continuously…[and]… dispositional influences… provide a place from which program reform might begin to affect persistence” (p. 25). It was interesting that dispositional factors were the barriers that administrators mentioned the least. This is consistent with Goto & Martin’s (2000) assertion that dispositional barriers may be the least understood and least often addressed by practitioners. One of the reasons for that may be that students are less likely to disclose a
dispositional barrier, e.g., “I am withdrawing because I am full of self-doubt”, “I don’t like to fail” or “I don’t believe I can be successful in this class”, than a situational barrier, e.g., “I am withdrawing because I have to work” or “I don’t have childcare.” A student’s disposition influences how they perceive and react to the situational and institutional barriers they face; therefore, programs need to become more informed about this type of barrier. It is indisputable that it is not possible to alleviate all students’ barriers to persistence, however, it is possible for practitioners to influence how students perceive their barriers.

While I did not explicitly ask administrators how they support student persistence, the subject came up in interviews. Goal setting and progress toward meeting goals were mentioned by almost all administrators. Goto & Martin, (2009) found that a clear understanding of their pathway strengthened student’s resolve to overcome situational barriers in their lives. Administrators were on the right track here! This is also consistent with the four persistence supports that Comings et al (2000) identified - 1) awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence, 2) self-efficacy, 3) goal setting, and 4) progress toward reaching a goal. In their seminal New England persistence study, they found that all four supports existed in many, but not all, the programs studied and they suggested that programs make more intentional efforts to implement a combination of supports that may provide a more supportive environment to persistence. This has important implications for the field because building up positive forces “may be more critical to increasing persistence than is the removal of barriers” (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009, p. 4). This suggests the need for programs to reconsider the allocation of resources (staff, time and financial) to efforts that alleviate negative forces (transportation, childcare, etc.) and to increase efforts that support the positive forces in students’ lives (forming and deepening relationships between students and staff, etc.).
Many administrators talked about the importance and value of developing students’ sense of belonging and connection with the program or staff. Ziegler & Durant (2001) suggested that persistence is strongly influenced by students’ degree of engagement and specifically addressed relationships, that is, the connections between students, instructors and peers, belonging to a group, being cared about and helped through difficulties. For the administrators participating in this study, this is clearly their reality and a lived experience that informs and supports persistence interventions at their programs.

Theme 3: Data. Adult education exists in a “data desert” that has multiple lush database “oases”, but they are difficult to navigate to and through.

Access to, sharing and use of data in the field of adult education is challenging because of the lack of research data available; inconsistent program-level processes for data collection, retrieval, analysis, use, and sharing; and lack of access to “big data” at state and national level.

The lack of data, including research data, means that adult education practitioners often make decisions and develop practices based on assumptions, albeit educated assumptions based on experience and/or some data. They sometimes feel like they are flying blind in the decision-making process. It is not uncommon for administrators not to have all the data they need to make a decision watertight, but since they do have to make a decision they base it on the data that they have. There are some decisions that are best made using quantitative data, others best made with qualitative, and others still that require both. Knowing what you need is key to making a good decision and having access to a variety of data makes identifying what you need easier.

It is not that there is a data drought in adult education, however. As a field, adult education collects and stores a lot of data, but there was a shared consensus among interviewees that data is not retrievable in the configurations that programs need to enable them to make data-
informed decisions. The most immediate need is for administrators is to be able to parse their own data as needed without having to manipulate data from various sources. Additionally, they need access to comparative data (from peer programs, from other states).

**Theme 4: Resources (what holds it all together).**

The final and overarching theme is related to resources. At multiple junctures during each interview, administrators shared how they are resource-challenged. They, explicitly and implicitly, expressed concern that limited and highly-controlled financial resources, being understaffed and overextended, and access to data were impacting their work. This was not a surprising finding, given the anecdotal evidence I have collected over the course of the thirty years I have worked in the field.

Even though adult education has a consistent source of revenue from state and federal funders, those funds come with a lot of strings. As discussed in chapter 2, resource dependence theory helps us understand the dynamics and implications of the resource-dependent relationship that adult education programs have with grant funders - ICCB in Illinois and ACLS in Massachusetts. The critically and scarcity of funding for adult education means that the field is tightly coupled with state funders. Funders dictate who gets funded and what the funds are spent on. They define program outcomes and evaluate programs annually on quantifiable measurable outcomes. The stakes are high. In the funding cycle, financial resources impact staffing, which impacts services, which impact outcomes, which in turn impact subsequent funding (figure 4).

Adult education administrators posit that when funders measure program performance solely on quantitative data and when analysis is based on numbers only, they are depriving programs of the opportunity to present their best selves. Some things cannot be counted or measured. Data that is described in words, e.g. anecdotal, observational data is gathered by
program faculty and staff every day, rather than in numbers is no less valuable. This study provides evidence of the thick, rich, valuable data that was collected over the course of four interviews conducted for this study. To a greater degree than “Measurable Skills Gain”, qualitative information is what program staff are using to inform decisions about persistence interventions and support services. However, that data does not seem to be collected in a consistent way within or between adult education programs, meaning if a student moves from one program to another that data is lost as Oliver pointed out. Programs may need to pay attention to this gap and devise processes to capture, store and make meaning from qualitative data.

In the interviews, there was general consensus that adult education programs are understaffed, and existing staff members are overextended. Most mentioned the impact low staffing levels has on their program’s ability to innovate, complete additional tasks, or respond to requests to “do one more thing”. As previously discussed in chapter 2, equity theory suggests that “members continually assess the personal return they receive for the investment they put into the organization” (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 299). This has significant implications for administrators who report being understaffed and for administrators who report that their staff members are wearing multiple hats and are overextended. “When people feel that they are being dealt with inequitably or unfairly, equity theory predicts that they will act to restore their feeling of equity” (Bess & Dee, 2012, p. 299). They can do that by 1) producing lower quality work, 2) seeking to increase outcomes (praise, money, autonomy), 3) reassigning some of their work to others, 4) asking others to reduce their productivity, or when all else fails 5) leaving their job. Obviously, administrators would prefer that staff do not engage in any of these equity-balancing tactics. But this raises an interesting question: if administrators reported that, for the most part,
they are understaffed and overextended, why is there not a mass exodus from the adult education field? Equity theory indicates that they should, right? Oliver may have hit the nail on the head! He used the term “labor of love” when explaining why a staff member (who is a retired software engineer) created his program’s alternate database in Access, something that would have been cost-prohibitive otherwise. He also asserted that instructors stay with the program “not because we give the benefits or anything, but, you know, because they really love it.” Is it the love of the job or the love of the program that balances the inequity that staff experience from being overextended? (figure 5).

![Diagram of Job Inputs and Outputs]

*Figure 5. Job Inputs and Job Outputs of Adult Education Practitioners.*

**Implications and Recommendations**

The results of this study suggest that there is much work to be done in the areas of adult education research, resource allocation, and data (access to, sharing and use of). Adult education has suffered from the lack of leadership in the research arena since NCSALL lost its funding in 2007. Without a revitalization of formalized research, it will be left to a limited number of practitioners who study adult education for academic purposes. Practitioners will be significantly disadvantaged by the lack of new information with which to innovate. Maintaining a data status
quo has significant implications at the program, state and federal levels. Using incomplete or inaccurate data may lead users down the wrong path, may waste resources, may result in poor decisions, and is likely to have an impact on the ability to serve students.

**Recommendations**

This section includes recommendations for a variety of audiences, practitioners and the field, state professional development systems, institutional leaders, funders, and policy makers.

**Adult Education Practitioners and the Field.** At the program level, practitioners should advocate for professional development around adult learner persistence; identify skills gaps among faculty, staff and program leaders and work with professional development networks to develop or strengthen expertise; continue to support staff attendance at professional development workshops; consider attaching a stipend to completion of long-term training and recognition for developing expertise. Practitioners should formalize program processes for gathering, organizing and analyzing qualitative data and then use it to inform persistence intervention strategies. Administrators should convene a working group to explore alternate funding sources that would provide programs more flexibility and room to innovate as well as to reduce dependence on state and federal funders. All practitioners should actively engage in advocacy efforts, including National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week.

**The Professional Development Systems** (e.g., the System for Adult Basic Education Support in Massachusetts and the Professional Development Network in Illinois). Grant-funded professional development systems should provide opportunities for adult education administrators to engage in long-term, sustained professional development, e.g. Persistence Study Circle to develop a greater and more consistent understanding of persistence in the field. They should consider developing and tailoring trainings for under-supported job functions, e.g.,
data entry staff, technology coordinators, curriculum developers, advisors, customer service and
other front-facing staff. They should develop a robust onboarding process for new
administrators, which would include data analysis and use, as well as opportunities for
mentoring. They should also be active participants in research efforts.

**Institutional Leaders.** Institutional leaders should continue to advocate for adult
education among peers, during interactions with state legislators, etc. They should develop a
greater understanding of the importance of, need for and value of adult education. They should
actively support student persistence efforts, e.g. pay GED testing fees for students who complete
the HSE program. They might consider being a visible presence for adult education students or
provide them with access to resources that credit students have.

**State Funders.** Funders should revisit the funding model and increase number of full-
time positions supported; increase “rates” so that faculty and staff can be compensated fairly for
their work; include incremental raises; provide financial rewards for credentialing. They should
support the effort to increase the professionalism of the field by improving the working
conditions of adjunct faculty and part-time staff (vacation, sick time, reduced cost healthcare,
etc.). Data-related recommendations include the consideration of qualitative data in the program
performance evaluation process; supporting the development of data expertise among *all* staff;
convening data working group to assess program level data needs and develop roll-out plan and
timeline; investing in database improvements (but first survey administrators to see what it is we
need, e.g., student persistence across semesters, not accessible in DAISI or LACES currently). In
addition, they should help programs explore alternate funding sources that would provide
programs more flexibility and room to innovate, e.g. Innovative Bridge and Transition grants.
They should provide opportunities for administrators to connect with high-achieving programs in
other states to identify best practices and to learn from the success of others. They should invest in database integration systems (between core partners). Finally, they should consider conducting extended program visits, to engage with faculty, staff and students and get a better understanding of the program-level successes and challenges.

**Federal Funders.** My recommendations to funders are as follows. Be open to considering ways to include qualitative data in program outcome evaluation process. Consider funding a national study of adult education persistence. Relax restrictions on the use of unrestricted funds to allow programs to support students differently. Provide financial support to states for database integration systems (between core partners). Visit adult education programs, engage with faculty, staff and students and get a better understanding of the world of adult education. Support efforts to increase the professionalism of adult education.

**Policy Makers.** Policy makers should put partisanship aside and be open to listening to advocacy arguments and to reorienting their stance on existing policy. They might consider refunding NCSALL (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy) or fund a similar federally funded research and development center focused solely on adult learning, on improving practice in educational programs that serve adults learners in need of literacy, numeracy, or language skills.

**Future Research**

Several areas for future research in adult education and on student persistence exist. This research project was originally planned to be the first part of a bigger, long-term initiative. Since persistence is impacted by conditions and practices at a variety of stages of enrollment 1) pre-enrollment (intake, orientation, advising), 2) enrollment (instruction and advising) and 3) post-enrollment (advising and follow up), exploring what happens at each stage would be a worthy
endeavor. Persistence is multidimensional, therefore interventions to support persistence need to be multifaceted. Without a complete understanding of the dimensions of persistence at each stage of enrollment, it is difficult for adult education practitioners to design a tailored persistence support plan for students.

There is still work to do in the exploration of the relationship between self-efficacy and student persistence. The existing research points to the impact of self-efficacy on persistence which has potential implications not only in academic arenas but in the everyday lives of our students also. A broader study of adult education administrators' experiences with data could also prove worthwhile. The findings could inform funder database improvements and systems integration. Finally, I would be very interested in seeing a national quantitative study using data from LACES which is used in 21 states. Questions I would like answered are 1) how long do students typically stay in their program? 2) when they stop out, how long do they stop out for before returning? 3) how many times do they stop out before they are successful? and 4) how long does it take students on average to make a level gain?

**Study Limitations**

Despite a low response rate in phases I and II of the quantitative study, I defend my decision to use email and an online survey to answer the original research question. It would not have been possible to reach the potential participant pool with another communication tool. Limitations for the study at each phase are outlined below.

A number of limitations in phase I of the study were identified. HSE students might not have responded to the online survey because they did not know me or recognize my @nl.edu email address. Attempting to connect with students via their college email address might not have been the best approach as students might not check their college email when they are not
actively attending class or the college might not have continued to support student email addresses once they exited. In terms of the survey, because I asked for student names and email addresses, students who preferred to remain anonymous may have not participated. Additionally, there might have been too many questions on the survey. The relevance of the study might not have been as clear as needed for students to be interested in participating. Finally, it is likely that students were overextended, dealing with life challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations during phase II of the study include the timeline. The study was conducted over the summer, a time when most students are not actively attending class and many programs are working with reduced staff. As with phase I, the outreach mode was not effective. Because HSE students do not use email regularly, it is likely their “invitation to participate” remained unopened in their inbox. It is likely that administrators were overextended, dealing with challenges associated with the pandemic and did not have the time or resources to share the invitation to participate with their students. Additionally, the relevance of the study may not have been sufficiently inviting to program administrators.

In phase III of the study, limitations included the length of the interview. Even though the interviews were schedule for 30 minutes, most went over. I closed the interviews feeling that administrators had much more to share.

If I were to do this study again, I would address the limitations by 1) reconsidering the use of email as a mode of contact, 2) contacting administrators individually prior to sharing the survey and being more explicit when sharing the value of the study and of their participation, 3) providing students with an incentive to participate, and 4) conducting the study when classes are in session.
Significance of the Study

This research study has practical significance for adult education administrators. The findings will be shared with peer adult education practitioners at state and national conferences and with funders. The research and literature explored in chapter 2 may inform persistence-supporting practices, policies, and structures in adult education programs. The project has the potential to bridge the divide between persistence research and on-the-ground practice, between the conceptual and the concrete. Program processes, policies and improvements may be informed by the findings of the qualitative study, while contributing to the development of a culture of evidence in the field.

Adult education practitioners may be well served by gaining an understanding of the findings of this research project. Prior to engaging in any persistence initiative, they will need to have a complete understanding of the barriers, drivers and supports to student persistence as outlined in Chapter 2 (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 2000). All practitioners, regardless of role, should identify and reflect on the part they play in fostering the development of one or more of the supports. This could result in more intentional attempts to support persistence. The findings of the qualitative study, which engaged in a process of discovering and defining program level experiences and challenges, will provide practitioners with the critical information they need to develop and deliver solutions at their local program level, thus allowing them to be solution-centric.

An understanding of the findings of this study will also serve host agencies/institutions and funders, who may consider the broader implications of the study and its scalability. Increased persistence, which leads to course and program completion, results in increased student success outcomes, increased transition to college, training programs and employment, a
greater return on investment, a reputation “boost”, and if scaled to other adult education programs could impact student learning outcomes at the state level which affects federal funding allocations. The findings will support host agencies/institutions to make data-informed decisions and to advocate for change. Finally, an understanding of the findings and their implications will allow host agencies to better support adult education programs.

Ultimately, however, the population that will be best served by this research project will be adult learners who persist in their program long enough to meet their goals.

“Research is always about creating new knowledge” (McNiff, 2013, p. 89). The depth and breadth of that new knowledge are not always evident at the beginning of the research. Each study is as unique as the institution in which it is conducted and as the researcher who conducts the study. From the early days of my doctoral journey, becoming an expert in the area of the persistence of adult education students and generating new knowledge was something that excited me. Pivoting to a qualitative study to understand the challenges I faced in the data collection phase of my quantitative study, while disheartening, provided an additional and unexpected opportunity to explore the adult education field through a different lens. This two-part study presents a more holistic picture of our field.

Conclusion

Adult education programs across the United States face a myriad of challenges with most practitioners sharing a common, consistent concern about student attrition which has significant implications for students, programs, funders, employers and beyond. In the first part of this two-part study, I set out to explore the relationship between self-efficacy and the persistence of adult learners pursuing a high school equivalency credential, using an online survey. Because of the challenges I experienced collecting data, the findings were statistically insignificant. In part two
of the study, I pivoted to a qualitative study of my experience in the data collection process. I set out to find out why data gathering was so difficult; why students or administrators might not have responded to the invitation to participate in the study; and what the lack of access to, sharing, and use of data in adult education means for us now and in the future. With these questions in mind, I engaged four adult education administrators in 30-minute semi-structured interviews. Using resource dependent theory and equity theory to inform my exploration, The findings suggest that 1) programs experience a variety of challenges communicating with students at every stage of enrollment, 2) student persistence is multi-faceted and adult education practitioners wish they had a better understanding of the factors that impact persistence so that they could devise more impactful interventions; 3) despite collecting and storing large amounts of data, it is difficult to access that data in specific configurations that program administrators need; 4) adult education is under-resourced in three main area, finances, personnel, data. These findings suggest that there is a need for additional exploration of funding formulas as well as data management and integration.

While the initial goal of the study was to explore student persistence, the revised “two-in-one” study provided me with the opportunity to pull back the curtain on a myriad of resource challenges that prevent programs from responding effectively and efficiently to student persistence challenges. So, the “call to action” question that remains for me is how satisfied are we as a field with the data and resource status quo?
REFERENCES


Schwarzer, R. (2005). Everything you always wanted to know about the self-efficacy scale but were afraid to ask. *Assessment, 18*(3), 242-251.


I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about your experience as a GED student at [name of program].

- Who is doing this study?
  - Jacqueline Lynch, doctoral student at National Louis University.

- When does the study start?
  - May 2021.

- What is the purpose of the study?
  - To understand the relationship between a student’s belief in their ability to do something and the length of time that they stay in their GED program.

- Do I have to participate?
  - No, your participation is voluntary and you can stop at any time.

- What do I have to do?
  - If you want to be involved, you will complete an online survey (about 3-5 minutes to complete).

- What do you want to do with the results?
  - The results of the study may be used to make improvements at your GED program which will benefit future students. Additionally, the results may be published or presented at conferences.

- Will you use my name?
  - No, your identity will be protected. Nobody will know who took the online survey but me.

- Will my responses be safe?
  - The survey results will be kept in a password-protected folder and only I will have access to the information.

- Are there any risks?
  - None greater than those you face in everyday life.

- What are the benefits?
  - The information could be useful to the GED program at [name of program] and to programs across the state.

- Can I see the results?
  - Yes, contact me, Jacqueline Lynch at jlynch8@nl.edu.

- Who do I contact if I have questions?
− Researcher: Jacqueline Lynch at jlynch8@nl.edu.
− Committee Chair: Nathaniel Cradit, ncradit@nl.edu

Institutional Research Board, National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL: Dr. Shaunti Knauth, Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu, (312) 261-3526

Consent: I understand that by checking ‘Yes” below, I am agreeing to participate in the study “To believe or not to believe: the relationship between student self-efficacy and persistence in adult education programs”.

My participation will consist of the activities below during the May 2021 to August 2021 time period: Completion of an online survey taking approximately 3-4 minutes to complete.

Electronic Consent

Please select your choice below. You may print a copy of this consent form for your records. Clicking on the “Agree” button indicates that

- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You understand that you can stop participating in the study at any time.
- You are 18 years of age or older

1. First Name: __________
2. Last Name: __________
   - I agree
   - I disagree

Page 2: General Information

1. Email Address __________
2. Age
   - 18-25
   - 25-40
   - 40-55
   - Over 55
3. Gender?
   - Male
Female

4. Race/ethnicity? (choose all that apply)
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Asian
   - Black
   - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Hispanic / Latino

5. When you started GED classes, how long had it been since you attended high school or formal education?
   - Less than 5 years
   - 5-10 years
   - 10-20 years
   - 20-30 years
   - More than 30 years

6. How many GED classes/courses in total did you take at [name of program]? *
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6
   - More than 7

7. How many GED courses did you complete? Note: "Complete" means you did not stop going to class, that you attended class up to the last week of the semester, "Complete" is not related to passing a class. *
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5
   - 6
   - More than 7

Page 3: Online Survey
Directions: Read each statement and decide if that statement is “not at all true”, “hardly true”, “moderately true”, or “exactly true” for YOU. Please be honest, there are no right or wrong answers.

10. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough
   - Not at all true
   - Hardly true
   - Moderately true
   - Exactly true

11. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want
    - Not at all true
    - Hardly true
    - Moderately true
    - Exactly true

12. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals
    - Not at all true
    - Hardly true
    - Moderately true
    - Exactly true

13. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events
    - Not at all true
    - Hardly true
    - Moderately true
    - Exactly true

14. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations
    - Not at all true
    - Hardly true
    - Moderately true
    - Exactly true

15. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
    - Not at all true
    - Hardly true
    - Moderately true
    - Exactly true

16. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping skills
    - Not at all true
    - Hardly true
    - Moderately true
17. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions
- Not at all true
- Hardly true
- Moderately true
- Exactly true

18. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution
- Not at all true
- Hardly true
- Moderately true
- Exactly true

19. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.
- Not at all true
- Hardly true
- Moderately true
- Exactly true

Page 4: My Experience

Directions: Read each statement and click on the response that best refers to YOU.

20. When you were taking GED classes at your program, what made it hard for you to come to class? In other words, what caused you to be late to class? What caused you to be absent?
Click on all that apply to you.
- Work
- Personal or family commitments
- Transportation
- Childcare
- Motivation
- Self-confidence
- Health
- COVID related challenges
- Technology - access to a computer, internet or lack of technology skills
- Class was too hard / easy / not interesting.....
- Program quality
- Class schedule
- Other - Write In (Required)
21. Of the things you selected in the previous question, which one was the main reason you stopped going to class? "I stopped because....."

- Work
- Personal or family commitments
- Transportation
- Childcare
- Motivation
- Self-confidence
- Health
- COVID related challenges
- Technology - access to a computer, internet or lack of technology skills
- Class was too hard / easy / not interesting.....
- Program quality
- Class schedule
- I didn’t stop, I am still attending / plan to return in the fall
- Other - Write In (Required)

22. What was the main reason you wanted to get your GED?

- I want to go to college
- I want to enter a technical or trade program
- I want to get a job
- I want to keep my current job
- I want to get a better job
- I want to have a career, not just a job
- My employer required a GED
- I want to make more money
- I want to support my family
- I want to save to buy a car / house....
- I want to be a positive role model for my children
- I want to make my family proud
- I want to feel better about myself (e.g. more confident, more motivated, more focused, more positive)
- I was required to get my GED (e.g. early release, court mandate, public assistance requirement)
- I want to join the military
- Other (describe)

Submission Response:

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey. By participating in this research study, you are helping shape the future of adult education in [state]. If you have any questions, please contact Jacqueline Lynch at jlynch8@nlu.edu
APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY (PHASE I)

Dear GED student / former GED student,

My name is Jacqueline Lynch. I am a doctoral student at National Louis University in Illinois. I am writing to invite you to take part in an online survey for a research project that I am doing. As a current (or former) GED student at [name of program], you can provide valuable input that will help shape the future of adult education in Illinois.

In this research project, I am trying to understand how a student's belief about their ability to do something affects how long they stay in their GED program. The study will start in May 2021 and end in June 2021. If you want to take part, all you need to do is answer 20 questions which will take 3 to 4 minutes to complete.

Instructions

- Page 1: About the Survey and Consent
  - Read about the survey and decide if you would like to participate.
  - Check the box if you want to participate in the study.
  - Close the survey if you do not wish to participate.

- Page 2: General Information
  - Provide some general information.

- Page 3: Online Survey
  - Read 10 statements and decide how the statement applies to you.
    - "not at all true"
    - "hardly true"
    - "moderately true"
    - "exactly true"
  - Please be honest, there are no right or wrong answers.

- Page 4: My Experiences
  - Read 3 statements and click on the response(s) that best refers to you.

If you do not have access to a computer or the internet at home, you can access the online survey on your phone or at a computer station at your program or your local library.

If you wish to participate, please take the survey (link) as soon as you can. It will only be open for one week. It will take you 3-4 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time and input.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Lynch
Dear fellow adult education administrators,

My name is Jacqueline Lynch. I am the Dean of Adult Education at Killeen Community College. In my ‘other life’ I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership program at National Louis University. I am at the research stage of my program and I am contacting you to invite your ABE/ASE students to complete an online survey for my study, “To believe or not to believe: The relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing a High School Equivalency credential”. I am trying to understand how a student's belief about their ability to do something affects how long they stay in their HSE program.

A number of programs have agreed to be research sites and shared their student contact information with me. However, I have had very limited success securing a participant pool by outreaching to students directly. I think that may be because students don’t know me, don’t recognize my email address, or my email may be going to their spam. To expand my recruitment pool, I am now reaching out to adult ed colleagues. Would you be willing to share a short online survey with your current and former GED students - any or all students who attended between FY18 and FY21? The survey (22 questions) takes 3 to 4 minutes to complete. My hope is that students will be more likely to participate if the invitation comes from a familiar source. You are welcome to preview the survey (click here). The link to the actual research study survey is included in the sample "invitation to participate" letter below.

I am happy to provide any additional information you might need or to answer any questions you have.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Lynch

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*Sample Invitation to Participate* (Note: feel free to edit or revise completely)

Dear GED Student,

A fellow adult education administrator, Jacqueline Lynch, is a doctoral student at National Louis University in Illinois. She is doing a research project that I would like to invite you to be part of.

As a current (or former) GED student at [name of program], you have the ability to provide valuable input that will help shape the future of adult education in our program and across the state of Illinois.

In this research project, Jacqueline is trying to understand how a student's belief about their ability to do something affects how long they stay in their GED program. If you want to take
part, all you need to do is answer 22 questions in an online survey which will take 3 to 4 minutes
to complete. If you do not have access to a computer or the internet at home, you can access the
online survey on your phone.

Completing the online survey involves the following:

- **Page 1: About the Survey and Consent**
  - Read about the survey and decide if you would like to participate.
  - Check the box if you want to participate in the study.
  - Close the survey if you do not wish to participate.

- **Page 2: General Information**
  - Provide some general information.

- **Page 3: Online Survey**
  - Read 10 statements and decide how each statement applies to you.

- **Page 4: My Experiences**
  - Read 3 statements and click on the response(s) that best refers to you.

If you wish to participate, please take the survey as soon as you can. The survey will close on
July 25th. It only takes 3-4 minutes to complete. If you do not wish to participate, please ignore
this email.

Participation is voluntary, can be discontinued at any time, and will not affect your status with
our program. In fact, [name of program] will not know whether you have participated nor the
contents of your response if you do choose to participate.

If you have any questions, please contact Jacqueline Lynch at

    Click here to start the survey

Sincerely,

(Program representative)
APPENDIX D: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY (PHASE III)

Dear [name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a semi-structured interview for my doctoral research study, entitled “To believe or not to believe: the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing a High School Equivalency credential”. The purpose of the study is to understand the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of students pursuing a high school equivalency certificate, that is, how a student’s belief about their ability to do something affects how long they stay in their HSE program.

As I shared with you when we spoke, the response rate to the study’s online survey was very low, therefore the study has been modified in an attempt to understand

- my experience attempting to gather data
- why data were not available/ inaccessible
- program level data collection and sharing experiences of adult education peers and related barriers
- the implications of lack of access to program-level persistence data and the ensuing inability to identify/address state-wide trends.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to explore data gathering, use, and sharing at the program level and not to evaluate any aspect of your program. Participation in this study will include one semi-structured interview (approximately 30 minutes) via zoom [link]) scheduled for [day, date and time].

I look forward to speaking with you then,

Sincerely,
Jacqueline Lynch
APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT (PHASE III)

You are being asked to participate in a semi-structured interview for a research project being carried out by Jacqueline Lynch, Dean of Adult Education at Triton College and doctoral student at National Louis University. The study is called “To believe or not to believe: the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing a High School Equivalency credential” and is occurring between March 2021 to December 2021. The purpose of the study is to understand the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of students pursuing a high school equivalency certificate, that is, how a student's belief about their ability to do something affects how long they stay in their HSE program.

Despite best efforts, the response rate to the study’s online survey was less than .03%, therefore the study has been modified in an attempt to understand

- the researcher’s experience
- why data were not available/ inaccessible
- program level data collection and sharing experiences of adult education peers and related barriers
- the implications of lack of access to program-level persistence data and the ensuing inability to identify/address state-wide trends.

This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted by Jacqueline Lynch.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to explore data gathering, use and sharing at the program level and not to evaluate any aspect of your program. Participation in this study will include:

- One semi-structured interview via zoom, scheduled at your convenience in August 2021
  - Interviews will last up to 30 minutes and include approximately 10 questions
  - Interviews will be recorded, and participants may view and have final approval on the content of interview transcripts

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences and employed to inform persistence efforts at adult education programs but participants’ identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants or the programs they represent). To ensure confidentiality the researcher will secure recordings, transcripts, and field notes in two-factor authentication cloud storage. Only the researcher and her advisor will have access to data.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to your program and other programs and looking to initiate or refine persistence/retention initiatives.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Jacqueline Lynch at to request results from this study.
In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Jacqueline Lynch at or . If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that have not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact Nathaniel Cradit, Ph.D. (ncradit@nl.edu) or the chair of NLU’s Institutional Research Board, Dr. Shaunti Knauth (Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu, (312) 261-3526).

Thank you for your consideration.

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study “To believe or not to believe. The relationship between self-efficacy and persistence of adult learners pursuing a High School Equivalency credential”. My participation will consist of the activity below during the August/September 2021 time period:

- One semi structured interview lasting approximately 30 minutes.

_________________________  __________________________
Participant’s Signature    Date

_________________________  __________________________
Researcher’s Signature    Date
APPENDIX F: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) What is your program’s usual student communication protocol?

2) What factors contributed to your decision to take part in this study

3) Whether you shared the “invitation to participate” with your students or not, what challenges did you face or did you anticipate facing when preparing for or sharing the invitation with your students?

4) If resources were not an issue, what would your ideal way of communicating with students be? What would that look like?

5) Why do you think students were non-responsive to the “invitation to participate”?

6) Why do you think program administrators might not have sent the survey inviting students to participate?

7) Persistence
   a. What is your experience of persistence among HSE population?
   b. What persistence barriers do your students face?
   c. What kind of information might help you better address student persistence at your program? What would you like to know/understand?

8) Do you think your program / the field would benefit from persistence research? How?

9) Study revisions
   a. How do you think the study design could be improved? Why?
   b. What could have been done differently for a more positive outcome? Why?

10) Is there anything else you would like to add before we end?