

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

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Adult participation in formal learning has reached unprecedented levels within the last decade, due to technological advancement, innovative educational programming, the exploitation of adults as a profitable learning market, widespread social acceptance of globalization as a challenge to national economic sustainability, and awareness among middle-income adults that education is the vehicle to career enhancement. Out of context, the sheer numbers are startling: mega transnational universities such as the University of Phoenix with adult student enrollments well beyond 350,000; online students in distance education programs totaling nearly 1.5 million as of 2006 and tripling from 483,113 in 2002 (Romano, 2006); more than 360 colleges and universities offering accelerated learning programs created specifically for working adults (Commission for Accelerated Programs, 2008); and an estimated 90 million adults participating in formal and informal education including adult basic education, English-language learning, workplace learning, and personal development classes (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). If current trends continue, more than 50% of all adults in the U.S. between the ages of 25 and 55 will be involved in some form of adult education by 2010 (Cook & King, 2004).

Yet, when these numbers are examined through the lens of income, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and credential and degree completion, troubling disparities and challenges emerge. The most underserved group in adult education is the poor (McSwain & Davis, 2007). Among low-income adults aspiring to earn an associate or bachelor's degree, only 8% earned the former and 7% the latter within 6 years (Cook & King, 2004). In workplace learning, similar discrepancies exist in whose learning gets supported, with businesses prioritizing learning programs for top management and knowledge workers rather than low-skilled, low-income learners (Watkins & Marsick, 2009). Since 50% of the people living in poverty in the United States are African American or Hispanic (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003), these groups have the least access. While women now earn more bachelor's degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics than do men, they earn a much smaller percentage of doctorates, especially in the better paying fields of engineering (12%), computer sciences (15%), and physical sciences (21%) (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2004). Although people with disabilities represent one fifth of the U.S. population, their completion rates for attaining a bachelor's degree are minimal (Fabian & Liesener, 2005). The estimated 12 million undocumented workers residing in the United States are among some of the hardest workers with the fewest opportunities for advancement through adult education.

These statistics reflect the legacy of historical injustices and the great difficulty of achieving equity in a discipline committed to it—adult education. They reveal the complexity of knowing what to do

to enhance access and participation for all adults. As practioner-scholars, we have worked to make adult education more inclusive through instructional practice that is culturally relevant (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Our successes and challenges have deepened our interest in a better understanding of access and participation, with an emphasis on the pragmatic. Guided by the tradition of critical journalism, we surface questions that can illuminate the knowledge of policy makers, government and educational institutions, and adult educators to more effectively and equitably enhance access and participation. The questions we address are:

1. Who participates in adult education?
2. How can we understand adult participation?
3. What do individuals and institutions such as education, business, and government do to increase or diminish equitable access and participation?
4. What are the innovations, trends, and prospects that could provide greater and more equitable participation?

DEFINITIONS

As we reviewed the literature for this chapter, we found there was a lack of consensus on appropriate definitions for some of the key concepts. Other scholars have noted this problem as well (Fenwick, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Paulson & Boeke, 2006). With an understanding of their limitations, we offer the following definitions based upon at least one reference with essentially corresponding meaning:

Adult Basic Education (ABE): The continuum of education that extends from basic literacy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) services through adult secondary education (ASE), which includes adult high school diploma and General Educational Development (GED) preparation (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006, p. 1).

Access: Not only the first time, but any time an adult can enter or make use of a nonformal or formal educational program in an institution such as college or the workplace (Adelman, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007).

Participation: The decision to join or enroll in an adult education program, which can range from ABE to the workplace or college (Comings, 2007).

Persistence: Continuing in an adult education program to the extent that personal educational goals have been met or that some courses or training have been completed and can be applied to acquiring a certificate, license, credential, or degree (Benseman, 2005; Comings, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007). In ABE, persistence can mean adults' engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending programs, and their return to such programs when the demands of their lives allow (Comings, 2007, p. 24). In higher education, persistence connotes duration of enrollment, often with accompanying institutional use as a measure of retention and program effectiveness.

Formal learning: Learning sanctioned by an institution such as a college or by a business that leads to credits or some form of certification or diploma (Hrimech, 2005; Merriam et al., 2007). For this learning, there is usually an instructor, a curriculum, and an evaluation process.

Informal learning: Learning that is usually self-directed, independently pursued, and unregulated, often with the purpose of solving problems (Hrimech, 2005; Watkins & Marsick, 2009). With the use of books, technology, and the Internet, this type of learning is very important to adults as a form of knowledge acquisition that provides for learning in the workplace as well as for self-sufficiency and civic contribution.

Nonformal learning: Organized learning such as a workshop or training that takes place at work or in a community organization, but without sanctioning or credit accumulation toward a degree or certificate (Merriam et al., 2007). A community of practice is another example of nonformal learning that occurs as an emergent group to pursue a common interest such as analyzing a particular database or developing a teaching practice.

Workplace learning: Learning where a change in behavior or consciousness, from a new skill to a worker's personal outlook, occurs through and within the organizations, contexts, and activities of work (Fenwick, 2005).

The terms we have defined, while not exhaustive, are foundational to the contents of this chapter.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN ADULT EDUCATION?

The research of Johnstone and Rivera (1965) has informed discussions of participation in adult education for over four decades. The initial portion of their summary, with the exception of its claims about age, has enduring relevance in the United States: “The participant is just as often a woman as a man, is typically under 40, has completed high school or better, enjoys an above-average income, works full time and in a white-collar occupation, is white, Protestant, married and has children, lives in an urbanized area (more likely the suburbs than the city) and is found in all parts of the country . . .” (p. 8).

Researchers have found that in the U.S. within the last decade those workers most likely to participate in nonformal and formal education are 45 to 54 years old, White or Asian American, have a professional or master’s degree, earn more than \$75,000 per year, and work in professional fields such as education and health care (Hudson, Bhandari, Peter, & Bills, 2005). Participants in postsecondary education among adults 25 and older are predominantly White, women (60%), married with children, and with above average family incomes (Cook & King, 2004; Paulson & Boeke, 2006).

Johnstone and Rivera’s (1965) findings for what adults were learning is also similar to that in current literature—practical and skill-oriented subject matter directly useful for work, vocational pursuit, and home life. Formal workplace learning continues to dominate in the 21st century, with 46% of the workforce—nearly 60 million adults in the United States—taking work-related courses, most of which are offered by employers (Hudson, Bhandari, Peter, & Bills, 2005). Whether at work or a postsecondary institution most adults participate in learning for career- or job-related reasons (Aslanian, 2001; Paulson & Boeke, 2006).

Adults found least likely to pursue formal workplace learning have a high school diploma or did not complete high school, are Hispanic, earn less than \$30,000 a year, and work in blue collar or service occupations (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). In postsecondary education, low-income

adults, in general, are the least likely to enroll, and once enrolled, the least likely to graduate. As Cook and King (2004) document, within 6 years, only 7% of these students earn a bachelor’s degree and only 8% an associate’s degree. While the proportion of Whites among low-income adult college students is declining, the proportion of African American and Hispanic low-income adult students is increasing. In general, at any age, whether a student acquires a bachelor’s degree is largely determined by social class (Selingo & Brainard, 2006). In virtually all societies opportunities to participate in formal education are unequally distributed.

Although the studies are limited, this trend is visible in patterns of adult participation in ABE programs. The adults least likely to participate are those with the least amount of formal education and lowest incomes (Benseman, 2005). For example, within refugee groups nonparticipants tend to be women with little or no formal learning. Findings from a study on persistence in pre-GED classes suggest that among immigrants, those over the age of 30 and parents of teenage or grown children are the most likely to persist (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). These older adults face fewer challenges in terms of finances and child care than do younger immigrants. The practical need to learn English contributes to the well-documented finding of greater persistence by immigrants in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes compared to other ABE students (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1994).

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND ADULT PARTICIPATION?

A score of years ago, one of the most popular models for explaining participation in adult education was Cross’s (1981) chain of response model. This reciprocal psychological framework begins with an adult’s self-evaluation and attitudes about education, considers his or her life transitions and the importance of goals and expectations for education to meet them, and concludes with the barriers and opportunities to be encountered as well as the information needed to proceed. If the adult’s responses all along the chain are positive, the adult will participate.

Using a psychological perspective as well and building on Houle’s (1961) classic study on

the adult's motivation to participate, Boshier (1991) developed and refined the Education Participation Scale (EPS). This 7-factor scale proposes the following items as influencing and differentiating among diverse adults who participate in educational programs: communication improvement, social contact, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, social stimulation, and cognitive interest. Although widely applied and researched, such models do not grasp nor sufficiently predict the many complex and changing adult motivations for participating in adult education (Courtney, 1992).

Using a sociological perspective locates participation in an adult's social context rather than the adult's individual motivation and circumstances. These analyses consider such factors as class, race/ethnicity, and gender, as well as how the related patterns of inequality found in adult social, educational, and work lives affect adults' participation. A sociological lens contributes to a historical and broader comprehension of adult participation. As several scholars (Fassinger, 2008; Merriam et al., 2007) have noted, understanding the interaction of sociological and psychological factors offers the fullest and most useful explanation.

In 1981, Cross introduced the concept of barriers emanating from an individual's situation in life, and combining with institutional practices or personal dispositions such as attitudes and self-perceptions, to diminish participation. Although not categorized in the same manner, more recent examination of psychological and sociological factors reveals an interaction that contributes to current inequitable participation. These factors include students' goals and basic skills as they interface with institutional systems such as adult basic education and developmental education.

Two out of every five 18- to 64-year-olds do not have the basic skills in reading and mathematics to succeed in college or today's skilled workforce (Pulley, 2008). Not factoring in English-language learners, there are 57 million adults for whom the lack of basic academic skills poses a barrier to access and participation. Studies (Comings et al., 2000) indicate that ABE students need 150 hours of instruction to have a 75% probability of gaining a one grade or greater equivalent in reading comprehension or English language fluency.

This amount of learning requires most ABE students to have extensive instruction, often for more than a few years, to be able to move on to skilled job training or postsecondary education.

Between 43% and 80% of all entering community college students require one or more remedial courses in math, writing, or reading (Pulley, 2008). Numerous studies provide evidence that adults in this group, as secondary students, often have not been adequately taught (Worthington, Flores, & Navarro, 2005); they have not developed a readiness to learn (Boudard & Rubenson, 2003), have not had sufficient math or science courses (Adelman, 2007), and have lacked educationally supportive role models (Fassinger, 2008). Such disadvantages compound over time and become increasingly difficult for low-income adults to overcome. These adults' capacity to participate is often further diminished when these pre-adult barriers combine with the obstacles in adult education programs.

Adults who participate in adult basic education and higher education exhibit the phenomenon of *stopping out* (i.e., dropping out with the intention of returning), which suggests the need for different institutional perspectives and actions. In a qualitative study, Belzer (1998) found that students who were defined as dropouts in a large urban literacy program did not consider themselves as such. Each student who left planned to return. They were stopping out. These students attributed leaving the program to factors beyond their control such as health problems, financial problems, or family problems that needed to work themselves out. This in-and-out pattern is a form of persistence for many adult basic education students (Comings, 2007). Belzer cautions against framing the issue as dropping out as a result of an obstacle at a single point in time, because it denies the complexity of the issue and the fact that some students see themselves as connected to a program and temporarily unable to attend. Comings (2007) concludes from his research that most ABE students are *intermittent* students who move in and out of program services because they have long-term learning goals, but experience personal and environmental barriers that disrupt their learning and require episodes of departure from their programs. They will likely return as the demands of their lives allow.

In higher education, there are few long-term persistence studies that focus on adult students. The work of Attewell and his colleagues is informative (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2007). By tracking women who enrolled in the City University of New York system from 1970 to 1972, they found out that within 30 years, 70% had completed a degree, three quarters of these had earned a bachelor's degree, and most had done so in a period longer than 6 years. In their parallel analyses of data from the Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which tracked college students from 1980 until 2000, they found the graduation rate was 61%, and approximately 50% for students entering college with an average of C or below. They also found that 28% of bachelor's degree recipients get their diploma more than 6 years after enrolling in college. This statistic holds more for women, students of color, and low-income students. Due to circumstances such as earning an income and taking care of family needs, they need more time than average to complete college. Similar to the ABE students, many of today's adult learners in college are intermittent students who stop out. Education has to be fitted into the rest of their lives.

Understanding participation in formal and nonformal workplace learning reflects the interaction of societal structures, institutional processes, and individual attitudes and attributes (Rubenson, 1998). With globalization, the chances for acquiring formal and nonformal learning are grim for immigrant workers at the initial stages of English proficiency (Watkins & Marsick, 2009). Today, corporations tend to move work around the globe to find lower operating costs. The U.S. leads the world in this form of offshore or strategic sourcing. Consequently, opportunities for entry-level workers to become skilled workers are lessening. In addition, with estimates that 70% of all workplace learning is informal, formal educational programs are decreasing (Cross, 2007). Corporations want employees to learn continuously of their own accord. For those adults with advanced education and skills, this format may be an exciting possibility. For those adult without such advantages, the potential to participate is constrained.

Analyzing adult participation in adult basic education, higher education, and workplace learning makes it clear that the poor and least formally educated face the most personal and

social barriers to participation. Although no individual theory or model provides scientific predictability, evidence for this obvious fact is irrefutable.

WHAT DO INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS SUCH AS EDUCATION, BUSINESS, AND GOVERNMENT DO TO INCREASE OR DIMINISH EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION?

The most obvious technological change that has allowed informal, nonformal, and formal access to workplace learning and higher education is online learning offered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and asymmetrically to accommodate any individual's schedule globally (Conrad, 2005). Adults are the largest age group to use online learning because of its convenience and flexibility. With international competition, the learning demands of all jobs are escalating (Watkins & Marsick, 2009). Workplace learning is now more continuous with online learning as the source for much informal and self-directed learning.

In higher education, many large schools, such as the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), have initiated liberal enrollment policies to allow broad access to adult learners. In March of 2006, Congress passed legislation to delete the requirement that a college had to offer at least half of its courses face-to-face in order to receive federal student aid. This legal change allows more working adults opportunities for federal financial assistance to pursue a postsecondary education. It supports the growing trend of a higher proportion of adults attaining their degrees through online degree programs.

There is widespread global disparity in access to technology. Infoplease (2008) reports that there are 211 million Internet users in the United States, while there are 40 million in India. When we realize the United States has a population of approximately 300 million people and India 1.1 billion people, this proportional difference (70% to 4%) illustrates the profound digital divide at a global level. Everywhere, low-income people lack access to technology and its educational benefits. In addition to the lack of experience and familiarity with personal computers, low-income adults do not receive the

institutional cost benefits of online learning (Kelland, 2005). Tuition for online courses is usually the same or higher than for face-to-face courses.

Regardless of the evidence that most formal and informal learning for adults occurs in the workplace (Paulson & Boeke, 2006), there is a global trend in business and industry calling for postsecondary learning among corporate employees (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007). Pressures to expand higher education opportunities have increased in almost every region in the world. Rising per-student costs and increasing enrollment rates are an international phenomenon. Under existing circumstances, people with more income and education are most likely to benefit.

As more students enter higher education in the United States, the inequality in financial access for low-income students is increasing (St. John, 2005). Pell grants are the largest federally funded, need-based assistance for low-income adult students. As tuition costs have increased, the purchasing value of Pell grants has declined by nearly two thirds in the last 30 years (Anderson & de Vise, 2009). Most other forms of aid such as tax credits do not offer the same benefit to low-income students that they do to middle-income students, because low-income families frequently lack the tax liability to appreciably benefit from tax credits. Estimates indicate that it would be necessary to double the Pell maximum to recover its losses in purchasing power during this decade.

Further, most student aid policies favor recent high school graduates without dependents (Bosworth, 2007). There is no incentive system in place to encourage employers to invest in the education of their less-prepared adult workers. Nor is there sufficient assistance for low-skilled adults to invest in their own education.

Postsecondary education has been anchored as the threshold qualification for most well-paying and dependable jobs (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). In a service/knowledge economy, as more manufacturing jobs are globally distributed, the strong relationship between income and a college education grows, creating a more elitist society where parental education and wealth are passed from one generation to the next. With population growth and underfunding of public higher education increasing, the educational disparity between lower- and

higher-income groups is a persistent and predictable economic consequence.

Business and industry primarily rely on postsecondary schools to educate the workforce at the levels necessary to meet their competitive needs. Under 4% of employer training is remedial (Frazis, Herz, & Horrigan, 1995). Rather than investing in basic learning, corporations target their most skilled and educated workers to produce the highest financial returns from their educational investments. Workers must first have postsecondary education to secure jobs that will advance their training (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004).

Within the last 20 years, community colleges have been the largest gateway for adults to enter postsecondary education. Almost all of the 1,200 community colleges in the United States are open access institutions enrolling a much broader variety of students than baccalaureate-granting colleges. Students of color, low-income students, students with lower academic achievement in high school, and part-time adult students are enrolled in significantly greater proportions in community colleges than in most 4-year colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

However, all of public postsecondary education faces daunting fiscal challenges. State budgets for higher education have dropped by at least 13% since 1990 (National Association of State Budget Officers, 2002). Federal budgets have declined as well, with more resources shifting toward national defense as well as business and personal tax cuts. In the U.S., as in many Western countries, reaching out to low-income adults and making access to postsecondary education more available would require considerable investments by federal and local governments and the business community. If funding were available, estimates are that 11 million low-income adults could significantly benefit from postsecondary education and training (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). When money from the federal and state government recedes, students pay higher tuition costs. Within this cycle, low-income adult students are the most vulnerable. In 2008, estimates were that the average education debt for graduates who attain a bachelors' degree through loans was \$20,000. For the economically distressed, the goal of a college degree and the ability to pay for it is becoming an irresolvable problem (Glavin, 2009). With increasing numbers of less academically

prepared students, many of whom are adults, the need for remedial education is surging (Pulley, 2008). Developmental education programs in community colleges attempt to meet this demand; however, these programs tend to be underfunded, generally do not provide college credits, are often not completed, and have low success rates.

WHAT ARE THE INNOVATIONS, TRENDS, AND PROSPECTS THAT COULD PROVIDE GREATER AND MORE EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION?

Nonparticipation in formal learning from the perspective of some adults may be a form of resistance to the status quo, especially for adults from historically marginalized ethnic and racial groups. As Merriam and her colleagues (2007) point out after reviewing 20 years of research on adult participation, “Regardless of the study, the profile of the typical adult learner in formal educational activities remains remarkably consistent: white, middle-class, employed, younger and better educated than the nonparticipant” (p. 78). There are several ways to understand this profile. For example, given the experience of many students of color in secondary schools, it is possible that adult education continues to be a repetitious story: an irrelevant curriculum built upon unexamined cultural norms (Crowther, 2000). Critical race theorists call attention to racism as a central structural entity that permeates every social, economic, and political institution in the United States (Howard, 2008). Today, adult education is a major institution that represents the status quo.

These influences are compounded by the market orientation to recruiting adults for public, private, or for-profit adult education programs. Relying on self-selection to recruit students, the adult education system widens the educational, cultural, and income gaps in society (Rubenson, 1998). Although camouflaged in a liberal progressivism and often housed in universities, the adult education establishment accentuates individual ambitions over communal needs. This orientation promotes the benefits of education with its promise of social mobility, setting the stage for professional growth to trump the expressed need for social change (Wilson, 2009). As members of the adult

education community, we believe that recognition of our complicity with the status quo is foundational to suggestions and actions for more equitable adult participation.

Formal education for adults has changed: who conducts it, how it responds to local and global challenges, where it is situated, and how it is financed. Although informal education can develop personal knowledge and advance workplace learning, the trends that legitimize knowledge and secure professional and skilled employment involve formal education. In an increasingly global economy, business and industry expect postsecondary education to provide workforce preparation or, increasingly, they hire employees in other countries.

Currently, 80% of high school graduates attend college within 8 years of graduation and undergraduate enrollment is six times greater than it was 50 years ago (Attewell et al., 2007). With estimates of the number of nontraditional students exceeding 70% of the enrollment in postsecondary education, as well as being the highest population of learners in adult basic education (Zafft et al., 2006), we have to ask: When future rates of more privileged learners participate, can formal education providers offer greater access for underserved adult learners? Given global economic conditions and past educational policies, our response is cautious. There are numerous innovative ideas and practices to expand opportunity in adult education. Although an exhaustive exploration of them exceeds the scope of this chapter, the following examples and policy reports offer a partial representation:

- Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has become an established global phenomenon, often increasing postsecondary access for underserved adult learners (Spencer, 2005). There are no exact figures available, but there is little doubt that hundreds of thousands of adults have used this process to earn college credit for non-formal, informal, and workplace learning, including various forms of training, volunteer work, and self-directed study. Assessing prior learning includes challenge exams, portfolio assessments, and knowledge demonstrations.
- Accelerated and intensive learning formats reduce the amount of time to earn a degree or credential making a postsecondary education more accessible for working adults. Typically,

accelerated courses are between 5 and 8 weeks duration with 20 to 32 contact hours of instruction (Wlodkowski, 2003). Working adults prefer these compressed formats because of their efficiency for completing a certificate or degree (Aslanian, 2001).

- Transition-to-postsecondary-education programs are a promising trend in adult basic education (Zafft et al., 2006). These programs, which are often members of the National College Transition Network (www.collegetransition.org), facilitate access for ABE students to postsecondary education by sustaining their level of academic readiness, promoting more substantial college preparation in ABE courses, and providing advising that supports their resource management to attain further formal learning.

- Although focused on ABE learners, the implications of the findings from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) multiphase study of factors that support and inhibit persistence are relevant for any long-term formal learning program (Comings, 2007). Confirming the intermittent pathway of most adult learners, the study suggests supportive practices for the three critical stages of their program participation: entrance into services, participation in services, and reengagement in learning.

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Within the last decade, advocates of policies to increase access and participation for underserved adult learners have emerged with a number of useful reports (Bosworth, 2007; Gershwin, Coxen, Kelley, & Yakimov, 2008; McSwain & Davis, 2007; Ruppert, 2003). Another valuable resource for ideas, research, and innovations is the Lumina Foundation for Education (www.luminafoundation.org), whose primary mission is to expand access for nontraditional learners. All of these advocates stress the need for stronger community, business, education, and government partnerships. They offer ideas that could significantly increase more equitable adult participation in formal education. Yet, they must be acted upon to have an impact.

Equitable participation is a means to a more just society. At its most basic level, such participation is grounded in every adult being prepared for skilled work and formal education, being able to afford their costs, and having the will and opportunity to learn. Historically, adult educators have been advocates for the common good. Only by example can we reignite the discourse and action for equitable access and participation. Without authentically striving for these fundamental goals, we cannot claim to be agents of social and economic improvement. With such effort, we continue our commitment to provide education for all adults.

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