



National Coalition For Literacy

The Need for a Research and Development Center in Adult Education/Literacy

The Institute for Education Sciences (IES) in the US Department of Education funded a national research and development center in adult education/literacy at Harvard University (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, or NCSALL) for eleven years. Previously, it funded a similar center at the University of Pennsylvania (National Center on Adult Literacy, or NCAL) for six years. These two centers, their partners, and other research institutions, had been developing a community of scholars, sufficient theory to begin testing interventions, and models for rigorous research as well as more effective professional development and service models to better serve adult students. However, the USDOE discontinued funding for a comprehensive research and development center for adult learning and literacy in 2007, in spite of the need for research that supports the delivery of services. This decision on the part of IES to discontinue the ONLY national center devoted to adult education research has dealt a severe blow to the field, both to practitioners and researchers.

Adult Education and Literacy can benefit from research in other education arenas, but the field has unique challenges not addressed by other fields including:

- Recruiting and supporting undereducated adults who need education, social services, public health, and other support services;
- Customizing basic skills learning plans that enable
 - Welfare recipients to qualify for jobs with family sustaining income,
 - Adults to complete secondary education through obtaining a high school diploma or GED,
 - Adults to complete secondary education and successfully enroll in post secondary institutions,
 - Low-literacy parents to attain the skills needed to support their children's education,
 - New comers to learn English and American culture and citizenship skills,
 - Current employees to attain the skills to qualify for ever increasing demands in the workplace that allow their employers to remain competitive in a global economy,
 - Unemployed adults to qualify for job training programs and attain a marketable skill,
 - Adults with learning disabilities to be successful in strengthening their literacy and numeracy skills, and
 - Parents to be able to read and follow medical instructions to provide for the health concerns of themselves and their children—AMA reports that 46% of adults cannot do so.

- Identifying best practices for each of the above.
- Measuring the impact of each of the above.

Research in other fields does not address these uniquely adult education and literacy requirements.

What is lost with the absence of a research center?

1. Interruption of Current Research: NCSALL has been tracking 1000 high school dropouts (18-45 years of age at the beginning of the study) in Portland, Oregon for seven years. They have 92% retention of their sample, and have been interviewing the participants and testing their literacy skills every two years. That project was closed down this year and there is no funding to analyze all the new data. By the end of the year, this opportunity will be lost, even though the study is producing important insights.

On several areas of their research, NCSALL had completed enough basic research and was ready to begin experimental studies. They had strong hypotheses ready to test, but no funds to do so. That investment will be lost as well.

2. Carrying Out Other Needed Research: There is little or no adult education research currently going on except in reading (the NIFL, NICHD, and ED studies). As to research topics, many interventions need to be studied for impact, such as family literacy, transition strategies from GED to postsecondary education, and health literacy, to name a few. Retention remains a huge issue as students frequently drop in and out of programs. Although there are a number of retention studies, what training can be developed for the field that captures the best that research has to offer? With the numbers of ESL students growing, what interventions are effective with both those who are both literate and illiterate in their native languages? What interventions can improve health literacy while at the same time build literacy skills?

3. Carrying Out Significant Research Efforts: Longitudinal research, which is almost impossible without the support of a center, is very much needed to study the impact of interventions over time. Large-scale research is also almost impossible unless the researcher obtains a sizable grant that enables him/her to hire sufficient staff. Even then it is difficult because a center can provide various forms of support, such as statistical and data analyses. Interdisciplinary research has been shown recently to have many benefits over individual research. A center can more easily bring researchers from different disciplines together around an issue in adult education and literacy. (Family literacy is a good example of the need for interdisciplinary research since both adults and children are affected by family literacy programming.)

4. Translation, Dissemination and Training: Without a current center, there is little or no dissemination of research nor connection of research to practice. A part of a center's role is to translate findings for practitioners and policy makers. It is not enough to send out research summaries and publish in research journals. Dissemination of findings must be carefully planned so that the results are applied in professional

development for teachers, tutors, and administrators. A research center can accomplish this process while individual researchers usually do not have the funding for extensive dissemination. Practitioners who may not be well versed in research need to have the results packaged in usable form so that they can be applied in their classrooms. If a product results from the research, then it is especially important to make it widely available to practitioners. Similarly, policy makers need to receive research results in ways that can be understood so that policy can be informed by research.

5. Research Agenda: There is no mechanism for the field as a whole to set and pursue an adult literacy research agenda.

6. Policy Support: All disciplines within education (as well as other fields) need research to support not only practice but also policy. It is important that research is ongoing because of the cumulative nature of research findings. Outcomes from one study should not dictate practice and policy, but replicated studies allow us to generalize to findings that can be applied to practice and policy. The advantage of a center is that a systematic program of research can include a series of research studies that build upon each other so that outcomes do inform practice and policy. Without a center and its funding base, it is unlikely that researchers will be able to systematically build upon previous studies incrementally so that useful results emerge. As a result, local, state and federal policy makers will have scant information on which to make crucial policy decisions. In addition, there is no place for policymakers to call when they want to know what research says about any issue.

7. A Catalyst for Other Researchers: A center can also set a direction for research based on the needs of the field. Not only can the center conduct the needed research, but it can encourage individual researchers to engage in similar thematic research studies. A center provides a synergy for research in adult education and literacy that can attract other researchers to the field. It can also serve as a clearinghouse for the research studies of university faculty and graduate students as well as for studies conducted by non-university research firms that perform research in adult education and literacy under governmental contracts. A center can also assume a leadership position in training emerging researchers by offering graduate assistantships and internships that encourage future research in adult education and literacy.

The NCSALL website is currently getting more than 500,000 hits per month with about 25,000 unique visitors per month, so there is clearly growing interest in adult education research. Although IES is charged to provide research that guides and supports educational practice, it has few if any studies that focus on adults or on the critical adult research topics cited above. The field of adult education and literacy has now been left to function on traditional practices and the professional wisdom of its teachers and program managers. With the increases in the number of low-literate adults, immigrants needing to learn English, high school dropouts, and with the demand for workers with increasingly more technical skills, it is crucial that the field of adult education and literacy has ongoing research to identify and support best practices in the field.

According to the recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), about 93 million adults need services: adults striving to make the transition from welfare-to-work; high school dropouts obtaining a GED to enter job training programs, enroll in higher education, and find new or better employment; low-literate parents attaining the skills they need to support their children's education; our newest citizens taking English as a Second Language and civics courses to provide the pathway to success in the home, workplace, and community. For the unemployed and underemployed, adult education programs offer opportunities to master the complex skills needed to obtain and retain employment in today's high tech society. Recent reports have pointed out that the US can no longer rely on only our graduating high school students for our current and future workforce—only two percent of the annual workforce comes from public school graduates. We must also rely on a skilled and educated adult workforce. We have relied on federally funded research to help us meet the needs of this diverse clientele. There are few other options.

It is our hope that the Institute of Education Sciences will once again support the funding of a research center in adult education to continue to allow the field to provide high quality services to some of our nation's most vulnerable citizens.

Funding

Funding for research and development efforts in the adult learning and literacy field should be a minimum of \$5 million per year (or \$25 million for a five-year period, to be increased in succeeding five-year periods).