

The Economic and Social Impact of Adult Education Programs in Rhode Island

Project Aims

National and international studies such as the recent PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills (OECD, 2013) provide strong evidence of the economic value of adult basic skills (ABS). Research indicates that there is strong economic return on basic skills at given levels of education (Hanushek et al, 2013). There is little rigorous research, however, showing that participation in adult basic skills programs directly impacts skill levels, educational attainment, or social and economic well-being of adults with low levels of education. More importantly, there has been little research about the impact of such programs utilizing data from Rhode Island that could assist policymakers and program designers to improve services and adult outcomes. Most research on adult literacy development looks only at short-term changes as students pass through single ABS programs. Most studies use short follow-up intervals and include only program participants, making it difficult to see longer-term patterns of program participation and persistence and to assess long-term impact of ABS program participation ([Reder, 2014a](#)).

Although ABS program evaluation and accountability reports typically show small gains for program participants in test scores and other outcomes, including students in Rhode Island, these studies rarely include comparison groups of nonparticipants, and most studies that do include such controls have not found statistically significant ABS program impact (Smith, 2009). Research is needed that compares adult development among program participants and nonparticipants across multiple contexts and over significant periods of time to provide a life-wide and lifelong perspective and a better assessment of program impact on a range of outcome measures.

The current research project draws on previous longitudinal studies that the principal investigator has conducted that found significant impacts of participation in adult education on numerous outcomes, including literacy development (Reder 2014b), earnings (Reder, 2014a), GED attainment (Reder, 2014c), and engagement in postsecondary education (Reder, 2014d). The current research, unlike the previous survey-based studies, utilizes Rhode Island administrative data so that findings will be directly applicable to local populations, needs and services.

These analytical findings will be developed, interpreted and applied collaboratively with policymakers and practitioners from Rhode Island, addressing several research questions from the research agenda of the Data Sharing Project Advisory Council. The project team includes experts in adult education research, longitudinal data analysis, state administrative data systems in Rhode Island and numerous other states, and Rhode Island educational systems, policymaking and practitioners.

Methods

The analytical strategy for the proposed research will carefully compare, using de-identified cross-agency administrative data from Rhode Island, the outcome trajectories of high school dropouts (noncompleters) who attend adult education programs with those of noncompleters who do not attend programs. Since individuals themselves decide whether to participate in the programs, care must be taken in making and interpreting these comparisons. There could be

important differences, for example, between self-selected participants and nonparticipants (in addition to their decision whether to participate). The effects of those other differences may be confounded with the effects of participation; this often is termed *selection bias* in program evaluation literature. A variety of treatment effects, difference-in-difference and within-subject panel regression models will be utilized to control for selection bias within the outcome trajectories being compared between adult education participants and nonparticipants (Reder, 2014a).

In analyzing the impact of program participation on outcome variables, it will be important to consider the intensity and duration of student attendance. Furthermore, the temporal shape of program impact on subsequent life outcomes needs to be carefully considered. In the LSAL study, for example, both the intensity of participation and the interval of time following participation affected the impact of programs on subsequent earnings. Program impact required a minimum threshold of intensity of participation and took several years to fully mature in the outcome data, which of course has major implications for policymakers and program evaluation designs (Reder, 2014a).

Description of Anticipated Deliverables

The project will develop two deliverables and offer a full-day symposium workshop to help policymakers and practitioners interpret and apply the findings of the project to problems facing adults and families in Rhode Island.

Deliverable #1: Research brief/working paper. The research findings from the proposed project will be written up as a 5-7 page research brief that will be highly accessible to researchers, policymakers and practitioners. Project staff has considerable experience producing such documents. Recent examples include a series of research briefs written for the U.S. Department of Education (e.g., [Reder, 2014a](#)). The findings summarized in the research brief will be written up in further detail as a working paper that can be further elaborated into a manuscript for a journal article.

Deliverable #2: Proposal for expanded research agenda. The findings from the project will likely suggest additional data linkages to build and additional analyses to run to broaden and deepen the understanding of the impact of adult education programs in Rhode Island. An expanded scope of work and research rationale will be developed that can be incorporated into proposals for additional funding.

Full-day Workshop for policymakers and practitioners. The project team, consisting of researchers and practitioners, will convene a one-day workshop in Providence near the end of the project to present and discuss the project's research findings, consider their implications for policy and applications to practice in adult education, and lay the groundwork for future research.

Project work is expected to be completed by the end of June 2018.