

## Counseling and Information Needs of Adult Learners

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LIBRARIANS AND OTHER LIBRARY staff members have long been interested in helping adults learn. They have done so by assisting with self-directed learning projects, by conducting book-based discussion groups, and by cosponsoring courses and workshops for adults. Libraries have also cooperated with other providers of adult and continuing education to increase the accessibility and relevance of educational opportunities.

This article explores ways in which library personnel can combine an understanding of adults as learners with a commitment to reaching underserved adults, and thus effectively meet some of the counseling and information needs of adult learners in ways that broaden the range of service. The essence of this proposed approach is the librarian's use of his or her understanding of the influences on adult participation in educative activity as a basis for developing learner-oriented counseling and information services that help libraries (and other continuing education providers) in their recognition of and response to the educational needs of adults.

This community leadership on behalf of adult learners occurs when a librarian assembles information about continuing education opportunities in the community and then uses it to assist adults selecting appropriate learning activities. Such leadership is further strengthened when the librarian identifies unmet educational needs of these adults and uses this information, in summary form, to encourage the library and other providers to respond. The activities are the rudiments

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of counseling and information services for adult learners. In this article, the counseling function is summarized as helping adults to recognize resources and to make decisions regarding their lifelong learning; it does not include psychological counseling. This article suggests ways in which libraries can strengthen such adult services, and outlines the benefits to adult learners, the community and the library.

### **Adult Participation in Educative Activity**

In best practice, public libraries help adults discover and use educational resources for self-directed learning and for participation in educational activities offered by all types of providers. These include libraries, museums, schools, colleges, universities, employers, labor unions, associations, penal institutions, religious institutions, and community agencies. Librarians who effectively help adults to find and use such educational resources must understand the resources themselves as well as the needs of the learners. In each community there are many independent providers of continuing education, and libraries can begin to help meet the counseling and information needs of adult learners by serving as a "clearinghouse" where adults can clarify their educational needs and find out about educational resources.

Adult participation in educative activity benefits both the individual and society. Darkenwald and Merriam include cultivation of the intellect and personal development, as well as organizational effectiveness and social progress and transformation, as aims of adult education.<sup>1</sup> Houle lists multiple goals of continuing professional education that pertain both to individuals and to society.<sup>2</sup> These benefits warrant library efforts to increase the responsiveness of continuing education programs to adult learners.

A major issue in educative activity is the low rate of participation by adults with less formal education. As Johnstone and Rivera reported almost twenty years ago, and as has been substantiated repeatedly since then, about one of two adults in the United States with the highest level of formal education participate in some form of adult and continuing education each year, in contrast with only one of twenty adults with the lowest level of formal education.<sup>3</sup> Educational levels are also associated with adult participation in self-directed learning projects,<sup>4</sup> and participation rates are positively associated with other characteristics of adults (such as younger age and higher levels of income and occupational prestige).<sup>5</sup>

## *Counseling and Information Needs*

Adult life includes both stability and change. As indicated in the preceding article on intentional change and in the following articles on facilitation and helping processes, the stability and continuity of adulthood is periodically punctuated by changes that contribute to a heightened readiness to learn. Continuity reflects the influence of personality, habit, expectations, commitments, and inertia. Change may be intentional or imposed. Knox explained how change events entail adjustments associated with personality development.<sup>6</sup> Aslanian and Brickell confirmed that changes trigger about 85 percent of adult participation in educative activity.<sup>7</sup> The resulting information-seeking can take many forms; and for many adults, action tasks are both the impetus for and the application of learning.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to higher rates of information-seeking and educative activity, adults with higher educational levels rely on somewhat different sources of assistance than adults with less formal education. Better-educated adults use print and electronic media, impersonal experts, and friends and acquaintances. By contrast, adults with lower levels of education rely mainly on conversations with people they know and trust.<sup>9</sup> This conclusion has major implications for responding to the counseling and information needs of adult learners.

Lower rates of participation in educative activity by adults with low levels of formal education also indicate greater difficulty for continuing education providers in attracting, retaining, and teaching them.<sup>10</sup> Darkenwald and Larson have noted, however, that level of formal education is not the only characteristic associated with participation rates. Within each category of highly educated adults (such as members of a professional association) some engage in limited amounts of educative activity.<sup>11</sup> These are also hard-to-reach adults. A persistent issue in the field has been how to serve all these hard-to-reach adults.

The strong connection between continuing education participation and educational level, income and occupational prestige no doubt reflects their centrality as indexes of social class level. Other characteristics associated with participation, such as optimism about advancement and sense of educational efficacy, are connected with class outlook and perhaps with life-cycle position, as indicated by age and role relationships such as employment and marital status.<sup>12</sup> Adults in those categories of life cycle and social class that are more highly associated with participation benefit from encouragement and support.<sup>13</sup> This encouragement and support comes from internal influences such as verbal facility, belief in the usefulness of knowledge, and optimism about improvement, as well as from external influences such as available

opportunities, expectations of participation, associates who participate, ability to pay, and financial assistance. These and other influences on continuing education participation help explain the extent of participation.<sup>14</sup> Associated barriers also help explain nonparticipation, which Darkenwald and Merriam classify as situational, institutional, informational, and psychosocial.<sup>15</sup> The most useful explanations of participation include an attention to personal and situational facilitators and barriers.<sup>16</sup>

Such transactions between adults and their societal contexts are also reflected in effective procedures to recognize and respond to connections between educational needs and resources. Many counseling and information needs of adult learners entail strengthening such connections. For example, this can be done by considering both individual growth and organizational productivity in work settings,<sup>17</sup> by linking potential participants with relevant educational opportunities through educational brokering for adults in community settings,<sup>18</sup> by using media and technology for teaching adults at a distance,<sup>19</sup> by encouraging and assisting members of professional occupations with self-directed learning activities,<sup>20</sup> and by marketing procedures that help potential participants clarify their educational needs and recognize relevant programs and resources.<sup>21</sup>

Librarians who effectively meet counseling and information needs of adult learners understand some of these dynamics of continuing education participation and some of the distinctive characteristics of libraries as providers of services for adult learners. In some countries, libraries have effectively responded to the counseling and information needs of adult learners.<sup>22</sup> In an early effort of the Metropolitan Toronto Library Board in Canada, the Board began publishing a continuing education directory, which lists many continuing education activities and counseling services for adults available from various organizations. In several recent efforts of cooperating public libraries in New York State, libraries served as educational information centers for adults in each region. In one of the more successful examples, public libraries and public school adult-education programs cooperated to provide assistance to adult new readers.<sup>23</sup> Less satisfactory results occurred when librarians were expected to perform an unfamiliar counseling function.<sup>24</sup>

For librarians who want to strengthen library responsiveness to the counseling and information needs of adult learners, some major publications are available to assist them. Bock provides a general rationale for the combined use of counseling and information services to encourage

## *Counseling and Information Needs*

both initial and continued participation in continuing education.<sup>25</sup> Kotler provides both a rationale and specific procedures for the marketing of nonprofit services emphasizing responsiveness to the clientele.<sup>26</sup> Di Silvestro provides both a rationale and many specific examples of counseling and advising adult learners in various agency settings. It is worth emphasizing that this library function depends on building on major and distinctive library strengths, purposes and resources, while minimizing and perhaps compensating for those library characteristics that do not lend themselves well to meeting counseling and information needs of adult learners.<sup>27</sup> The next two sections of this article identify more detailed counseling and information needs and suggest effective ways in which libraries can respond.

### **Information and Marketing Services**

The extent of participation in continuing education activity (including self-directed learning) reflects the balance between facilitating and resisting influences.<sup>28</sup> For many nonparticipants, the resisting influences are much greater than the facilitating influences. Low participation rates by hard-to-reach adults dismay continuing education practitioners. Many practitioners conduct continuing education activities in part because of a missionary commitment to narrowing the gap between the "haves" and "have nots." Although continuing education benefits adults at all educational levels, annual participation rates are ten times higher for adults who have the most formal education than for adults with the least education. The result is to widen the gap. Information and marketing services become, therefore, the main means by which continuing education providers encourage participation by hard-to-reach adults.

Marketing services address both needs and interests of potential participants, and those characteristics of the program and provider likely to influence their decision to participate.<sup>29</sup> Adults vary greatly in backgrounds, experiences, roles, values, interests, circumstances, and resources. Market segmentation is a procedure that may be used for identifying categories of adults with similar backgrounds and needs who are likely to engage in a given continuing education activity. In continuing education, needs-assessment procedures provide the market research to enable continuing education providers to understand and respond to major educational needs of each target market of adults.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to distinctive educational needs, there are widespread needs for information related to educational activities. One is for help in

crystallizing unmet educational needs that potential participants may barely recognize. Human-interest stories and examples of how similar adults discovered and benefited from continuing education activities are especially effective because they help adults clarify discrepancies between their current and desired proficiencies. Another need is for information about programs and resources. Specific information about such opportunities helps adults clarify their own needs, and identify educational activities of interest.

Needs-assessment procedures can yield many ideas for new or revised programs and can help set and justify service priorities.<sup>31</sup> Various procedures can be used: scores from self-assessment inventories or diagnostic tests, suggestions from use of the Delbecq Technique for Nominal Group Process, group discussion about members' educational needs, questionnaire responses regarding topics of interest, responses to new program offerings, suggestions from other providers, and advisory committees. Other useful sources of information about educational needs include preferences of agency staff and resource persons; local agency purposes and trends; ideas from historical, philosophical and operational literature; organizational or community records and reports; and data from personnel department exit interviews.

Writings on adult development and learning also suggest likely educational needs and the ways in which change events trigger participation in educative activity.<sup>32</sup> Such writings also emphasize the importance of identifying educational opportunities and resources. This process helps potential participants deal with sometimes vague thoughts about educational needs in terms of specific decisions. Librarians can respond by helping adults become more aware of their educational needs and the resource options available.

A marketing perspective emphasizes the responsiveness to adult learners and to other publics of each continuing education provider agency.<sup>33</sup> Libraries that provide educational information services for adults can facilitate both the acquisition of needs-assessment information from adults who inquire about educational opportunities (which can be shared in summary form with providers), and the provision of information to adults to help them clarify their needs and recognize opportunities. Writings that summarize generalizations about middle age or old age and provide examples of responsive continuing education programs can help librarians link needs and resources.<sup>34</sup>

But attention to needs is only one aspect of a marketing perspective. Other aspects include attention to program, place, price, and promotion.<sup>35</sup> Program administrators have to make decisions about all of these

## *Counseling and Information Needs*

aspects in order to effectively attract and retain adult participants. Libraries that perform an educational brokering function can help providers improve their marketing; and librarians who understand marketing concepts and procedures can be especially helpful in this regard. Potential participants also make decisions based on program, place, price, and promotion information. Adults who decide to enroll in a continuing education activity typically feel that it is for people like themselves; expect that the program content and methods will be beneficial; find the place, time and price satisfactory; and receive promotional and word-of-mouth messages through communication channels they normally use and in a form they understand.

There are many types of information services about continuing education opportunities in a community that libraries can provide, but few do. Illustrative services include:

1. Written and oral statements that the library is a source of information about continuing education opportunities.
2. Holding some continuing education activities (courses, workshops, discussion groups) in library facilities, or with library cosponsorship to increase the library's visibility as an organization concerned with continuing education.
3. Use of needs-assessment procedures to help adults clarify their educational needs and focus on pertinent educational opportunities.
4. Provision to continuing education providers of summary information about learning needs.
5. Listing of information (name, address, phone number, types of offerings) about continuing education providers, so that quick and accurate referrals can be made.
6. Provision of brochures and flyers about continuing education activities, along with an index or other ways to assist adults to locate relevant activities.
7. Collaboration with providers for joint needs-assessment and marketing projects.
8. Information services for continuing education activities in which the library is the provider.<sup>36</sup>

In providing such information services, libraries can help other continuing education providers market their offerings to adults served by libraries. However, this effort will not benefit those adults (typically with lower levels of formal education) who do not perceive libraries as existing for people such as themselves. Therefore, continuing education providers typically cooperate with organizations other than libraries for

their marketing and information services in order to attract hard-to-reach adults. A total marketing effort which includes libraries can benefit them by broadening their image and contact with hard-to-reach adults. The resulting broader community service and support can strengthen the library's total effort.

### **Counseling Services**

This section emphasizes counseling services to encourage initial participation and persistence in learning so that adults achieve their objectives.<sup>37</sup> The quality of the continuing education activity is a major influence on persistence just as it is on marketing. However, there are many other influences on persistence and attrition which counseling services can address.<sup>38</sup> These include difficulty with decision making, financial limitations, competing time demands, and unfamiliarity with procedures. Learners who confront problems such as poor study procedures, changed work assignments, family illness, or difficulties with transportation, sometimes drop out because they are unaware of assistance to help solve or work around these difficulties. Librarians with some expertise in counseling adult learners can encourage learning persistence both directly and through referrals.<sup>39</sup>

Most people who provide counseling services for adult learners are in one of four categories.<sup>40</sup> They are professionally prepared counselors, continuing educators (including librarians), practitioners in related agencies (such as employment or welfare), or paraprofessional aides or peer counselors. Counseling services for adult learners can include any or all of six general counseling functions: information giving, assessment, educational and occupational planning, coping with related problems, advocacy, and referral.

Many librarians view these functions as incompatible with their roles, and feel that they are better performed by people in other occupations. However, some librarians (especially those who enjoy working in readers' advisory services, the reference desk, or adult-learner services) view some of these counseling functions as important parts of their roles. Writings on counseling adult learners describe their counseling needs and appropriate responsive procedures, along with rationales that librarians can use to select the counseling functions they will perform, and those better performed by people in other roles.<sup>41</sup>

Information giving is a counseling function in many settings, and requires little specialized preparation as a counselor. Adults want accurate information about specific educational and occupational oppor-

### *Counseling and Information Needs*

tunities and related services. They also appreciate assistance in using such information to plan further education. If the library has such information on hand, many librarians could perform this function satisfactorily without undue time and effort. In contrast, the use of assessment procedures and instruments (such as inventories, tests and questionnaires) to assess the learner's abilities, personality and interests usually requires specialized preparation, which some librarians have or can acquire. When this is not the case, librarians can refer adult learners to agencies better prepared to provide such assistance.

Assistance provided by various organizations for adult educational and career planning, tends to be widespread but informal. Unlike educational institutions that provide detailed educational planning, or employers and employment agencies that provide detailed occupational planning, libraries can provide assistance to adult learners at early stages, and then refer them to other agencies for more specialized help. Assistance with personal problems related to educational activities can also be viewed as a part of such a broad educational-brokering approach, with reliance on referrals for specialized counseling.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes counselors act as advocates for the rights of adult learners to representatives of educational institutions and librarians who prefer not to perform this function can identify counselors in other agencies who can do so. But librarians who rely heavily on referring clients should become expert in knowing how to find appropriate and competent counselors in other agencies. They also should be skilled in the process of making referrals so that the learners actually get the help they need.

Clearly, adult users of every library could benefit from some adult learner counseling services. However, the extent and type of services appropriate for a specific library depend on several local circumstances: the other counseling services for adult learners available in the community, the counseling abilities and interests of library personnel, and the importance of continuing education to library policy makers. In setting priorities for library-based services, attention should be given to the special strengths and distinctive purposes of the library as a provider of counseling services for adult learners. For example, many libraries would be interested in providing assistance in self-directed study and discussion groups for adults that are related to library collections, and in giving information about other continuing education providers in the community. By contrast, few libraries would be prepared to provide specialized personal counseling services for problems unrelated to educational activities. Some libraries have found it mutually advantageous to collaborate with a local continuing education council or agency,

such as an adult basic education program, to help adult new readers. Such a project enables the library contribution to be closely related to its purpose and expertise, and brings benefits to the library in the form of broadened community service and support.

The tenth anniversary of educational brokering services occurs this year.<sup>43</sup> The history of library provision of counseling services for adult learners illustrates many issues for the future. Since the 1930s, when some urban libraries established readers' advisory services, counseling services for adult learners have been an attractive idea that has not been widely emulated. During the 1970s, library-based educational brokering services were established in various states, including Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Because of their neutrality as continuing education providers and their client and community orientation, public libraries seemed to be natural brokers. However, comprehensive brokering services have been established in only a few libraries; many were subsequently discontinued, and the total number of such libraries has increased very slowly. Heffernan's conclusions about the reasons for this have major implications for future decisions.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to needing a greater awareness of educational and career opportunities, adult clients of brokering services want help with planning and action, support and empowerment. To respond to such expectations, libraries require information about local educational needs and resources; and they need to pay careful attention to both the quality and support of their services. High-quality services have relevant information, and encourage self-directed efforts. In practice, however, library staff members are often overloaded, have little inclination or preparation to provide counseling services, must confront limited budgets, and are not likely to impose user fees to support brokering services. These constitute powerful barriers to library involvement.

Impact studies of library-based broker services have concluded that clients are less satisfied with referrals to other community agencies than to resources within the library. This probably reflects both staff expertise and libraries' priorities. In all settings, brokers with low service costs emphasize information versus counseling, and one-time assistance versus continuing contacts with a client. It seems likely that library staff members who successfully provide brokering services will be prepared for counseling adult learners, and they will obtain adequate library support for the services.

### **Conclusions and Staff Contributions**

This section summarizes the rationale for libraries meeting counseling and information needs of adult learners and suggests contributions that can be made by library staff members. Further detail on interactions between adult clients and librarians, and on proficiencies needed to provide learner-centered services will be found in other articles in this issue.

Library administrators and board members can help by making policy decisions about the relative priority of education of adults as a library function; about the desirability of strengthening connections with other providers of continuing education; and about the importance of broadening service to hard-to-reach adults. Librarians and administrators who want to strengthen their responsiveness to counseling and information needs of adult learners are likely to meet resistance, and progress will require effective leadership strategies.<sup>45</sup> Library staff members who exercise leadership regarding continuing education have writings available to enhance their own skills and those of other people who contribute to the effort.<sup>46</sup>

A persuasive rationale for increased library service to adult learners requires attention to emerging trends and issues. Rising levels of formal education are increasing among adults, and pressures for adaptation and change are resulting in more adults participating in more continuing education programs. In our pluralistic society there are many independent providers of continuing education; their numbers make it difficult for the potential student to locate and select relevant educational resources. The increasing accessibility of educational technology (such as computers, videotapes, and telephone networks) in the home, office and community agencies can be used to support community centers for information about educational opportunities for adults.<sup>47</sup> Another trend that makes it desirable to provide centralized information about educational opportunities is the growing concern about public support of community agencies, including continuing education providers. These trends contribute to increased interest by adults in help with their decision making on self-directed learning and in selecting educational programs. Libraries can perform this important function, and if they do it well, they can strengthen their public support.

Librarians who want to increase library services to hard-to-reach adults face a special challenge.<sup>48</sup> Over the years, libraries have been most successful in serving the people who most often participate in continuing education, and have been least successful in serving hard-to-reach adults. Efforts to better serve hard-to-reach adults are most likely to

succeed if they are combined with a general library commitment to broaden clientele and support bases.

Librarians who coordinate and provide counseling and information services for adult learners will benefit from an understanding of adult learners, marketing and counseling procedures, relations with other providers, and ways to strengthen the support of library staff for continuing education activities. In larger libraries, such librarians typically work with various people to provide counseling and information services. Also involved are other library staff members and volunteers, representatives of other providers and community agencies, marketing specialists, and people to whom adult learners are referred for specialized counseling assistance. Deserving of special attention are the library staff members who talk with adult learners and help them to recognize their educational needs and available opportunities, and to select a sequence of learning activities. They may be professional librarians, or paraprofessional aides, or volunteers, or people at least partly associated with other organizations. But they should be people who perform well in the interpersonal relationships that are central to the effective provision of counseling and information services. This article suggests some of the ideas and sources for further reading that can enhance performance in this important role. Without a library staff member able to perform much of this educational brokering function, library efforts to respond probably will not succeed. With such expertise this activity can be very satisfying. In addition, the institutional benefits include greater responsiveness to the counseling and information needs of adult learners, stronger relationships with other providers of continuing education, and broader service to and support from a wider range of adults. These are considerable benefits and they easily justify the costs.

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## Counseling and Information Needs

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ALAN KNOX

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