



R-ALLY: Research Allies for Lifelong Learning

Adult Learner Leadership in Education Services (ALLIES) Evaluation

Executive Summary

Year 1 Survey, Assessment, Observation, and Program Information Findings

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Introduction

VALUEUSA, a national non-profit organization run by and for adult learners, believes that adult learner leadership can improve services in an adult education program and boost adult learner outcomes. VALUEUSA defines adult learner leadership as adult learner involvement in all components of the AE program. VALUEUSA leadership training encourages learners to lead in design of instructional services, mentoring, and evaluation.

In 2014 VALUEUSA and its evaluator designed a two-year experimental study, Adult Learner Leadership in Education Services (ALLIES). The purpose of ALLIES is to evaluate how adult learners can benefit a program as they pursue learning and leadership goals. In 2014-15, 21 programs were randomly selected by state into one of two conditions, participating or control, and baseline data were collected. Participating programs recruited adult learners for a leadership training and project. Example projects included raising community awareness, fundraising, tutor recruitment, and improving staff-learner communication. Control programs ran their programs as usual, with the only difference being an evaluative visit to collect baseline data. This Executive Summary includes final first-year results from all 21 programs in the study's first year, along with conclusions and recommendations¹. Data collection continues in 2015-16.

In its first year ALLIES evaluated 306 adult learners and 67 staff in diverse programs – from rural Florida and Kansas to urban New Jersey and Texas. Most striking about these findings are the similarities. When compared by condition, the similarities among adult learners or among staff far outweighed the differences. Participating and control learners did not differ significantly in Year 1 on most critical thinking and all writing assessment scales, nor were differences significant by condition for staff and adult learners in perceptions of program services and leadership.

Evaluation Questions

The following evaluation questions were developed for ALLIES' baseline year:

1. In Year 1, how did adult learners and staff perform on the evaluation's leadership-related measures (i.e., surveys, assessments, and observations)?
2. To what extent did Year 1 performance of adult learners and staff differ by condition on leadership-related measures?
3. Which Year 1 findings inform next steps for the final year of the evaluation?

Year 1 Results

Adult Learner Surveys

By June 2015, 306 adult learners and 67 staff in seven states took part in ALLIES. Most learners were women (69%) and English language learners (67%). They tended to learn about the program through word of mouth (43%). By condition, 58% of adult learners were in participating programs and 42% in control programs.

Adult learner responses to the first measure, survey, tended not to differ by condition. Still, participating learners reported more often that they got adequate information on high school equivalency testing (2.4 times the rate of control learners), postsecondary programs (4.8 times) and applications (2.6 times), and financial aid (3.1 times) than control learners did. Although teacher/tutor support was reported as universally high (9 in 10), control learners perceived even higher support than participating learners (Cohen's $d = 0.41$).

Seven in 10 adult learners didn't know who made decisions about or implemented changes in the program. As displayed in Figure 1, small proportions of adult learners saw themselves as current leaders, yet the majority of them want to be leaders (regardless of condition).

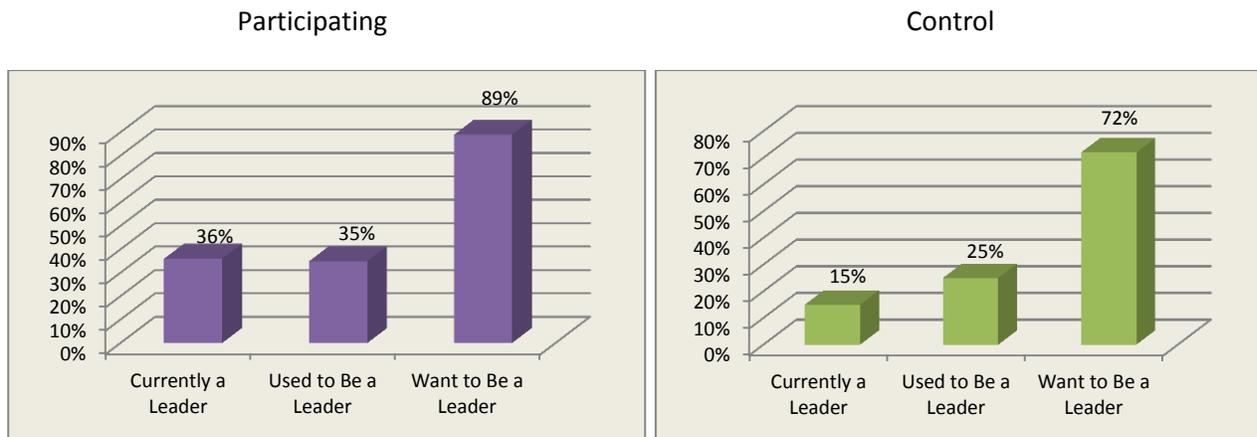


Figure 1. Adult Learners' Leadership Status by Condition

On the survey participating adult learners rated themselves an average 7 out of 10 as leaders; control adult learners an average 6 of 10 (see Figure 2).

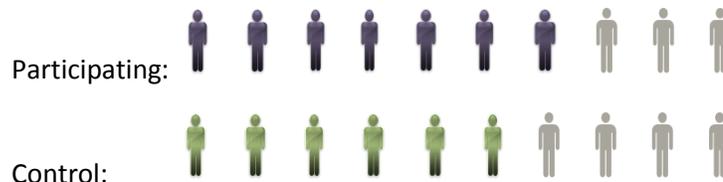


Figure 2. Self-rated Adult Learner Leadership Status by Condition

Still, participating adult learners aspired to be current and future leaders much more (89%) than did control learners (72%). Adult learners who saw themselves as strong leaders already (i.e., who rated themselves an 8, 9, or 10 in leadership) were similar in age, gender, language status, and employment status. Strong leaders reported being more organized ($d = 0.65$) and collaborative ($d = 0.55$) than adults with lower leadership ratings.

Nearly all adult learners (90%) reported comfort with adult learner leadership (see Figure 5), and adult learners who felt comfortable with leadership tended to also perceive its benefits (correlation $r = 0.56$). Adult learners reported high levels of collaboration, involvement, and wanting to “give back” to others who helped them, but wanting to give back appeared to be stronger the closer proximity the recipient had to the adult learner. Adult learner mentors tended to be older (42 years, on average) than non-mentors (average 35 years) and to rate themselves higher as leaders (an average 7 vs. 6 on a 10-point scale). Learner mentors have much higher scores in collaboration ($d = 1.47$) and in post-program involvement ($d = 0.59$) than non-mentors.

Post-program involvement, or the extent to which adult learners would stay involved after the program, correlated moderately with giving back ($r = 0.53$) and with the adult learner’s perceived involvement ($r = 0.49$) during the program. Adult learners reported very high levels of determination to learn (9 in 10), and adults who were more determined tended to feel more involved in the adult education program ($r = 0.58$).

When asked about their initial aspirations, participating learners were more apt to consider college or university first than control learners were (see Figure 3). Control learners more often wanted a better job first.

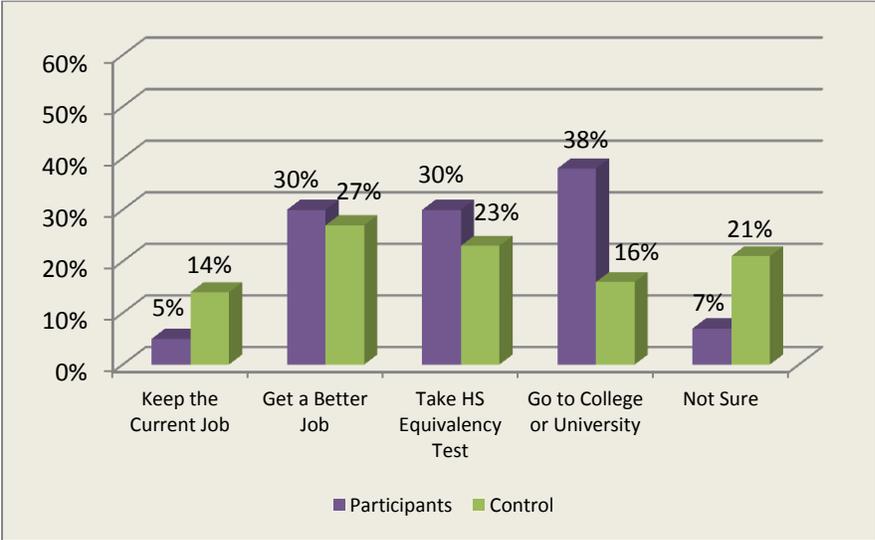


Figure 3. Participant and Control Adult Learner Priority Aspirations

Adult learner leadership ratings correlated slightly ($r = 0.25$) with attributes of leadership reported in the survey, such as innovation, flexibility, or taking charge. That is, the more adult learners saw themselves as having these attributes, the higher the leadership rating. Differences in responses throughout the survey also occurred by progress in the center, gender, age, and language status; these differences are presented in the full report.

Assessments

Overall, adult learner scores on Critical Thinking (CTA) and Writing assessments did not differ by condition. Average CTA scale scores were (on a 5-point frequency scale): Reasoning (4), Information Processing (4.1), Enquiry (3.7), Problem Solving (4.0), Decision Making (4.4), and Analysis (2.9), indicating adults generally plan to get information and analyze it less often than to deal with decisions or tackle questions.

Correlations among five of the Critical Thinking scales are moderately strong and indicate key relationships within critical thinking, as shown in Figure 4. Planning to get information (i.e., Enquiry) relates to

processing the information and to reasoning. Information processing appears closely related to reasoning, decision making, and problem solving, with the strongest links between making decisions and solving problems. The baseline assessment data, then, provide credible statistical support that logical processes connect to adults' skills in reasoning and processing information, which in turn tie to their decision making and problem solving.

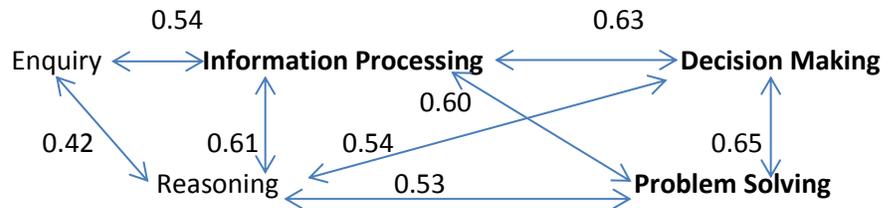


Figure 4. Correlations among Critical Thinking Assessment Scales

In the Writing assessment, scale scores averaged (on a 5-point agreement scale): Metacognitive Strategy Use (3.5), Capacity Belief (3.2), Checking Strategy (4.1), and Contextual Belief (3.9). These scores indicate that adults tend to agree least often with a belief in their capacity to write about their ideas and most often that they employ strategies to check their writing. Adult learners who were aware of and could act on their strategies to write about their ideas tended to have stronger beliefs in their capacity to write ($r = 0.53$). At the same time, adults who employed strategies to check their writing tended to have stronger beliefs that their writing would improve if they had support of others ($r = 0.54$).

Survey-assessment relationships indicate that adult learners who seek and process information and apply reasoning skills consistently when dealing with a task tend to be more organized, collaborative, and determined learners. Adult learners who aspire to be leaders in the future had moderately higher Information Processing ($d = 0.42$) and Decision-making scores ($d = 0.34$) than those who did not have the aspiration. Those who wanted to stay involved after completing the program also tended to seek and process information consistently and to have stronger Critical Thinking scores overall.

Writing scores correlated with collaboration ($r = 0.39$) and post-program involvement ($r = 0.37$). Adult learners who aspired to be leaders in the future had moderately higher Writing Capacity Belief scores than those who did not have the aspiration ($d = 0.35$). Scores on attributes of leadership (from the survey) also correlated with scores in Information Processing ($r = 0.40$), Reasoning ($r = 0.38$), and Writing overall ($r = 0.33$), suggesting meaningful links of adult critical thinking and writing skills with leadership attributes adults saw in themselves in the baseline year.

Staff Surveys

Staff in 21 programs ($n = 67$) took online surveys. Most staff members were women (85%) and native English speakers (79%), typically with a bachelor or master degree and a median age of 50-54 years. Working with adult learners for an average 8 years, staff collaborated with learners as leaders for less than a year (median), and a third had never done so.

When asked about adult learner strengths, adult learner independence, and program/staff strengths, staff that recognized program strengths tended to also recognize adult learner strengths. Staff ratings of adult

learner independence were generally lower. More participating staff than control staff agreed that their role becomes stronger the more they “give up the driver’s seat when adult learners lead activities.”

Staff survey findings were compared with learner survey results where possible. To help them learn best, learners saw more of a need for computer instruction, mentoring, and accommodations than did staff. Participating staff tended to place more emphasis on self-directed learning than did control staff. Overall staff and adult learners agreed at comparable rates that adults had enough information from the program for work-related activities; however, staff agreed less frequently than learners that learners had enough information to organize a work project. Staff and adult learners appeared to have similar rates of agreement on programs giving enough information to do most education-related activities, except for taking an HSE test and getting postsecondary information – staff saw information in these areas as less adequate than learners did.

Staff comfort with adult learner leadership was very high and levels did not differ by condition. As with learners, comfort levels increased with closer proximity to the survey taker. Staff believed they were more comfortable with adult learner leadership than their colleagues or adult learners would be (see Figure 5). Staff tended to agree less often than adult learners that adult learners would be comfortable with leadership.

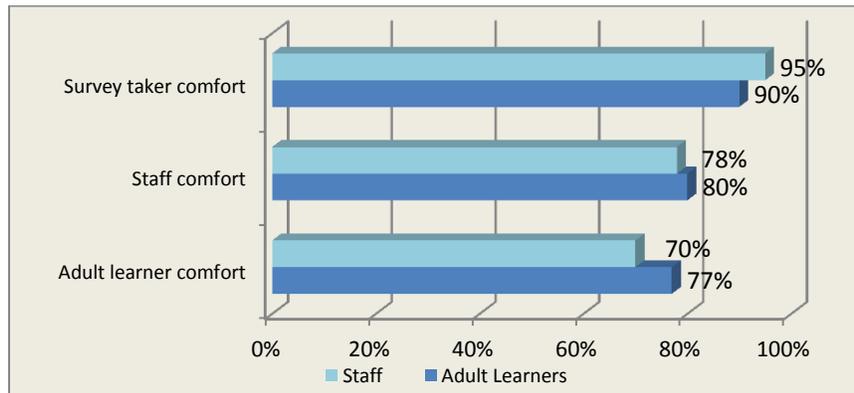


Figure 5. Staff and Adult Learner Comfort with Adult Learner Leadership from Three Perspectives

Though much more knowledgeable than adult learners, a surprising proportion of staff (15%) lacks basic information about decision makers and change makers in adult education programs. Staff belief in adult learner post-program involvement is much lower than that of learners themselves, as shown in Figure 6.

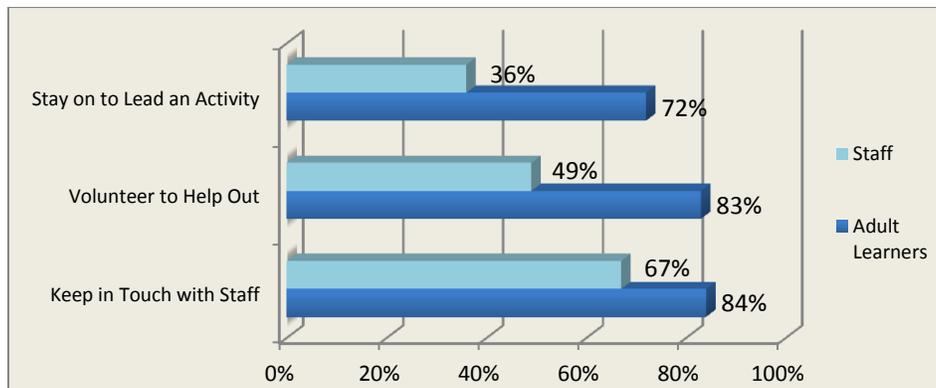


Figure 6. Staff and Adult Learner Agreement on Adult Learner Post-Program Involvement

Adult Learner and Staff Expectations and Contributions

Before beginning leadership projects, adult learners and staff appeared to have high hopes for their involvement. As reported on the surveys, adult learners and staff held diverse positive expectations and offered numerous contributions to the leadership project. In Texas, a young female English language learner stated, “I expect so much from this program, because it's a big and excellent opportunity for my future, because I'm going to be a leader. And I'm going to have more opportunities.”

Adult learners expected to gain general skills and make personal growth as well as gain confidence. A middle-aged female English language learner from Texas wanted to “learn more and more how to speak in front of people, I want to lose the fear of public speaking, and I want that my [children will] be motivated with [what] I do.” Learners also hoped to gain specific leadership skills, learn more English and help peers learn. In return, they were willing to help other learners or benefit the program. In Kansas a young male adult learner expected to “give my all to this leadership project and hopefully motivate others.” A female retiree from Florida declared, “I would really love to be the one in the back pushing them on!” Others sought to help in any way possible, or to contribute by simply participating.

Staff expectations centered on gaining leadership skills, learning other skills, and helping students or the program. A Florida administrator was enthusiastic to “learn from the students and see the dynamics of how students, tutors and staff interact. I can't wait to see how the group bonds and provides leadership skills to all of the individuals.” A Kansas instructor expected to gain “the experience of observing a diverse group of adult learners cooperating to improve a program that they have a vested interest in.” They, too, wished to boost adult learner confidence and gain additional skills that would support learners. Staff offered specific skills and expertise, planned to mentor and coach learners, and expressed readiness to participate actively in the leadership project. A Colorado instructor offered to “give our students encouragement to let their leadership skills shine and develop even more.”

Observations

The evaluation included observing staff-adult learner interactions onsite, often in classes. Overall, staff initiated interactions much more (69%) than did adult learners (31%). Adult learners in participating centers (41%) spoke more than those in control centers (20%). In centers where adult learners were primarily newcomers, learners tended to initiate interactions more often (38.7%) than in centers with more experienced adult learners. Adult learner responses and initiations generally increased as time went on during an observation session. When staff would initiate an exchange, it was usually to ask a question. Learners were rarely asked for their opinions. Usually, learners who initiated an exchange would primarily interact with staff, but on occasion they would directly engage with other learners. Adult learners typically expressed liking staff and would smile and laugh at jokes. Staff appeared to express genuine caring for adult learners and about their day-to-day lives.

Program Information

To aid in understanding growth, programs were asked to supply program-level information for the previous three years. Programs ranged in size from approximately 30 to 1,700 adult learners, with an average size of 400. Average enrollment increased slightly from 2011-12 to 2013-14. After 2011-12, annual hours per learner stayed approximately the same, 48 hours. The number of administrators stayed steady, the number of

instructors fluctuated, and the number of volunteers decreased. Program data indicated decreasing learning gains and fluctuating high school equivalency/diplomas and postsecondary entry rates from 2011-12 to 2013-14.

Programs generally relied on nearby resources to fund their programs. Major sources of program funding were local or regional government or non-profit grants, foundations, and federal or state adult education funds. To recruit learners, programs looked to local agencies, print advertising, and word of mouth.

Individual learner standardized test data was supplied for those in ALLIES giving permission. Learners' scores tended to increase on standardized reading tests from 2013-14 to 2014-15. Increases represented growth in scores of ELLs rather than in scores of ABE/ASE learners. The average reading level for ELLs increased from High Beginning ESL to Low Intermediate ESL ($d = 0.68$). In contrast, scores for ABE/ASE learners were highly correlated from 2013-14 to 2014-15 ($r = 0.75$) and stayed an average High Intermediate ABE.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Year 1 findings from ALLIES provide a picture of adult learners and their 21 programs in seven states. The 306 adult learners and 67 staff work in a variety of settings and programs of different sizes and demographic makeup – from rural Florida and Kansas to urban New Jersey and Texas. What stand out most from these findings are the similarities – that is, when considered by condition, the similarities among adult learners far outweighed the differences. Participating and control learners did not differ significantly in Year 1 in:

- Program services that helped them learn best
- The extent of progress they made in the program
- Awareness of funding sources for the program
- Knowing who made decisions about changes and implemented them
- Comfort with adult learners being leaders
- Perceptions of their own organizational skills
- Perceptions of the value of diversity
- How involved they felt with the program
- How determined they felt about learning
- Most attributes associated with leadership
- Nearly all critical thinking skills that were assessed (enquiry, reasoning, information processing, decision making, and problem solving)
- All writing skills that were assessed (metacognitive strategy use, checking strategy, capacity belief, contextual belief)

Staff responses to baseline surveys tended to vary little by condition. Like learners, they held generally positive perceptions of their programs and of leadership. Rapport among adult learners and staff appeared genuine and almost universal in programs. While staff and learners responding to surveys had differing levels of comfort with adult learner leadership and disparate beliefs in adult learner post-program involvement, their experiences of the program generally yielded corresponding perceptions, which seldom differed by condition.

Given these similarities, the evaluator makes the following recommendations for the final year of ALLIES:

1. Complete data collection for Year 2 no later than summer 2016.

2. Review ALLIES project descriptions and report on the characteristics of participating adult learner leaders in those projects.
3. Controlling for Year 1 levels, ascertain growth in participating adult learners, in contrast with control learners, from 2014-15 to 2015-16. Where sample sizes permit, growth needs to be measured employing survey responses, assessment scores, observational change, and from program documentation. Examine participating adult learner attendance and reading assessment patterns from Fall 2013 through the end of data collection. Analyze observation data from 2015-16 qualitatively and by interaction interval.
4. Analyze and report on interactions between survey responses and assessment scores as identified in Year 1 findings.
5. Assess growth in staff survey responses by condition from 2014-15 to 2015-16, as well as the extent of agreement between staff and adult learners.

Appendix: Methods

The design is a randomized control trial, and the study employs a mixed methods approach. In each selected state (Colorado (4 programs), Connecticut (2), Florida (4), Kansas (3), New Jersey (3), and Texas (5)ⁱⁱ), programs were randomly assigned to either a participating or control condition. Participating programs recruited 10-15 adult learners for an intervention and a leadership project lasting no more than 12 months. Control programs ran their programs as usual, with the only difference being an evaluative visit to collect baseline data. Control programs received no training or mentoring and were asked to recruit 20-25 learners for the study. Participating and control programs were offered stipends, and adult learners received incentives. First-year data were collected in 13 participating and 8 control programs. Program settings are community-based organizations, libraries, public schools, community colleges, refugee organizations, an agricultural manufacturer, a ski resort, and a housing project.

Before intervention, evaluators made a one-day visit to each program. After obtaining informed consent, evaluators collected baseline data via observation, surveys, assessments, and program documentation. Intervention consisted of VALUEUSA's six-hour leadership training followed by development and implementation of a leadership project and as-needed mentoring phone calls to address any implementation issues. Example projects include raising community awareness, fundraising, tutor recruitment, and improving staff-learner communication.

Instruments were administered with evaluators present to answer concerns and help with vocabulary. The survey was 11 pages and written at a sixth-grade-level equivalency. Survey items asked adults about experiences with learning, perceptions of the program and of leadership, plans after completing, and demographic characteristics. Participating learners answered two additional open-ended questions: what they hoped to gain from and expected to contribute to a leadership project; otherwise surveys for learners in the control condition were identical. Nearly all items contained multiple-choice options, with responses on a five-point agreement scale and emoticons added to assist readers with low skills.

Two assessments, Critical Thinking and Writing, were administered.ⁱⁱⁱ Critical Thinking (CTA) is a standardized youth assessment (Mincemoyer, Perkins, & Munyua, 2001). CTA contains six scales with 31 total items. CTA asked how often learners did something in daily life: never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), or

always (5). Actions included ways in which learners think, solve problems, or make decisions. In the original assessment, overall internal consistency (i.e., Cronbach's α), was high at 0.88. CTA scales were: Reasoning, Enquiry, Information Processing, Decision Making, Problem Solving, and Analysis. In ALLIES Year 1, Cronbach's α overall was also high, 0.89. The Writing assessment (Boekaerts & Rozendaal, 2007) was developed at Leiden University for use in vocational training. This assessment includes 31 items measuring how learners write about their ideas. Overall reliability for the original Writing assessment was not reported. In ALLIES Year 1, Cronbach's α overall for Writing was reasonably adequate at 0.72, and scale reliability ranged from 0.68 to 0.90. Writing scales were: Metacognitive Strategy Use, Writing Capacity Beliefs, Contextual Beliefs, and Checking Strategies.

In addition, a staff survey was developed for online administration online via QuestionPro. A participating staff survey contained 22 multi-part items, and a control staff survey contained 20. Fifteen items were parallel to adult learner survey items and were administered to cross validate learner responses and to determine how staff perceptions differed from those of learners. The staff survey response rate was 71%.

During site visits, learners and staff were observed interacting for about 45 minutes and could choose any format that allowed for interaction, such as group discussions, student council meetings, classroom lessons, or other formats. During observation, evaluators described behaviors and cited comments of learners and staff. Observers also noted at 5 to 10 minutes intervals whether staff members or learners initiated interactions.

A final data source for the evaluation was program documentation. This information included aggregate program-level documents from the previous three academic years as well as attendance and assessment data on consenting individuals. Collecting this information allowed evaluators to determine the scope of the program, identify program-level shifts across time, and ascertain individual growth in attendance and learning.

Adult learner surveys and assessments and staff surveys were analyzed using categorical data analysis and means testing, with Cohen's d employed to represent the magnitude of mean differences. The evaluator compared learner item percentages by condition, learner progress in the program, age, gender, and language status. Composite scores were created for items representing learner and staff perceptions or behaviors and were compared using Pearson correlations (r). Means for staff composite scores, as well as grouped agreement percentages, were compared by condition, staff age, and staff language status. Learner and staff expectations and contributions were organized by theme. Observation data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively using discourse analysis and summary statistics. Program-level information was summarized using descriptive statistics.

ⁱ For more information on the methodology of ALLIES, please see the Methods section at the end of the Executive Summary. For more background information on adult learner leadership, please see the full paper.

ⁱⁱ New Jersey originally had three programs, but one participating program dropped out before data collection, and a Pennsylvania program substituted as a control program. Connecticut had three programs initially, but the third program could not arrange for data collection in the baseline year. Texas originally had five programs, but one participating program dropped out before data collection; a control program later substituted.

ⁱⁱⁱ Assessments are copyrighted by their respective developers and available online.