

Chapter XXVII

Barriers to Adult Learning

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing need for an educated, skilled workforce that is able to learn and adapt to new challenges. Expecting this need to be met by those graduating from high school is not realistic as the current educational system has not adequately served the non-traditional student. This chapter reaffirms that Career Technical Education programs are excellent ways to meet adult learning and workforce development needs. The challenge, as described in the chapter, is to engage adults in becoming lifelong learners. This will require removing barriers to adult learning that relate to cost, accessibility, and interest. State and federal leaders also have a stake in addressing this need as it affects the nation's ability to compete on a regional and international level.

INTRODUCTION

Believing that all students will continue advancing their education after completing high school or General Educational Development (GED) requirements is misleading and does not adequately prepare the career, technical and adult education instructor. Adults, at all levels, face a multitude of challenges that impact their ability to begin and/or

succeed in a teaching and learning environment. Career Technical Education (CTE) programs can serve to meet the needs of the traditional curriculum student who seeks experiential, engaging experiences in order to be academically successful. Current workforce needs anticipate more than a high school diploma or GED to be competitive in the workplace. CTE programs reinforce career options and promote learning in the workplace

through internship and apprenticeship experiences and high school CTE students are more likely to stay in school (Earning, Learning, and Choice, 2004). Doing so allows these students to develop marketable and competitive skills.

Technological advances have promised enhanced access to learning opportunities; however, barriers remain for the adult learner. This chapter will review the cost, accessibility, and psychological barriers to adult learning. Affordability is a major factor in determining whether to pursue CTE or post-secondary education endeavors. Funding may be available at the state or federal levels or through employer-based support. Accessibility barriers may present themselves if the time and program format are not aligned with the learner's needs or abilities. In addition, time restrictions and family priorities may limit the ability to participate in higher education offerings; however, distance education programs may serve to overcome barriers. Psychological barriers include a lack of awareness or motivation which may also deter individuals from furthering their education. If a learner is threatened or fearful based on prior negative educational experiences, the barrier widens.

Also addressed is a higher education model that has been developed and identifies principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners. Policy recommendations continue to reinforce the need for unifying employment, economic, social, and adult learning policies. Partnerships with community and employers are also emphasized to promote workplace and career information.

The objectives of this chapter are to identify workforce needs; illustrate how workforce needs can be met through the use of CTE and adult education programs; and, address the importance of removing adult learning barriers that would allow the development of lifelong learners. The chapter is organized using the following sections: background, adult learners, barriers and proposed solutions, future trends, and a conclusion.

BACKGROUND

A skilled workforce is needed to support our society now and in the future. In addressing the importance of a strong economic local, regional, and global position, it is beneficial to remove barriers that may hinder adults from engaging and continuing educational goals and interests. The mere expectation of K-16 students funneling through the traditional educational system and progressively meeting the workforce needs of our nation will not be sufficient. Keeping students in school to complete high school requirements or to obtain a General Educational Development (GED) is one of the first steps to promoting a skilled labor force responsive to our nation's needs.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs make a difference and serve students whose needs were not being met in the traditional curriculum. CTE students frequently find the hands-on, application-oriented courses to be an incentive to continue their secondary and post-secondary education track (Peters, 2008). Gohm, Humphreys and Yao (1998) found that students with strong visual-spatial skills were not as successful in the traditional high school courses; however, excelled when they transferred to the CTE courses. Instead of students dropping out of high school, CTE programs can serve as an alternate choice in retention. The freedom to choose courses, to self-regulate, and to self-direct the pace and content have shown to be strong preferences for CTE students (Peters, 2008). The hallmark of high-quality CTE programs are literal connections to the specific field; flexibility so that students can choose programs (Benson, Johnson, Taylor, Treat, Shinkareva, & Duncan, 2004); and content that is flexible and open to new and developing fields (Peters, 2008).

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs prepare students for both employment and college experiences. These programs provide an experientially-based connection to work related issues and problems and provide a workforce with

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