

New England Learner Persistence Project: Approach to Professional Development and Program Improvement

The New England Learner Persistence project aimed to expand our collective knowledge base and practical resources from which all adult education programs can benefit. To that end, the New England Literacy Resource Center designed a process that drew on existing research and associated promising strategies, and engaged adult education programs as research partners in testing those strategies in specific program contexts. The project provided adult educators with options for two phases of engagement:

Phase I: Study Circles

Adult educators across New England were invited to join a learner persistence study circle in their state. Most study circles drew educators from several programs but in some cases, the study circles were held at a program for that program's staff. Participating in the New England Learner Persistence project at this level meant making a commitment to attend three study circle sessions lasting a total of 10 ½ hours and doing the readings in preparation for them.

The study circles followed the *Adult Student Persistence Study Circle Guide* <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=896> developed by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The readings included in the NCSALL guide were supplemented by the 'Taking Action to Stay in School' issue of NELRC's *Change Agent* magazine www.nelrc.org/changeagent (fall 2007). The study circles were facilitated by adult educators in each state, usually pro bono.

Sixteen study circles were held with 131 adult educators participating. The participants evaluated the study circles very positively. The facilitators' and participants' feedback confirms that the study circles served their intended purpose of creating a common knowledge base and thereby paving the way for action research.

Phase II: Action Research

All programs from which at least one staff person had completed the study circle were eligible to apply for a \$3,000 mini-grant to conduct action research. Applicants were also required to complete and submit a program self-assessment based on an inventory of promising persistence practices developed by NELRC. Based on the results, applicants were asked to choose the focus for their action

research from among four aspects of program operations (1.entry/orientation; 2. instruction; 3. counseling and peer supports and; 4. and re-engagement/self-study) and to identify specific strategies related to that area to investigate. Of the 21 applicants for action research mini-grants, 18 programs were selected for funding. Each program was required to have a team of at least three staff, including the program coordinator, participating.

To prepare the participating program teams to conduct action research, NELRC organized a two-day learner persistence summit. The first day offered workshops aimed at deepening the participants' knowledge of persistence-related strategies and practices. Topics ranged from goal-setting and implementing distance learning to building students' self-efficacy.

The second day of the summit prepared the program teams in action research methods and protocols. The action research teams received guidance in articulating a theory of change related to their chosen persistence strategies and then developing a logic model that laid out the steps that lead to such change. Day two of the summit also initiated the participants in the project's qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

Subsequent to the summit, the action research teams implemented their chosen strategies for roughly one semester. They documented formative and summative data related to their chosen intervention, posting monthly 'Significant Change Stories' on an intranet site created for the project by NELRC and collecting quantitative persistence data as described below. The NELRC project staff provided support and guidance to the teams online and through individual and cross-team phone meetings.