switchboard
connecting resettlement experts



Overcoming Barriers to Adult Education

Strengths-based strategies for effective enrollment and retention

Education and learning are important to all people striving to attain their goals life. For refugees and other ORR-eligible adults, it is essential to rebuilding a stable and fulfilling life in the United States. As such, many organizations that serve refugees are striving to help their adult clients continue their education, including English Language Proficiency (ELP), academic learning, vocational/career education, community orientation, financial and digital literacy, parenting, and more. Unfortunately, refugee adults face many conflicting demands, and accessing needed education is often difficult. This information guide suggests practical strategies that can help.

About Adult Education

Adult education is a vast field, helping clients work toward many types of goals. Some education may be required to access the benefits of certain types of programs, and some may be optional. Some adult educations programs may be very short and others quite long or intensive, but all are typically focused on specific goals with practical applications in the lives of the learners.

While all individuals have different goals, many adults face obstacles that prevent them from finding, enrolling in and completing educational services. Some research suggests that the U.S. adult education system meets the needs of less than 4% of all adult learners in the country.[1] Among those accessing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training between 2010 and 2015, an average of 28.2% of students left before completing a level.[2]

[1] McHugh, Margie and Catrina Doxsee. 2018. *English Plus Integration: Shifting the Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration Success.* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 20. Based on analysis of U.S. Department of Education data.
[2] Ibid, 19.

Innovative strategies for mitigating barriers to adult education include…

- **Partnering with employers** to offer and incentivize participation in classes at work
- **Providing training virtually** to clients at multiple sites via video at a common time
- **Schedule-stacking** needed classes and services to create "mini-one-stop-shops" that make long commutes or difficult logistics worthwhile for participants
- **Breaking up courses and programs** into smaller, buildable units
- **Taking a two-generation approach:** coupling high quality early learning opportunities for children with programming for caregivers, such as adult education, parenting skills, civic engagement, academic or workforce-oriented educational needs, and supports that promote family stability

Mitigating barriers to adult education is critical to increasing adult education attainment, and, in the long term, to improving safety, health, economic well-being, and civic participation more broadly. Keep in mind that adult education is a long-term process: depending on an individual's prior education, it can take five to 10 years to attain proficiency in English and attain a high school diploma or its equivalent.[3]

Understanding Key Barriers

Among refugees, common barriers to participation in educational programs that adults face include:

- **Work obligations**
- **Family obligations**
- **Financial constraints**
- **Language, literacy, and formal educational attainment**
- **Transportation barriers**
- **Status of physical health, mental health, cultural adjustment, and basic needs**
- **Expectations and perceptions**

Work Obligations

Work schedules may often conflict with class schedules. But even those who are able to enroll in a class may experience irregular work schedules or sudden shift changes, preventing them from attending.[4]

Family Obligations

Family obligations can take many forms, including child, elder or other dependent care, housekeeping responsibilities, or just spending time with loved ones during the few hours that families may have together during the week.

Financial Constraints

Immigrant parents are highly likely to be both employed and living in poverty.[5] Finding resources to pay for adult education can be extremely challenging. Even when courses are free, participating may come with transport costs or the cost of giving up opportunities to earn income.

Language, Literacy Levels and Formal Educational Attainment

Low English proficiency, low native language literacy, and/or little formal education can bar participation in much adult education other than ESOL. Depending on the educational program, even advanced speakers may require additional language training before being able to access and complete a program.

Transportation Barriers

Getting to and from classes in a manageable amount of time at an affordable cost—and feeling comfortable doing so—is an additional key factor in access to adult education.

---

[3] Park, Maki, Margie McHugh, and Caitlin Katsiaficas. 2016. *Serving Immigrant Families through Two-Generation Programs: Identifying Family Needs and Responsive Program Approaches.* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
[4] McHugh and Doxsee, 20.
[5] Park, McHugh, and Katsiaficas, 14.

Status of Physical Health, Mental Health[6], Cultural Adjustment, and Basic Needs

For those coping with health concerns or basic needs instability, such as housing or food insecurity, attending classes regularly can be difficult. Similarly, participation in educational programs may be more or less overwhelming depending on level of cultural adjustment. For instance, one study of an ESOL program for survivors of torture suggests that participation in English class is often a final step in the recovery process, requiring an individual to finally accept that they cannot return home.[7]

Expectations & Perceptions:

These may factor into individuals' decisions to enroll in or continue with adult education. These include expectations about progress they will make, who will teach and who else will attend, and about teaching style and learning approaches.[8]

Strengths-based Strategies for Overcoming Barriers to Adult Education

As you work to mitigate these barriers, keep the goals and strengths of adult learners at the heart of adult education program design and delivery. Consider the below approaches:

Define your target population: Who are you trying to reach with this specific educational offering? The more specific you can be about the people that your desire to enroll and retain in a particular class, the more able you will be to design a program to reach them.

Employ diverse, culturally and linguistically competent staff and volunteers to attract and build trusting relationships with families and communities.[9]

Conduct holistic needs assessment and support clients' educational goals within the context of their adult lives: Once you know who you want to reach, assess their strengths, needs and barriers with respect to the educational offering you are designing. For most adults, educational goals will be just one of many competing demands. Seek to understand the full picture of your clients' assets and needs and support them in balancing both their individual and family needs.

Design to your target population's strengths, needs, and barriers: When helping clients make plans to attain their educational goals, avoid making assumptions. If at all possible, design in collaboration with your potential students. Consider:

- **Time:** When can your participants attend? Can you offer multiple options to accommodate varying needs, including those of both women and men?
- **Duration:** What class length is feasible and worthwhile to attend? How long of a session can clients commit to at one time? What can realistically be achieved in that time?
- **Location:** Can you create convenience for participants by co-locating with early childhood service providers, K-12 schools, community colleges, public health and safety departments, legal service providers, libraries, or economic development agencies?[10] Will a mobile or roving class structure promote wider access?[11]
- **Direct and indirect costs:** What does it cost to attend? Can these costs be reduced or eliminated? For instance, can scheduling eliminate the need for childcare? Also consider whether in-kind support can help reduce students' costs.
- **Transportation:** Can transportation be subsidized or can the class take place within walking distance? If cost is manageable but participants need help with navigation, why not build this education into the course?
- **Curriculum:** How can your curriculum address your participants' strengths and practical needs? One successful model is Integrated Basic Education & Skills Training (I-BEST), which integrates occupational and basic skills needs, including English

[6] Ramsay, Georgina and Sally Baker, "Higher Education and Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Meta-Scoping Study," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 2019, 38, 55-82.
[7] Bobrow Finn, Heather. "Overcoming Barriers: Adult Refugee Trauma Survivors in a Learning Community," *TESOL Quarterly,* 2010, 44(3), 588.
[8] Convention of Scottish Local Authorities' and Research Scotland, "ESOL for Resettled Refugees: The Guide," October 2017.
[9] Park, McHugh, and Katsiaficas, 3.
[10] McHugh and Doxsee, 15.
[11] Hernandez, Jennifer. California Workforce Development Board, Policy Brief: Serving English Language Learner (Ell) Populations Using Best Practices and Model Partnerships, January 2017, 16.

acquisition.[12-13] Another is English Plus Integration, which focuses on English acquisition but incorporates digital literacy, integration topics important to families (like understanding education systems, taxes and finances, careers, and U.S. history and civics), and support to develop plans related to individual and family integration goals.[14]

- **Language:** Does the learning you are seeking to achieve have to be in English? If content is more important than language in this course, consider whether it can be taught in students' native language(s).
- **Learning styles:** Seek feedback during program design and at the end of each course on the activities that students' enjoy most (and least). Use that information to from students to evolve your class or program to leverage students' learning styles and maximize outcomes.

Create incremental pathways: Students may need to enter and exit your programs multiple times. Provide a mix of short, moderate and long-term courses which stack to build toward higher value credentials.[15]

Consider prerequisite skills: What knowledge or skills does participation require? Will prerequisites be a barrier? If so, consider offering prerequisite courses, identifying partners who offer courses on these skills, or integrating this content into your course. For example, English proficiency is a common barrier to continuing education outside of ESOL for refugee learners. Consider teaching language and content side by side to enable access for students with lower English language proficiency.

Design an atmosphere of welcome, respect and social support: Supporting students' social and emotional needs for belonging and connection may promote retention. Ask: How will you make your students feel welcome and respected? How will you put them at ease? How will you create a class culture that allows students to bond with each other and the instructor(s)?

The IRC in New York City's Providing Opportunities for Women's Economic Resilience (POWER) program builds social and emotional support into to job readiness training. The 10-week program is split into two five-week sessions. The first involves train-the-trainer activities in which participants (many women with low literacy and formal education) learn how to design and deliver workshops on topics they identify as their own strengths. They also participate in experiential learning on food, agriculture, and marketing at an urban farm and farmers market. For the second half of the program, participants continue this experiential learning while also receiving classroom instruction on job readiness and financial literacy.

The POWER program takes several steps to create comfort, safety and a sense of belonging at the start of each cohort. Participants attend information sessions, travel to the program site together, and share about their positive experiences in formal and informal learning settings, which facilitators then incorporate into the program.

A qualitative evaluation found several benefits to this approach: Participants valued this program in contrast to previous employment-related education because it more holistically addressed their short- and long-term goals and it supported them to plan long-term career paths. Participants also reported improved physical and mental health, self-efficacy, and economic well-being.

[12] Wilson, Jill H. Investing in English Skills: The Limited English Proficient Workforce in U.S. Metropolitan Areas, Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings, September 2014.
[13] Wachen, John, Davis Jenkins, Clive Belfield, and Michelle Van Noy, with Amanda Richards and Kristen Kulongoski. "Contextualized College Transition Strategies for Adult Basic Skills Students: Learning from Washington State's I-BEST Program Model," The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, December 2012.
[14] McHugh and Doxsee, 2.
[15] Ibid.

Enhance programs by using technology with which clients are already comfortable: For example, support ESOL learners in using their smartphones for brief translation when speaking with neighbors (you can suggest mobile apps like Google Translate) or for studying English while commuting to work on public transit (you can share apps such as DuoLingo). You might also share useful educational websites like www.CoreNav.org and www.USAHello.org, and apps like Settle In, which can be accessed in many languages. Encourage clients to download apps while in class, using WiFi provided by your organization.

Use data, seek feedback and evaluate: Use data to inform your selection of strategies to mitigate barriers. Can you map where potential students live and the community institutions nearby? Can you analyze the demographic profile of previous participants (who is and who is not represented)? Ask clients for feedback on your strategies, monitor whether they are working to increase participation, and evaluate their success at least once a year.

Support participation education programs through case management and coaching: When referring clients to educational classes or programs (internal or external), a warm handoff will often be more successful than a cold referral. Helping clients to access services that are needed in order to participate, such as childcare, will make education plans more realistic; regular communication between caseworkers or coaches and teachers may support retention.[16]

For clients unfamiliar with US adult education systems, support students to learn relevant norms, and provide their instructors with information that will help them meet the students' needs and recognize their assets.[17] This might include key statistics about your clients and resources or articles about different client populations. You can search Switchboard's library of Country Guides for backgrounders to share with partners.

Similarly, follow your clients' progress and support it by mitigating additional barriers as they arise—especially when clients are enrolled in long-term programs such as higher education.

Conclusion

Barriers to adult education pose challenges for students, organizations, and teachers. But what may be a barrier for one client, or for one particular educational opportunity, may not be a barrier for another. An important first step is exploring your clients' strengths and potential barriers as they relate to each opportunity. With these identified, seek to build in solutions like those discussed above.

Resources

Serving Immigrant Families through Two-Generation Programs: Identifying Family Needs and Responsive Program Approaches: This study reviews promising two-generation approaches to immigrant education. Appendix 2 offers a useful summary of the programs studied, funding streams, and partners.

English Plus Integration: Shifting the Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration Success: This brief recommends shifting models of ESOL and adult education by tailoring instruction to better meet participant needs.

Repairing the Nation's System for Adult English Learners: This report shares examples of innovative strategies and partnerships to increase access and success in adult English and other education.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities' ESOL for Resettled Refugees: The Guide: Section 5 in this guide offers practical tips for promoting an inclusive classroom environment and reducing barriers.

Demystifying Strengths-Based Services: Fostering Refugees' Resilience in Resettlement: This guide describes how providers can take a strengths-based approach to service delivery, including in education.

The IRC received $1,194,063 through competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant # 90RB0052. The project is financed with 100% of Federal funds and 0% by non-governmental sources. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

Photo credit: Ethan Fichtner/IRC.

[16] Ibid, 16.
[17] Ramsay and Baker, 2019, 67.