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Adult Education as a Response to the Rural Crisis: Factors Governing Utility and Participation

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of an investigation of situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to participation in an adult education program offered in an economically distressed area. The results suggest that modification in traditional content, methods, marketing, and delivery systems are required in rural settings.

INTRODUCTION

As the economic and social conditions of rural midwestern people worsen with the widening ripples of the farm crisis, public and private organizations representing the whole spectrum of community and social services have been mobilized (Mermelstein & Sundet, 1987). In the main, these have embodied what Gamm and Fisher (1980) describe as the "technical assistance approach" to community problem solving. This is an altogether predictable response since there is a fifty year success rate with adult educational technology transfer programs as a proven means of introducing change into rural America (Wynn & Jacob, 1977; Bast & Buxton, 1977; Omer, 1978; Cotton & Linder, 1977). Some successes with traditional techniques have been noted, particularly in small demonstration projects that feature high interpersonal interaction. However, what little objective research has been conducted indicates that many of the education programs being offered are under-utilized in relation to the documented need levels (Heffernan & Heffernan, 1985; Sundet & Mermelstein, 1987). This finding, in turn, confirms what has been widely reported by practitioners in many disciplines. The traditional educational techniques for providing assistance and coping with socioeconomic change are not working.

As part of an overall study of a typically impacted agricultural area, the authors were concerned with a variety of factors affecting the efficacy of adult education interventions. In particular this study focuses on why current programs are not reaching the targeted population. Consequently adult education participation models, particularly those that emphasize deterrents to participation were used as the theoretical framework (Miller, 1967; Rubenson, 1977; Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merrian, 1982; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; and Martindale and Drake, 1989). For this study the earlier work of Houle (1961) still served as a point of departure. Houle (1961) suggested that there are three types of motivational-oriented learners: activity-oriented (participating for the sake of the activity), goal-oriented (using learning to gain specific objectives), and learning-oriented (pursuing learning for its own sake). While Houle's typology offers a useful framework for thinking about multiple motives for adult learning, it does not provide a construct of deterrents to participation. As Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) state, "This gap in the literature is particularly serious because the construct of deterrents or barriers occu-

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pies a central place in virtually all theories or models of participation" (p. 178).

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the factors that govern deterrents to participation to adult education programs within the rural community. In addition, the availability, educational policy and curriculum aspects of adult education programs were also examined.

SETTING

This study of resident response to adult learning issues in contemporary rurality took place in the region of northwest Missouri which abuts Iowa on the north and both Kansas and Nebraska on the west that has been particularly hard hit by the interaction of financial, social, and demographic forces in the past decade. As with the other midwestern grain belt states, Missouri farmers and rural townspeople are suffering in the current economic malaise. Farm bankruptcies have increased from 115 in 1981 to 541 in calender 1986 (Henderson & Matthews, 1986). The known suicide rate among Missouri farmers has risen 30% in two years, and from 1979 to 1983, hospitalization for mental illness and substance abuse has increased by 57.8% in the rural areas as compared to 18.2% in the metropolitan areas of the state (Land, 1986).

The specific region under study is 77.75% rural and 98.5% white (Hobbs & Elder, 1986); 20% of the farmers in the area are delinquent on their real estate loans and 16% on their operating loans (Missouri Agriculture Finance Study, 1986) and there has been an 11.7% decline in farm operations in the past three years where the primary occupation of the resident is farmer (Hobbs & Elder, 1986). But not just the farmer is in trouble. Businesses and industries selling to agriculture suffered a 20% decline in sales from 1981 to 1986 (Thomas, 1988). These are primarily small organizations with 94% employing less than twenty people and many of the larger employers are units of government such as the school systems or offices of state agencies (Hobbs & Elder, 1986). Four area banks closed in October and November of 1986 and six more failed in 1987. Fifteen percent of the population in 1985 was below the official poverty line with the numbers continuing to grow (Hobbs & Elder, 1986). Transfer payments account for 19.5% of the personal income, an increase of 23.5% from 1980 to 1984 (Hobbs & Elder, 1986).

Adult education programs are regularly offered through an area vocational-technical school, a regional state college and university extension. In addition, a variety of "special" sessions have been held by units of state government that were to address specific issues arising from the economic conditions. Response to each of these initiatives has been marginal at best.

METHODOLOGY

This study combines elements of two highly rated methodologies of needs assessment: the key informant approach and the general population survey. The intent is to capitalize on the strengths of each and at the same time compensate for the weaknesses inherent in both.

In the debate over techniques of community analysis (Center for Social Research, 1974), controversy centers on the definition of need. Some authors insist that only externally verifiable objective data are sufficient evidence (Bell, Sundet, Aponte & Murrell, 1976; Zangwill, 1977) while others accept perceived need as basic (Human Services Institute, 1975; Kimmel, 1977; Minnesota Planning Agency, 1977). Efforts to reconcile these points of view spawned a variety of needs assessment methodologies and their respective apologists (Booz, 1982; Blake, Kalb & Ryan, 1977; Dillman, 1977). It is now generally accepted that some combination of approaches yields the most accurate results (Kimmel, 1977; Hargreaves, Attkisson, Siegel, & McIntyre, 1974; Siegel, Attkisson & Moore, 1974; Warheit, 1977). Horton and Carr's (1976) comparison of ten strategies on eight validity and implementation criteria rated the key informant and general population survey highest. Although general population studies may have the high validity, their weakness lies in implementation barriers (Andrews & Withey, 1974; Babbie, 1973; Horovitz, 1976; Varenais, 1977). The key informant approach, on the other hand, is criticized for the selectivity of its data base and the built-in bias of informants.

Population

Respondents in this study were drawn from persons who attended one of nine workshops held throughout the seven county target area. One hundred and forty-seven names and addresses were collected at meeting registrations. From this list those with unverifiable addresses and those associated in any capacity with the sponsors (university extension service, community mental health center, and an area vocational/technical school) were dropped, leaving a

population of 104 subjects. The age distribution of the study's population was evenly split, with nearly 50% above and below 40 years of age. Thirty-two percent of the respondents had some college credit, 17.6% held a baccalaureate degree, with 20.3% having graduate degrees. Occupations of the respondents included business (17.6%), farmer (17.6%), retired (6.8%), clerical (8.1%), teacher/educator (10.8%), homemaker (13.5%), social services (8.1%) and medical (2.7%).

These subjects are by no means a random sample. The population involved was not only a self-selected group, many persons were specifically invited because they were representative of and/or held leadership in core community systems or organizations. They came already knowledgeable about community problems and were involved in various activities designed to address them. Thus they meet almost exactly the definition of "key informant" in the professional needs assessment literature (Warheit, Bell & Schwab, 1977). However, because the subjects were also drawn from an open group that covers the full range of occupational categories, mirrors almost exactly the age and racial composition of the general population, and has wide geographic distribution within the area, many characteristics of a general population survey are present and the major deficiency of the key informant model, researcher control of data input, is mitigated.

Instrument

A 118 item instrument with sections on community processes, social service issues, and adult education was mailed to each of the 104 subjects. Unstructured comments were specifically invited and urged. Seventy-four useable returns were obtained for a satisfactory response rate of 71.15%.

FINDINGS

Respondents were asked to judge four aspects of adult education programs in this rural crisis environment: 1) availability, 2) educational policy, 3) curriculum, and 4) barriers to participation.

Access was viewed as problematic with two-thirds responding that adult education resources were not available in the area and seventy percent indicating that they did not use those that were there. News media (63.5 percent) and friends (18.9 percent) were the most significant sources of information about education opportunities. University extension service and area vocational schools had negligible impact. Contrary to expectations, travel distance to programs was not reported to be a major impediment. Over eighty percent of the subjects said they would be willing to travel at least forty miles round-trip for adult education classes. As might be expected, travel was more of an issue with older subjects than with those under forty years of age.

In the policy area, academic credit for life experience is an often debated issue. Just under sixty percent of the respondents favored such a policy, with college graduates more strongly supportive of such a policy than less well educated subjects.

A second policy area, location, offered a strong endorsement for the traditional education sites in rural communities as Table 1 demonstrates. Subjects were asked to rate sites as acceptable or non-acceptable.

Separation of educational programs from the denominational issues of rural religion was clearly fa-

Table 1
Location for Education Programs: Rank Order by Positive Response

Site	Percent
School building	66.2%
Community center	50.0%
Place of work	40.5%
Church	28.4%
College/university	20.3%
Private home	17.6%
Hotel/commercial building	9.5%

vored. The majority also believed that the regional state colleges in the area were inappropriate sites. It may be that these facilities were just too foreboding or, this data may reflect a relationship gap between the institutions of higher education and area residents.

Closely related to location is the preference of a methodology (Table 2).

In this environment of extreme stress and uncertainty, one of the most attractive features of adult education to these people is its gregariousness. Independent study in two forms was rejected by almost all respondents.

The third aspect of adult education examined was curriculum. These rural leaders were asked to list their primary goal in obtaining additional education. The results are detailed in Table 3.

In an environment with the economic pressures detailed above, it is not surprising that the first priority is learning which has clear fiscal implications. It also may reflect a fundamental structural change in this rural society. Sixty percent of the people responding to these items were women and many of them were, apparently, faced with entering the job market for the first time. The rural ideal of "male bread winner" and "female nurturor" has been changing for some time but the current economic crisis has given new impetus and urgency to that change. A companion question on educational content confirms this conclusion. Eighty-nine percent listed "occupational training" as desired subject matter.

The final education component to this study focused on perceived barriers to the use of resources that were and might be made available to these people within this general geographic community. Using Cross' (1981) typology, the barriers were conceptualized as follows: 1) situational: those that arise from the personal living conditions of people; 2) institutional: those which are products of the structure, policy and/or practice of the educational systems; and 3) dispositional: personal/familial beliefs and values about self and education.

Based on previous work with this population it was hypothesized that situational barriers would predominate. Table 4 shows the contrast among the categories.

Table 2

Educational Method: Rank Order by Positive Response

Method	Percent
Conference/workshop	66.2%
OJT/internship	58.1%
Lecture/class	32.4%
Discussion group	29.7%
On own	10.8%
Correspondence courses	2.7%

Table 3

Primary Learning Goal: Rank Order

Goal	Percent
Occupational necessity	58.1%
Knowledge	16.2%
Escape routine/stress	10.8%
Personal fulfillment	5.4%
Obligation	4.1%
Community understanding	2.7%
Religious	2.7%
Cultural appreciation	0.0%
Social skills	0.0%

Table 4
Barrier to Adult Learning Categories -
% of Positive Response and Mean Category Response Score

Category	Percent	Category Mean
Situational barriers	53.6%	2.83
Institutional barriers	33.9%	1.90
Dispositional barriers	25.9%	1.67

The assumptions about situational characteristics were borne out by the data. But the strength of the other two categories, particularly dispositional barriers, was somewhat surprising. To further examine the components of each of these deterrent categories, Table 5 breaks them down into their sub-items and ranks them by mean importance response score using the five point semantic differential scale (1 = not important - 5 = very important) from the original instrument.

Four of the first five problem areas are situational, with cost, as anticipated in this depressed area, the paramount problem. With some of the other issues one can conject that there may be some defensiveness at work and rationalization for not wanting to take the risk that adult education represents. But in communities where transfer payments are the largest single source of income and that percentage is growing every year, even necessary vocational education is a financial burden many cannot bear. Two commonly reported situations of rurality, the lack of child care and transportation service, are not substantiated by these data.

The urgency of economic conditions may be again the controlling factor in the institutional barriers reported. "Time required to complete a program" appears prominently in the responses, both in terms of requirements and looking toward outcomes. By contrast, attendance requirements which are often thought of as a problem for employed and child rearing adults received almost no mention in this ranking.

Overall rating of dispositional barriers was low but inspection of the data indicated that further analysis

Table 5
Barrier to Adult Learning: Rank Order by Item Mean

Barrier	Category	Item Mean
Cost	Situational	4.17
Job responsibilities	Situational	3.72
Home responsibilities	Situational	3.48
Time required to complete	Institutional	3.32
No time available	Situational	3.00
Course schedule	Institutional	2.84
Too old for school	Dispositional	2.68
Can't go full time	Institutional	2.47
Courses not offered	Institutional	2.27
Don't enjoy studying	Dispositional	1.87
Don't know what to study	Dispositional	1.87
No energy	Dispositional	1.35
No child care	Situational	1.29
Information not available	Institutional	1.29
No transportation	Situational	1.29
Too much red tape	Institutional	1.18
Past low grades	Dispositional	1.15
Attendance requirements	Institutional	1.08
Family/friends object	Dispositional	1.05

controlling for sociodemographics was warranted. Table 6 describes correlations of item scores with these variables.

Money and time are the core elements which affect men and women equally. In this sample, home and job responsibility scores were varied by gender but balanced each other and when combined with cost/time account for the almost identical female-male ranking of situational barriers. Men, however, were much more critical of the adult education institutional structures, both in policy and curricular areas. Men also have the more negative attitude toward continuing education. "Past low grades," although not a highly ranked barrier overall, is an exclusively male response and "don't enjoy studying" correlates with it (.448). For females, objections from family and friends, although the lowest single item in any scale, was reported only by women and correlates with "home responsibilities" (.558).

The significant correlation between educational level and "course wanted not available" speaks to the difficulty in finding a marketable mass in a rural area, particularly when the desired content is vocation specific. The occupational variable bears out conclusions drawn about age and sex. Those persons who were at the lower skill levels also see themselves as "too old" (irrespective of actual age), "don't enjoy studying", and report the most economic and time barriers to participation in educational programs.

DISCUSSION

Despite the presence of numerous potential adult education programs, rural residents found accessibility to be a problem. The dollars spent on printing elaborate brochures could have been better directed in personal outreach efforts and more extensive cultivation of the local media. The assumption that physical proximity is required if programs are to be successful is not borne out by these data.

The social function of education is clearly of particular importance for persons suffering from the fear and depression that is so prevalent in this part of the country. Location and methodology that meet social needs of the learners are more important than sophisticated technology or ease of access.

In a survival environment, only those offerings which the students see as having immediate relevance are valued. This becomes a matter of both content and the packaging of content. Not all materials must be "job technique" specific but they must be presented in such a manner that the residents of areas like this one can

Table 6
Correlation of Barriers to Adult Learning to Sociodemographic Variables

Barrier	Sex	Age	Education	Occupation
Cost	-.125	-.307***	-.079	-.045
Job	.359***	-.023	.170	-.217*
Home	-.175**	-.072	.158	-.015
Time required	.132	-.136	.002	-.296**
Time available	.005	-.239***	.145	.007
Course schedule	.045	-.122	-.084	-.180
Too old	.256**	.116	-.120	-.372***
Go full-time	.094	-.109	-.104	-.154
Not offered	.094	-.133	-.313***	-.180
Don't enjoy	.338***	-.275**	.006	-.322***
What to study?	.278	-.189	.058	-.145
No energy	-.069	.182	.043	-.054
No child care	-.233*	-.205*	-.004	-.007
Information not available	.082	-.182	-.087	-.213*
Transportation	.019	.252**	-.031	.029
Red tape	.073	-.120	-.161	.034
Low grades	.234**	.018	.156	-.193
Attendance	.107	-.148	.031	.015
Family/friends	-.076	-.123	-.218*	-.013

see how the learning experience will address the basic goal of survival at all systematic levels. Educational programs that assume, a priori, relocation to an urban environment are generally rejected. For this population, survival is equated with the preservation of a way of life, not simply learning job skills that are marketable in some metropolitan arena. Personal and community survival are intertwined.

Situational barriers, particularly cost, predominate as anticipated. However, further analysis revealed the danger of broad generalizations, particularly the gender and age differences. Men are particularly sensitive to the risks that enrolling in traditional academic courses entail. Irrespective of age, men tend to see themselves as "too old" for continuing education as if, in rural culture, participation in the formal educational process should end with adolescence. Home and child care, as would be expected in a traditional societal structure, are major impediments faced by women.

Assumptions that situational barriers would affect the younger respondents more was borne out by the data. The older people are generally more affluent, have fewer pressing home and child care responsibilities, and simply more freedom to pursue educational interests. The only issue positively associated with the upper age group is the lack of transportation. The aggregate differences in institutional barriers are negligible when age is controlled for and item-by-item analysis fails to discover significant discrepancies. The dispositional barriers scales are statistically and theoretically different for these two groups. The younger people are more concerned about past grades, dislike for school, and almost despair over what, if anything, they can study that will help their situation. Very surprisingly, the strongest reported dispositional barrier, "too old for school" shows no difference by age groups. The response is just as prevalent among twenty-four year olds as it is with those over sixty. Apparently in this environment, culture dictates that education is a function of childhood and adolescence, not a life-long process.

Another disturbing finding from these data is that the greatest resistance is centered in the most needy population. Those persons with the lowest educational attainment and occupational skill levels are also those who have the highest dispositional barriers.

SUMMARY

Adult education has long been an integral part of the rural development process. With the economic and social dislocation of the past decade, its importance is greater than at any time since the great depression. However, data indicate that, while numerous programs are being offered, they are not reaching the intended audience. This study substantiates that providing services in a "business as usual" manner will not be effective. The current crisis environment requires that adult educators adjust content, methodology, marketing, and delivery systems if they are to regain their traditional role as central actors in rural community development.

While some conceptually based constructs of the participation patterns of rural adult learners have received attention in the literature recently (i.e., Baker, 1985; Galbraith & Sundet, 1988; Hesser, Spears & Maes, 1988; McCannon, 1983, 1985; Treadway, 1984; and Van Tilburg & Moore, 1989), very little research through empirically-based inquiry, with the exception of Galbraith and Sundet (1988), has been conducted. As Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) suggest "it is of utmost importance in a learning society that as many adults as possible take advantage of opportunities to continue their education. That goal (and the self-interest of adult educators) cannot be achieved in the absence of a better understanding of deterrents to participation . . ." (p. 188). To begin understanding the educational as well as the other issues and concerns of the rural environment, it is time to address the rural population as a unique subculture (DeYoung, 1987). Van Tilburg and Moore (1989) suggest that the concept of rural should be viewed as a specific subculture in which a group of people share a unique life experience, unique qualities, common characteristics, attitudes, values and motivations. Clearly the data in this study support such a conclusion. By accepting rural as a subculture, adult educators who are interested in combating deterrents and increasing participation can begin to develop strategies that focus on the uniqueness of rural adult learners and their communities.

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