CASE STUDIES ON SUCCESS VARIABLES IN OLDER ADULT LEARNER PROGRAMS

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What factors or variables are likely to influence the stability and success of older adult learner programs? How do administrators view their programs in regard to these factors? In what directions might a success variables perspective point older adult learner programming, in both philosophy and structure? A modified case study and follow-up study addressed the above questions in a project with three community colleges located in Tucson, Arizona, Brooklyn, New York, and Cleveland, Ohio. In the initial case study, conducted by the author in 1989–90, the author studied the three programs from the viewpoint of four variables likely to influence program stability or success. Those variables were leadership, funding stability and sources, institutional support, and organizational structure and placement in the institution. In 1996–97, the author conducted a follow-up study of the three programs, to note changes and determine further influence of the four variables. The modified case study methodology included data gathering by administrator interview instrument and telephone interviews with the three community college program administrators, in addition to review of program materials from the programs studied. Variables used in the studies were adapted from studies of formal gerontology programs. This article describes the history and operation of the three community college programs, reports results and conclusions from the original and follow-up studies, and closes with working hypotheses arising from the study.

Studying selected older adult learner programs from the perspective of success factors is appropriate because of the difficulties such programs often have in surviving and/or thriving. Limited funding, staffing, and office space, along with marginal status, are just a few of the problems these programs frequently face. Case studies of such programs offer an individualized look at programs, providing practitioners with a possible comparison to their own programs, and a potential contribution to the growing older adult learner literature.

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The author studied three community college programs located in Tucson, Arizona, Brooklyn, New York, and Cleveland, Ohio, focusing on ways in which four specific variables or factors were likely to influence the success and stability of the programs. Those variables were leadership, funding sources and stability, organizational placement in the institution, and institutional support.

PROGRAM SUCCESS FACTORS

Even though the factors of organizational placement in the institution, funding, leadership, and institutional support are important for long-term success of older learner programs (Peterson, 1983), these particular factors have seldom been studied in these programs.

One facet of educational gerontology in which the variables have been studied, however, is that of formal gerontology programs at postsecondary institutions. A major study by Peterson, Kerin, and Douglass (1991) examined formal gerontology instructional programs in American colleges and universities and identified four critical variables which influence program development and stability. Those variables were (1) organizational placement of the formal gerontology program, (2) financial resources of the program, (3) academic authority of the program, and (4) leadership of the program. One example of their findings was that organizational placement appeared to exert great influence upon program stability and success, because placement tends to indicate the access that the program director has to high administrative levels, such as vice president and above. Because particular success variables are both so influential and so applicable to various types of educational gerontology programming, they deserve study in older adult learner programs.

Manheimer, Snodgrass, and Moskow-McKenzie (1995) formulated an organizational development taxonomy that provides a useful context for study of success variables in older adult learner programs. Their 15-stage Critical Pathways Taxonomy, based in part on Peterson's (1983) 15 program planning phases, identified steps or decision points for programs as they go through the process of planning, needs assessment, implementation, and evaluation and refinement of programs. Some of their decision points or markers for program choices include the aspects of organizational positioning, funding and resources, continuity and growth.

The Critical Pathways Taxonomy also singles out the aspect of institutional rationales as being a critical decision point in older adult learner programming. A host institution's reasons and expectations for sponsoring an older learner program can exert a powerful

influence on the program, with possibilities for either undergirding or undermining the program.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data gathering method for both the initial case study and the follow-up study consisted of the development, mailing, completion, and return of an administrator interview instrument, supplemented by multiple telephone interviews with the three community college administrators. Older adult learner program materials from the colleges were reviewed to determine the history and operation of the programs.

Variables utilized in the initial case study were adapted from an unpublished draft by Peterson, Kerin, and Douglass, and in the follow-up study from Peterson, Kerin, and Douglass (1991). Program stability or success in the study was defined as the likelihood of program survival for the foreseeable future. The three older adult learner programs selected for the study were chosen, in part, because of their identification as successful programs at one or more national gerontology conferences.

To maintain the study's internal validity, frequent member checks were conducted with the three administrators participating in the study, asking them to review and confirm data and data interpretations for accuracy and plausibility. Peer examination consisted of colleague review and comment on data and findings.

Administrators participating in the 1989–90 study were Iris Whittington-Gold of Cuyahoga Community College, Dr. Barbara Ginsberg of Kingsborough Community College, and Helen Murdoch of Pima Community College. Both Ginsberg and Murdoch took part in the 1996–97 follow-up study. Janice Dzigiel, who replaced Whittington-Gold at Cuyahoga Community College in 1996, represented Cuyahoga in the follow-up study.

The designation of modified case study is used to indicate that interviews and other data gathering occurred by interview instrument mailings and by telephone, rather than by site visits to the institutions in the study.

1989–90 DESCRIPTION OF COLLEGES STUDIED

Table 1 describes general program characteristics of the three colleges studied. All three operate in urban settings, although Cuyahoga extends its program beyond Cleveland into county sites. Pima and Cuyahoga both heavily emphasize noncredit classes for senior citizens, and place less emphasis on tuition-free auditing of regular

TABLE 1 College Program Characteristics

| | | Program Characteristics | | |
Colleges	Location	Start-up year	Minimum student age	Number served
Cuyahoga	Cleveland, Ohio	1974	Age 55	1,750
Kingsborough	Brooklyn, New York	1981	Age 65	950
Pima	Tucson, Arizona	1974	Age 55	100–300 credit 2,600 noncredit

Note. As of 1989–90 for community colleges in study.

classes. Kingsborough is degree-related, offering academic credit courses only. At Cuyahoga, senior students enrolling to audit credit classes do so through the Admissions Office. At Pima, senior students enroll for both noncredit and credit classes in the same education office. Because the Pima and Cuyahoga Programs emphasize non-credit courses, and Kingsborough focuses primarily on granting degrees, it is assumed that different goals and outcomes exist among the programs.

Kingsborough Community College

Kingsborough Community College, the only one of the three college programs operating from a single campus and with a degree-oriented program, offers the "My Turn" program. "My Turn" provides tuition-free credit privileges for New York residents who are age 65 by the first day of class. No particular degree or educational background is required to enter the program, because Kingsborough, part of the City University of New York (CUNY), was granted permission to waive CUNY's college admission requirements for high school or GED (General Educational Development Diplomas) diplomas. Senior students without a high school diploma who satisfactorily complete 24 credits at the College can apply for a GED from the New York State Education Department. With the GED completed, students can work toward a college degree or take courses for pleasure. The only cost is a $25.00 registration fee per semester. The director of "My Turn," Dr. Barbara Ginsberg, a full professor, operates the program on released time from her teaching duties.

Cuyahoga Community College

Cuyahoga Community College is notable for its active senior leadership program, its extensive course offerings and sites, and the revenue it generates. The "Senior Adult Education" program, oper-

ating at three "Elders Campus" locations and 40 sites in the county, reached 1,750 students in the fall quarter of 1989. The program serves students age 55 and older.

Most classes are eight weeks long, and the course listing appears extensive and comprehensive. The full-time director, Iris Whittington-Gold, has four half-time program assistants, and is responsible for gerontology programming in addition to her senior education duties. The greater Cleveland campus sites are augmented by locations at nutrition sites, recreation centers, senior housing, churches, and hospitals, and the program cooperates with a multitude of agencies and organizations. In 1988 the program generated approximately $89,000.00 in revenue through its registration fees.

Pima Community College

Pima Community College, operating in urban Tucson, offers non-credit classes for people age 55 and older through its "Senior Education" program, and reduced-fee credit classes on a space-available basis in the "Senior Option" program, also for age 55 students. The program operates both at Tucson locations and at the Green Valley Retirement Center location, and provides outreach classes by request at mobile home parks, apartment complexes, and recreation centers. One hundred to 300 students took credit classes in the fall of 1989, whereas 2,600 noncredit students enrolled at the Tucson site and 1,200 enrolled at the Green Valley site.

Pima differs from the other two college programs in regard to its initial funding and to its 1989–90 transition period. The program began in 1974 with a grant from the Administration on Aging. In both funding and placement in the institution the program is undergoing current change, although the director feels that the future of the program is secure. The full-time coordinator, Helen Murdoch, shares a secretary and a receptionist with other programs, and she also directs a college study tour program, which attracts seniors.

1989–90 FINDINGS ON INFLUENCE OF VARIABLES

The case study used the factors of leadership, organizational structure and placement in the institution, and funding sources and stability to examine the success and stability of the three older adult learner programs. The variable of leadership included both professional staff leadership and older adult learner volunteer and paid leadership. Organizational placement also included the aspect of institutional support, or perception of support.

Professional Leadership

The variable of leadership is a compelling one in regard to the pro-
grams studied, both in professional leadership and in leadership of
the older learners in the program. The three administrators inter-
viewed for the study appear to operate at a high level of commitment,
motivation, and ability. In fact, these administrators bore a striking
resemblance to the gerontology instructional leaders described in a
study of success factors in formal gerontology programs (Peterson,
Kerin, & Douglass, 1991). In the report on their exploratory study of
critical factors influencing gerontology program development and
stability, these researchers portrayed the gerontology instructional
leaders/directors as being effective, committed, recognized as being
outstanding leaders, and being identified as "Mr. or Ms. Gerontol-
ogy" on campus. The senior education leaders at the three college
programs studied appeared to share some of these characteristics.
The senior education leaders also appeared to share the leadership
quandary of their counterparts in gerontology instruction in regard
to dependence of the programs on a single leader; that is, although
program leadership was viewed as the key element in program growth
and development, the dependence on one leader meant that the
program might collapse if that director left the position (Peterson,
Wendt, & Douglass 1994).

LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS

When asked to describe any problems in leadership existing in their
programs, the administrators in the study mentioned staffing,
funding, and technical needs. "I should be doing "My Turn" full-time,
but funding prevents it," said Dr. Barbara Ginsberg at Kingsborough.
Whittington-Gold at Cuyahoga said, "I need a full-time assistant for
so large and varied a program on several campuses. I also need to
look into training an understudy. When I leave this position, I want
the concepts and ideals of the program to be passed on."

Helen Murdock at Pima said, "I need an information analyst who
could train me and consult in such areas as computer information
utilization, scheduling, and fee problems. And now that our program
is in a revision period, we can no longer avoid our fiscal problems
and must face fiscal reality."

All three administrators have other duties in addition to their
older adult learner programming duties. Ginsberg's classroom teach-
ing and her direction of "My Turn" each take approximately half her
time. Murdock's duties include the direction of a travel program.

Whittington-Gold's job description includes directing several other gerontology-related activities.

Senior Leadership

In regard to the leadership of senior students, the three programs in 1989–90 displayed different extremes. Cuyahoga, by far, utilized senior leadership most broadly, both paid and volunteer. First, the program has an active volunteer advisory committee, about which Whittington-Gold comments, ''It's a good feeling to share leadership and respect with seniors as equals.'' Three active standing committees on marketing, evaluation and hospitality also play a vital leadership role, according to the director. Secondly, the program utilizes retired educators and professionals as paid emeriti instructors, in an extensive course offering.

Pima Community College, on the other hand, utilizes no senior leadership at all. The director wonders, she says, whether the seniors in her program really want a leadership role in the program, or whether they want to be free of that role. She plans to survey the group to determine the answer to this leadership question. At Kingsborough there is no advisory committee, and all instruction is done by regular faculty. However, ''My Turn'' does utilize senior leadership to some extent in its senior club, with an executive committee, which meets monthly.

Organizational Placement

Examination of the placement of the three programs within their organizations offered interesting comparisons. In 1989 when this study began, each of the three programs fell under a different college division, perhaps illustrating the diversity in senior education organizational placement. Cuyahoga was, and is, under continuing education; Kingsborough was, and is, under special programs; Pima was under community services but was moved to continuing education during the course of this study. Perhaps senior education programs ''float'' within the organization depending on the need of the institution and/or the program.

At Pima, the shift in organizational placement from community services to continuing education was beneficial, according to the director, resulting in better student services, and more flexibility in evening and weekend programming. The director's comments on the shift in placement perhaps underscore the important relationship between appropriate placement and program stability or success.

However, the transition at Pima is still underway, and whether the placement under continuing education will stabilize is not known at this writing.

Institutional Support

Peterson (1983) indicated that wherever the gerontology senior education program is placed within an organization, it's beneficial for the director to report to the highest level of administration possible, gaining access to a dean or vice president for visibility and financial resources. Another common need is for a higher level administrator who will be supportive and helpful in program development and resource development. Institutional support refers not only to high-level campus administrator support, but also to the perceived relevance of the program as it relates to the institutional mission, and whether the program contributes to campus prestige (Peterson, Kerin, & Douglass, 1991).

The three programs studied varied in regard to institutional support and commitment. The president of Cuyahoga played a major role in the launching of the senior program, providing both resource development and exceptional encouragement, according to Whittington-Gold. Perhaps his influence still lingers in this successful program, even though he is now president of another community college. The Cuyahoga director reports to the Dean of Continuing Education and feels that she continues to have good staff support. When asked about institutional support, the Kingsborough administrator in the study responded that the college president and vice president ''praise the program'' and that the college ''gives her whatever she needs'' for the program's operation. In fact, a vice president was instrumental in launching the Kingsborough program, in much the same way that the Cuyahoga president helped to initiate the Cuyahoga program.

Funding Stability and Sources

All three of the programs studied had uncertain budget situations to manage—Pima, with the demand to be self-supporting; Cuyahoga, with the replacement of two full-time staff members with part-time staff; and Kingsborough with no budget for increased staffing needs. They typify the varied funding situations existing among college senior education programs, and they are a reminder that stable and increased funding for such programs is difficult to generate and maintain. Few simple solutions exist for the financial difficulties facing

these program administrators, and finding financial resources will continue to be a struggle.

Even though Pima and Cuyahoga attempt to support their programs through fees, income stability may eventually suffer because fees charged in older learner programs, according to Peterson (1983), are usually minimal and do not cover instruction costs. Peterson further indicated that financing of educational programs will continue to be a major factor in program stability, but that foundation and government funds are likely to be scarce. Although an Administration on Aging grant allowed Pima to launch the senior program, hard dollars are now difficult to come by for Pima. Even though Cuyahoga and Kingsborough produce respectable revenue from their programs, budget difficulties still face them as their institutions weigh staff costs and other factors. The Kingsborough director says that program fees pay for the secretary's salary and for mailing and publicity; however, there is no budget allocated for professional staff except the director's released time from other duties.

Sustained financial support remains a critical variable for program stability. Unless programs turn to higher student fees or other alternatives during these difficult financial times, financial uncertainty in programming will continue to be an issue.

1996–97 FOLLOW-UP STUDY FINDINGS

When contacted to participate in a follow-up case study of their programs, the administrators at Pima Community College and Kingsborough Community College readily agreed to become involved. Janice Dzigiel, who had replaced Iris Whittington-Gold at Cuyahoga Community College in 1996, also consented to participate.

1996–97 Major Program Changes

Since the 1989–90 study, major changes had occurred at the case study schools in two success factor areas—professional leadership and organizational placement in the institution.

CHANGES AND TRANSITIONS IN PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

The staff change at Cuyahoga represented a significant transition for the program. Whittington-Gold had been with the program since its inception, and had formed and molded the program with her own unique style and skills over more than 20 years. Loss of a longtime

director usually launches a stressful transition period for any program, and the Cuyahoga program was no exception. However, the transition took a positive turn for two reasons. In 1992 a full-time assistant was added to the staff, allowing Whittington-Gold increased opportunity to delegate aspects of her job. Most important, Whittington-Gold's successor, Janice Dzigiel, had previous experience working in the Cuyahoga Senior Adult Education program. As a former, part-time program assistant, Dzigiel had supervised specific projects and programs, working closely with Whittington-Gold until the need for full-time benefits had necessitated a move to another position. Assuming direction of the program was relatively easy for Dzigiel, because she was very familiar with the program's activities and philosophy.

Although the Pima and Cuyahoga programs haven't yet experienced leadership transitions, their administrators have strong feelings about the qualities and abilities of those who will one day replace them. Murdoch wants her replacement to value and implement visiting older adult learner classes at least annually, and to emphasize the importance of each individual in the program by knowing the names of at least some participants and having personal interaction with them. Murdoch also underscored the importance of the administrator who replaces her being able to stay in touch with instructors and contact persons at program sites once classes are scheduled and advertised. Her replacement, she hopes, will also place high value on low student fees, disability-accessible sites, and offering a wide variety of topics throughout the metropolitan area.

Ginsberg indicated that the leader who will one day replace her at Kingsborough should have a clear vision of how older adult education enhances the quality of life of older adults. Her replacement should have a knowledge of administrative structure, along with public relations and outreach skills.

ORGANIZATIONAL PLACEMENT CHANGES

The most striking change among the three schools, in addition to the professional staff change at Cuyahoga, was in the success factor area of organizational placement. All three programs had been moved to new divisions and reported to different individuals in the college hierarchy. Table 2 summarizes the changes in organizational placement of the three programs during the periods of both studies.

The factor of organizational placement influences program stability and success in several ways, because of the access it provides to higher levels of administration. First, older adult learner programs

TABLE 2 Organizational Placement Characteristics of Colleges

Characteristics	Colleges					
	Kingsborough		Cuyahoga		Pima	
	1989	1996	1989	1996	1989	1996
Placement	Special Programs	Faculty Dean	Continuing Education	Division of Continuing Professional Education	Community Service	Corporate & Community Education
Reports to	Dean of Students	Faculty Dean	Dean, Academic Affairs	Asst. VP of Continuing Professional Education	Dean or Executive Dean	Director Community Education
Title	Coordinator	Director	Director, Sr. Adult Educ/ Gerontology	Director, Center for Applied Gerontology	Sr. Education Coordinator	Sr. Education Coordinator

with limited access to the Dean or above level will have limited
success when seeking increased funding or program expansion.
Second, formal communication channels are often determined by
organizational placement of programs. Program leaders may find
themselves hindered or blocked in contacting influential campus
administrators because of the program's placement in the institution.
Third, organizational placement and follow-up placement, at least in
the case of the three programs in the study may be based on institu-
tional convenience, rather than on program needs and priorities.

Senior Leadership

The convictions of Helen Murdock at Pima Community College about
participant disinterest in senior leadership had not changed since the
1989–90 study. Although the other two program leaders felt strongly
about the ongoing utilization of senior participant leadership in their
programs, Murdock continued to feel that the senior participants at
Pima had little interest in leadership roles in the program. She
observed that the Pima participants, in both 1989–90 and 1996–97, pre-
ferred to be involved in their classes only, and showed little interest
in being leaders in the program.

In contrast, Janice Dzigiel at Cuyahoga emphasized the strong role
of senior leaders in program planning and evaluation. She said that
she and her staff regularly spend "considerable time working with
advisory committees who take the program planning and evaluation
process very seriously." She attributed a significant aspect of the
program's quality to the leadership of advisory committees, who also
assist in planning courses and identifying faculty.

1996–97 Program Issues in Funding Stability and Institutional Support

The variables of funding and institutional support are inextricably
linked for older learner programs, because the provision of at least
some type of financial support is such an integral funding source for
programs. Institutional support reaches far beyond the financing of
programs, rooted in host institution mission and rationales for pro-
gramming.

Utilizing state and national initiatives in older adult learning to
gain funding stability and institutional support may offer possibilities
for community colleges, helping decision makers recognize that older
learner priorities reach beyond the local level. The state of Califor-
nia, for example, through the state Chancellor's Office, has brought

together community college and secondary school adult education leaders to set standards and curriculum guidelines for older learner programs in the state; a draft of the working paper they developed will eventually be available to institutions wanting more information.

Both institutional support and funding continue to be challenging factors for the three older adult learner programs involved in the case study, as they continue to face minimal operating budgets and difficulty expanding the funding base. The administrators listed the following funding problems in 1996–97: (1) generating adequate income on a regular basis, (2) justifying institutional program budget on an annual basis, (3) gaining program control of budget and funding, and (4) generating sufficient enrollment for each class to become a reality.

Dzigiel at Cuyahoga considered her annual institutional funding to be stable, even though she must continue to justify the budget annually. Because student fee income varies by enrollment and quarter of the year, she continues to be concerned about ongoing generating of adequate income.

At Kingsborough, Ginsberg's program generates fees that fund a full-time secretary and provides operating funds. However, the program continues to function without any specific institutional budget line item; her "My Turn" coordinator position is linked to her teaching position, from which the institution provides her released time. If the institution changes "My Turn" from credit to audit basis, Ginsberg fears that the program would eventually have serious problems surviving.

Their funding problems are similar to those of many older adult learner programs throughout the United States. Although program administrators may excel at how much they can accomplish on limited funding, program growth can continue to require increased space and support staff. In addition, program stability problems can flow from unexpected funding cuts within the host institution. Older learner programs often have low status or marginal status in the host institution, and seldom manage to be in the main stream of resource allocation. Older learner program growth remains somewhat unpredictable, because no coordinated national effort, policy, or public funds undergrid the programs (Manheimer et al., 1995).

When administrators in the study were asked to describe specific reasons for their program success, they listed the following factors: (1) vision and tenacity of program administrators over an extended period, (2) involvement of older adult participants in program planning, (3) reasonable program fees, (4) revenue-producing ability of

program, (5) sustained financial support from host institution, (6) providing scholarships for low-income participants, (7) quality instructors who are able to be flexible in both content and pace, and (8) personal attention by staff to program participants. The list underscores the importance of funding, institutional support, and professional and senior leadership to administrators of the programs studied.

Institutional support for older learner programs might best be viewed as long-term and visible institutional commitment, which is linked to specific tangible support. Only if program leaders deliberately position their programs to be in the flow of institutional decision making can they count on ongoing and long-term institutional support for their programs.

How can older learner program administrators develop such institutional positioning and commitment? Beckman and Ventura-Merkel (1992) set out guidelines that directly address this issue. Included in the guidelines are the following: (1) obtaining support from the college's trustees, as well as the president and other senior-level administrators; (2) identifying older adults as a significant constituency to be served by the college; (3) having a reference to the older adult constituency in all basic institutional documents; (4) identifying a top-level "champion" of older adult programming at the vice presidential level, to see that older adult issues remain on the decision-making agenda; and (5) formalizing college commitments by including references to older students in policy statements.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the manner in which specific variables influenced the stability and success of three older learner programs, and reported on how program administrators viewed their programs in regard to those variables. According to the study's definition of success, the three programs in the case study qualified as successful in both 1989–90 and in 1996–97, in spite of challenges and obstacles in funding, institutional support, organizational placement, and leadership. Administrators clearly identified specific success indicators of their programs. They anticipated the continued operation of their programs for the foreseeable future, although Ginsberg at Kingsborough expressed concern about the possible change from credit to audit in the "My Turn" program. They were thoughtful about the leadership transitions that will eventually transpire in their programs, and listed qualities, skills, and knowledge their replacements should be expected to have.

The final question posed by the study inquired about the directions in which a success factor perspective might point administrators of older adult learner programming, in both philosophy and structure. The following working hypotheses address that question. Although the results cannot be generalized to all or most programs, some practitioners and others interested in older adult learning may find them relevant or useful.

WORKING HYPOTHESES

Professional Staff Leadership

1. Older adult learner programs primarily dependent on a single leader—with no plans laid for development of future leaders—will likely face difficult leadership transitions when that leader retires or moves on. It behooves institutions seeking program stability to organize and implement long-range planning for leadership development, so that leader transitions can transpire without undue hardship and destabilization of programs.

Senior Volunteer Leadership

2. Many senior education programs, partly due to limited staff time, may be failing to utilize the leadership of older adult program participants in planning, teaching, advisory committees, and other essential program functions. A useful strategy may be to train program administrators in effective needs assessment, recruitment, and placement in senior volunteer leadership roles, thereby enriching program stability.

Organizational Placement

3. Possibly because of the marginal status of many older adult learner programs, their initial organizational placement and frequent follow-up placement is likely to be geared to short-term institutional convenience, rather than to long-term program stability and success. Development of institutional, state, and national strategies may be called for to identify and collaborate with leaders at the Dean level and above to assess appropriate placement options for older learner programs. Clarification of appropriate organizational placement could lead to increased program stability in both placement and funding.

Funding Sources/Stability and Institutional Support

4. Local, state, and national strategies may be called for to involve administrators at the Dean level and above in considering what level of income older learner programs should be expected to generate and what commitment community colleges have to underwrite program costs. Institutional rationales should be clarified at host institutions to identify present and future support that older learner program administrators can count on in policy, funding, and organizational placement.

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