
This publication was developed to help educators expand programming to reach limited-resource learners.

Limited-resource learners (defined as having low educational attainment and low literacy skills) tend to avoid participation in adult education. Ironically, those who could benefit from programming the most, participate the least. As adult educators, it is important to develop an understanding of the barriers to participation and then to develop programs designed to overcome these barriers.

Programming for Limited-Resource Families

First a word of caution—while it is critical to have a basic understanding of the values and behavior patterns of limited-resource adults, there is a danger of overgeneralizing and stereotyping. Stereotypes are resistant to change in spite of logic and personal experiences. Generalizations, on the other hand, help to guide our behavior, especially in new situations. If we apply generalizations carefully and try to remain open to variations and individual differences, they can be a valuable tool in developing effective programs.

Characteristics of Limited-Resource Learners

Education. There is no doubt the educationally rich get richer and the educationally poor get poorer. Past failures in school are a major barrier to participation in adult education programs. Individuals who view themselves as academic failures as children often continue to believe they cannot succeed as adult students. Many have great difficulty changing this perception. Unlike middle-class participants who have experienced success and satisfaction in education, limited-resource adults typically avoid participation in educational programs because it represents another potential opportunity for failure.

Low self-esteem. The development of self-esteem is closely related to past successes and achievements. People living in poverty may feel caught in a vicious cycle of failure from which they are unable to escape. They may blame themselves for their situation, even though the causes may be totally beyond their control. Low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness lead to the belief that “the odds are against me and I have no control over my future.” Not surprisingly, limited-resource individuals tend to avoid participation in educational activities since education is not viewed as a step to improving one’s lot in life.

Fear of change. In order to feel safe, we need to live in a predictable world. Coping with erratic change is an on-going dilemma of the poor. In the face of instability and feelings of powerlessness, low-resource people often are fearful of change. Trying new things or even going to new places carries the risk of failure.

Marketing to Reach Your Audience

Plan to put greater time and effort into publicizing programs for limited-resource learners than for most other groups. A multifaceted approach works best.

Develop and use a logo that is easily understood and remembered. Use it on all printed materials you use to publicize programs.

Use a variety of media for marketing including public service announcements on radio and television, notices in the newspaper, and printed flyers and posters. Developing contacts with representatives of your local newspaper, and television and radio stations can be challenging, but is essential to successful marketing.

Network with other social service organizations to include information about your program in their mailings. Ask for permission to put flyers in waiting rooms and offices that provide services to limited-resource clients.

Display posters or flyers in places where limited-resource learners are likely to go (grocery stores, discount stores, laundromats, social service agencies, fast-food restaurants, bowling alleys, food pantries, and churches).

Hire or get volunteer help from a community leader or local resident. Publicizing programs through personal contact is extremely effective in marketing programs.

Planning for Convenience and Relevance to the Learner

Plan presentations carefully, but be flexible. There are times when your audience demonstrates specific needs that have to be addressed before your planned program can be delivered. Being sensitive to learner needs is essential to effective programming.

Develop programs to address real life needs. Use focus groups, interviews, and surveys to identify the concerns of your target audience. Talk to teachers, clergy, agency personnel, and community leaders for additional information.

Studies have shown that limited-resource learners tend to want concrete, “how-to” information. Teach “need-to-know” information rather than “nice-to-know.” Present no more than three or four main ideas in one presentation.

Become informed of and sensitive to cultural values and behavior patterns. Incorporate them into your program.

Offer programs in familiar surroundings such as housing projects, churches, schools, or community centers.

Arrange for transportation or meet in a location serviced by public transportation.

Use volunteers or hire assistants from limited-resource backgrounds to assist with teaching and child care.

Research the services available for limited-resource families in your community. Prepare a flyer with the agency name, address, and telephone number on it to assist in making referrals.

Teaching to Meet Learner Needs

Avoid a school-like atmosphere. Keep learning participatory and informal. Incorporating the learners' experiences and insights into the program and using familiar examples will help make learning relevant and increase active participation.

Offer positive feedback to provide encouragement, correct misunderstandings, and help improve skills. Be generous with praise and encouragement, but be certain your remarks are sincere.

Treat people with respect and dignity regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, or sexual orientation.

Work with the group to develop specific goals that are realistic and achievable.

Dress appropriately so that learners will feel their clothing is appropriate and acceptable.

Be an active listener. Concentrate on what the learners are saying. Respond in a way that is helpful and demonstrates you value their contribution.

Use nonverbal feedback. Nodding, leaning forward, smiling, or establishing eye contact indicates you are paying attention.

Ask for clarification or more information when needed.

Phrase open-ended questions that require an explanation rather than just a "yes" or "no." Questions that begin with "how," "why," or "tell me about" often encourage better communication than questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no."

Use correct grammar and vocabulary similar to that used by your audience.

Present the same information in a variety of ways including demonstrations, posters, pictures, models, videos, and slides.

Use educational games. Award small prizes to encourage participation and increase interest.

Solicit donations from local merchants to provide door prizes and other incentives for participation.

Reinforce learning with take-home fact sheets and newsletters.

Send postcards to remind the learners of the time, location, and topic of future meetings.

Selecting Appropriate Materials

Select visuals that reflect the racial and ethnic identity of the group.

Keep the visuals uncluttered and simple to read. Limit each to one or two main ideas. Use bold colors on a neutral background. Print words across the page, not up and down or diagonally.

Use materials written at a reading level that is appropriate to the learners' literacy skills.

Test the materials and teaching activities with individuals that are representative of your target audience. Modify the materials and activities according to results of the pilot test.

For Additional Information

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