

# What Universities Can Do

## to Strengthen U.S. Adult Basic Skills Efforts

A "Can-Do" Guide of  
The Open Door Collective  
([www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org))  
[www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org)

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Edition



### Audiences and Purposes

This guide is primarily for American universities, to help them better understand why and how universities can support adult basic skills efforts in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

It is also for adult basic education providers, policy makers, and funders interested in supporting effective collaborations between universities and adult basic skills service providers.

The document is one in a series designed to help various stakeholder groups

better understand why and how they can work with adult basic educators to elevate the quality and reach of adult basic skills efforts nationwide.

Because of the historic leadership roles that universities have played in the adult basic skills field, we have made them the focus of this guide-- one of the first in our series.

ODC welcomes feedback and suggestions from readers about how this document can be further revised and made useful.

### U.S. Adult Basic Skills Efforts: Achievements and Needs

U.S. adult basic skills programs provide instruction, assessment, academic and career advising, and other supports to adults and out-of-school youth. These programs help learners meet a range of goals, which might include the improvement of reading, writing, listening, and speaking; strengthening of numeracy and technology skills; passing of high school equivalency and college entrance exams; and developing career and academic plans and associated skills, knowledge, and connections. Learners can also develop health literacy and financial literacy; strengthen their self-confidence and other affective and social skills; and otherwise deal with obstacles that can block their ability to participate fully in work, family, and civic roles.<sup>2</sup>

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### The Open Door Collective

ODC is a national network of adult educators and others who promote high-quality adult basic education as a tool for poverty reduction and forward-thinking social and economic development. (Visit [www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org).)

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Adult education services are provided in a number of organizational settings, including public school systems, community colleges, job training and employment centers, workplaces, labor unions, libraries, immigrant resettlement agencies, religious institutions, prisons and prisoner re-entry agencies, and child-care centers. Funding and in-kind supports come from a mix of public (i.e., federal, state, and local) and private sources (i.e., charitable foundations, corporations, employer-union agreements).

Adult basic skills programs frequently collaborate with other organizations like those mentioned above, in formal and informal partnerships designed to help students and service providers more efficiently achieve multiple goals. The partners collaborate to develop and implement integrated curricula; assess client needs; make services more accessible in terms of time and location; link learners to relevant support services; pool resources (e.g., facilities, staff, expertise, equipment); and do joint fund-raising, advocacy, recruitment, and raising of public-awareness.

The adult basic skills field can point to many positive outcomes for learners (e.g., in terms of people served, skills developed, exams passed, certificates achieved, advancement to post-secondary education, career paths created and jobs gained, and lives changed). Adult education also positively impacts the other stakeholders with whom adult learners interact. For example, employers report improvements in efficiency and collaboration of workers who participate in work-related basic skills programs; families benefit when parents in family literacy programs are better able to support their children's learning; families also benefit when family members who've participated in financial literacy and health literacy activities can better manage the incomes, work benefits, and health of their families and of themselves.

Basic education programs can help immigrants productively navigate the challenges and opportunities of life in a new society. Adult educators working with re-entry agencies can help formerly incarcerated individuals to deal with the multiple barriers they face when trying to re-integrate into work, family, and civic roles. Adult education can also help people with disabilities to develop particular skills they need for productive and rewarding lives.

Despite these achievements, the adult basic education field continues to be limited in terms of the quantity and quality of services it provides. Publicly-funded programs reach only five percent of the estimated 36 million individuals who have basic skills-related challenges.<sup>3</sup> Programs are often challenged by low and unpredictable budgets, limited training and career opportunities for staff, reliance on less-than-efficient instructional and other practices and resources, and an inability to customize services to the multiple needs and goals of a diverse clientele.

Nonetheless, the field has continued to develop – even if sometimes erratically – through ongoing refinement of policies and implementation of initiatives designed to introduce new models of instruction, professional development, uses of digital technologies, and partnerships. While these initiatives are subject to fluctuations in political climates, leadership, and budgets, the field has developed a core of principles, professionals, models, and other promising resources that can be built on.



## Why Universities Might Get Involved in U.S. Adult Basic Skills Efforts

Most U.S. universities see their mission as in some way helping U.S. and other societies to deal effectively with basic human needs. They do this through instruction, research, leadership and advocacy, community service, and provision of resources (e.g., finances, staff, facilities, tools) to worthy efforts in science and technology, education, public policy, healthcare, engineering, and other fields.

The gaps in the basic skills of millions of adults and out-of-school youth, now widely recognized by employers and post-secondary education institutions, are a major problem for the U.S.<sup>4</sup> These gaps impact not just individuals, but the families and communities they are part of. Basic skills limitations can hamper those individuals' work-readiness and financial security, their health and that of their families, and the school-readiness of their children. It blocks individuals from advancing in their education and from integrating into their communities.

Given the limitations that adult basic education programs are working with and the potential benefit of well-designed and – supported adult basic education for so many individuals and stakeholders, universities can and should consider how they might step up and play much more active roles in the solving of this major, complex problem.

In so doing, universities can not only help solve a problem beyond their campus walls but also better understand the education-related needs and related resources in their communities and states – and on their own campuses. Universities can use this knowledge to:

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- identify focal points and partners for the creation of relevant:
  - research and development activities for staff and students;
  - community service activities for university staff, faculty, and students;
  - educational supports for the universities' own staff.
- reach, recruit, and serve previously-underserved student populations who might otherwise experience barriers to participating in higher education. Such goals are in keeping with many universities' missions to provide education in an equitable, community-serving manner to a diverse student population. Tapping into the expertise of the adult basic education field can, for example, help universities develop instructional, assessment, and advising strategies to better serve historically under-served populations. These can include university students who are first-generation college students, non-native speakers of English, students with learning challenges, those who may struggle with soft skills such as effective communication and self-management, and students who are older than the standard undergraduate population and for various reasons were never able or encouraged to enroll in college when they were younger.<sup>5</sup>
- improve public relations and partnerships with stakeholders who benefit from a well-educated, engaged populace. (These might include a range of socio-economic groups, employers, labor unions, healthcare institutions, public safety agencies, and public and private sector donors.)
- make their campus facilities and communications more user-friendly and welcoming to visitors who might have basic skills limitations.
- generate resources (e.g., grants, contracts, tuition) for the universities themselves.

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*"Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development, an essential complement to investment in roads, dams, clinics, and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.... Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential."*

Kofi Annan

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# How Universities Can Get Involved

The following examples show various ways that U.S. universities have been involved in U.S. adult basic skills efforts:

## 1. Research

Universities have played important roles in carrying out research on various aspects of adult basic skills education in the United States. They have helped to clarify the basic skills gaps of segments of the population and practices that programs are using and might use. Examples include:

- Georgia State University: With funding from the U.S. Department of Education, GSU's Center for the Study of Adult Literacy has worked with other partners to study the underlying cognitive and motivational factors that impact adults who struggle with reading. As part of this project, the Center has also developed a reading intervention designed to help those adults improve their reading abilities. (Visit <http://csal.gsu.edu/content/homepage>.)
- Georgetown University: Research at Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce has focused on the role that basic skills play in career pathways and employability. (Visit <https://cew.georgetown.edu/publications/journals-articles/>.)
- Harvard University: From 1996 to 2007, Harvard's Graduate School of Education hosted the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). With funding from the U.S. Department of Education and other sources and working with other universities and agencies, NCSALL served as a hub for the conducting and dissemination of research on adult basic skills issues. (Visit <http://www.ncsall.net>.) A faculty member in Harvard's Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences has been a national leader in laying a research base for work in the area of health literacy (and other contextualized uses of basic skills) for lower-literate adults. (Visit <https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/135/2015/07/Health-Literacy-Overview-Slides.pdf>.)

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- Indiana University: Faculty in IU's Department of Language Education did early pioneering work on adolescent and adult literacy, workplace literacy, and the use of technology in language and literacy learning. (Visit <https://education.indiana.edu/faculty/departments/LCLE.html> .)
- John Jay College of Criminal Justice's Prisoner Reentry Institute conducts research, community outreach, and advocacy in support of removing barriers to higher education for inmates and formerly-incarcerated individuals. This population is disproportionately challenged by low basic skills and school-completion rates. Research shows the positive impact post-secondary education can have on reducing criminal recidivism and incarceration and ensuring returnees' positive reintegration. (Visit <http://johnjaypri.org/educational-initiatives/higher-education-policy/>.)
- Ohio State University: OSU's Center on Education and Training for Employment operated various components of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ERIC-ACVE) for 34 years, with operations ceasing in 2003. OSU did this work with federal funding through collaborations with other universities (e.g., Syracuse University and Northern Illinois University) over the years. At the time of its closing, ERIC-ACVE's web site had over 30,000 unique visits per month. Users found a range of short and more-in-depth documents that summarized research on many aspects of work-related learning, including workplace basics skills, a topic which was the focus of increasing attention from policy makers, adult educators, employers, labor unions, and other stakeholders at that time. Fortunately, the documents stored in the ERI-ACVE have largely been preserved and are still available. (Visit <https://www.calpro-online.org/eric/docs/ericfile-fall03.html> and <https://www.calpro-online.org/eric/ericfile.asp> .)

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- Pennsylvania State University: Penn State's Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy has conducted research on career pathways, student leadership, immigrant learners, digital literacy, the connection of health with adult basic skills, GED graduates' participation in higher education, rural and urban adult learners, family literacy (through the Goodling Institute for Family Literacy), and other topics. (Visit <https://ed.psu.edu/isal/research/>.)
- Portland State University: PSU's Department of Applied Linguistics has conducted extensive research on adult second language acquisition, digital literacy, workplace literacy, and the longitudinal impacts of adult literacy education, among other topics. (Visit <https://www.pdx.edu/linguistics/>.)
- Rutgers University: The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development has conducted research on how employment centers can better serve adults with limited literacy skills and on the basic skills demands of various occupations. (Visit <http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu/>.)



RU's Center for Women and Work has researched the uses of online occupational training for low-income women. (Visit [https://books.google.tg/books/about/Not\\_Just\\_Getting\\_By.html?id=zGHjU-Uyd50C&printsec=frontcover&source=kp\\_read\\_button&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.tg/books/about/Not_Just_Getting_By.html?id=zGHjU-Uyd50C&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false).) The Rutgers Graduate School of Education was a key partner in the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (described above under "Harvard University"). Faculty have provided leadership for independent adult literacy education journals, including the Coalition on Adult Basic Education journal and the upcoming ProLiteracy International Adult Literacy Education journal.

- University of Massachusetts: The UMass Center for International Education focuses primarily on formal and non-formal education (including basic education) in developing countries. But some CIE faculty and graduate students have also done important research on various aspects of adult basic skills education in this country, including a longitudinal study of professional development for adult educators and participatory approaches to literacy education in the United States. A number of CIE graduates have gone on to leadership roles in the U.S. adult literacy field, blending lessons learned in international models with U.S.-based work. (Visit <https://www.umass.edu/cie/>.)

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- University of Pennsylvania: Literacy.org at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education is a collaboration of the National Center for Adult Literacy and the International Literacy Institute. These components of Literacy.org have, for more than two decades, conducted research on literacy development for adults and children in both the U.S. and developing countries. NCAL's research has focused on adult education and technology, assessment, intergenerational literacy, multi-disciplinary approaches, professional development, and multimedia instructional design. ILI, established by UNESCO and the University of Pennsylvania in 1994, provides leadership in research, development, and training in the broad field of international literacy and educational development, with an emphasis on developing countries. (Visit [http://www.literacy.org/about\\_us](http://www.literacy.org/about_us).) Also at U.Penn., research at the National Center for Fathers and Families is focusing on intergenerational literacy, particularly within African-American and Latino families; young fathers in urban settings; education, literacy and health; incarcerated parents and their families; and children of incarcerated parents. (Visit <https://scholar.gse.upenn.edu/gadsden>.)
- University of Tennessee at Knoxville: The University's Center for Literacy, Education, and Employment (CLEE) has studied and developed adult literacy education as a tool for workforce, family, and civic participation. Projects have included development of a self-advocacy curriculum to help adults transition to post-secondary education, support for the Equipped for the Future and LINC'S initiatives of the National Institute for Literacy, and assistance for employers wishing to hire people with disabilities. (Visit <https://clee.utk.edu>.)
- University of Texas: In the 1970s, UT at Austin conducted a groundbreaking study of the literacy abilities of U.S. adults. This Adult Performance Level (APL) Study estimated adults' abilities to apply literacy skills to five categories of adult responsibility: occupations, consumer roles, civic (government and law) engagement, health maintenance, and community engagement. The study's estimates of adults able to perform these tasks at low, medium, and advanced levels became the basis for adult literacy initiatives at local, state, and national levels over the subsequent two decades. (Visit <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED185113>.)

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*"When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves'."*

Lao Tzu

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## 2. Professional development

Universities provide professional training to adult educators and other stakeholders to prepare them for various roles they might play in a range of adult education specialty areas. (Visit <https://www.mastersportal.com/search/#q=ci-82|di-290|lv-master|tc-EUR&start=20> for links to many examples.) These specialties include adult basic education and related areas such as workforce development. For those who want to study adult basic education per se, this training takes the form of graduate and undergraduate courses, conferences, and certificate and licensing programs (including online programs). Examples include:

- Empire State College, part of the State University of New York system, offers a master's degree program in adult learning. ESC tends to serve older students and this program is geared to individuals interested in working in adult basic education programs (GED completion), literacy

programs, higher education, community or corporate educational training programs, and for those interested in adult learning for social change and community engagement. (Visit

<https://www.esc.edu/graduate-studies/masters-degrees/education-programs/ma-adult-learning/> .)

- Hamline University's ATLAS (ABE Teaching and Learning Advancement System) is funded by the Minnesota Department of Education to operate the state's professional development system for adult basic education practitioners. Participants develop expertise in basic skills teaching (reading, writing, language, and math), as well as development of career pathways and transitions/soft skills. Professional development activities (job-embedded cohorts, study circles, regional conferences, workshops, online courses and communities of practice, etc.) are designed based on input from practitioners in the field. ATLAS also provides several online resource libraries for adult educators. Hamline University's School of Education offers certificate programs in ABE, Adult ESL, and TEFL. (Visit <http://atlasabe.org> .)
- New York University: NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study has offered a service-learning course in which undergraduates volunteer in local adult basic skills programs and, through reflection, discussion, and additional research, build their understanding of the adult basic skills problem and of potential

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solutions. Students and faculty in the Gallatin Writing Program have also published an annual collection of writings by New York City adult literacy students and hosted an annual reading and celebration of those writings. The Writing Program also hosts an annual day-long conference for local adult educators on strategies for adult writing instruction. (Visit <https://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing/literacyproject.html#literacyproject> and [http://www.pauljurmo.info/pauljurmo/Writings\\_files/Ivory%20Tower%20Sept%202003.pdf](http://www.pauljurmo.info/pauljurmo/Writings_files/Ivory%20Tower%20Sept%202003.pdf).)

- Pennsylvania State University's Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy and Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy offer on-line, 12-credit post-baccalaureate certificate programs in adult basic education and family literacy. These courses are for adult educators wishing to enhance their professional skills. Penn State is one of the first universities to offer a fully online certificate in adult basic education. (Visit <https://ed.psu.edu/isal/certificate-programs-1>.)
- Rutgers University: The Rutgers Graduate School of Education offers a range of master's degree courses relevant for adult basic education staff. These are found in the Graduate School's Literacy Education Program, its Adult Continuing Education Program, and its English as a Second Language Program. (Visit <https://gse.rutgers.edu/academic-programs/edm-programs/literacy-education>.)



- Texas A&M University's Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning operates the state's professional development and resource center for adult education and literacy service providers and other partners (e.g., workforce development agencies, employers). Services include planning and implementation of training events, research related to professional development, email discussion lists, a directory of adult education providers, the Texas Adult Education and Literacy Quarterly, and a toll-free hotline. (Visit <https://tcall.tamu.edu/TRAIN-PD-TCALL.html>.)
- Texas State University's College of Education offers a master's program in Adult, Professional, and Community Education with an English as a Second Language Concentration. (Visit <https://www.txstate.edu/clas/Adult-Education/ADED-Home/MA-in-Adult-Ed-ESL.html>.)

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- University of Massachusetts-Boston was for many years the sponsor of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, a professional development center for adult basic skills teachers, managers, and other program staff members in the greater Boston area. For 30 years, ALRI was part of the Adult Literacy Initiative of the City of Boston. (Contact ALRI's former directors, David Rosen [djrosen@newsomeassociates.com] and Steve Reuys [reuys@verizon.net] for more information.)
- University of Wisconsin's Center on Education for Work played a major role in the organizing of a series of international conferences on workplace literacy held, initially, in Milwaukee and later in Chicago and Detroit in the 1990s and early 2000s. These conferences grew directly out of the U.S. Department of Education's National Workplace Literacy Program which, from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, funded multi-year workplace basic skills projects operated by collaborations of education providers, employers, and unions. (Visit <http://ctd.wceruw.org/about.html> . To see papers presented at the 2003 conference, visit <http://www.workandeconomy.org/pastprojects/workplacelearningconf.html> .)
- Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education provided a six-course, graduate-level online certificate program in adult literacy for twelve years (2006-2018). It covered foundations of literacy, adult learning theory, assessment and instruction, and curriculum design. The six three-credit courses were offered sequentially using the Blackboard online platform. The course was successful in part because it satisfied the state requirement for an adult literacy endorsement for participants who already had a teaching license. The course was also offered at a cohort rate (about one-third the full tuition.) However, due to state budget reductions, the course is currently not being offered. (Visit <https://soe.vcu.edu/academics/certificates/online-adult-literacy/> .)

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### 3. Basic skills-related supports for university staff

Recognizing that their own employees might benefit from basic skills-related services, some universities offer English, writing, oral communications, teamwork, educational planning, and other activities for campus staff. Examples include:

- Harvard University's Bridge Program offers high school diploma, computer, career development, English to Speakers of Other Languages, and citizenship preparation courses and academic tutoring to university employees. A library provides resources related to academic and career advancement. Post-doctoral staff can also get help with pronunciation and accent reduction. (Visit <https://hr.harvard.edu/harvard-bridge-program>.)
- University of Massachusetts: Founded 30 years ago, the Labor/Management Workplace Education Program at UMass Amherst is a partnership of the University, the Association of Federal, State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the University



Staff Union of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and the Professional Staff Union. The program offers instruction, counseling, and other education and training services customized to the interests of frontline employees (including maintainers, trade workers, secretaries, professional, technical, and support staff) on and off campus, including those with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The program's mission is "to inspire and support innovative worker learning within the university and beyond . . . to empower UMass staff to learn new skills and gain confidence to improve their professional and personal lives." Courses include basic to advanced computer skills, workplace communications and leadership skills, career and educational planning, and ESOL (including English needed for various occupations and workplace situations). The "Building Bridges" program fosters understanding and communication across cultural differences, with activities including showcasing of artwork by campus workers and creation of a joint art project focusing on a theme identified by immigrant staff. A "Working Together Better" program helps employees understand promotion opportunities, contracts, and benefits. The "Respectful Workplace" program focuses on issues such as workplace bullying and diversity. (Visit <https://www.umass.edu/lmwep/>.)

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- University of Wisconsin: UW-Madison's Office of Human Resources has a Cultural and Linguistic Services unit that offers a range of basic skills-related courses for employees. These include (1) Workplace English classes to help limited-English-proficient employees communicate and collaborate in a multi-cultural environment and deal with safety and human resource issues, while practicing listening, speaking, pronunciation, writing, reading, and grammar skills; (2) Plain Language Services to help staff create easy-to-understand written documents; (3) an Employee Learning Center that helps employees identify and work toward educational and occupational goals; (4) Multilingual Training and Information sessions (in English, Spanish, Hmong, Mandarin Chinese and Tibetan) on topics related to job search skills, employee benefits, use of the university library, local education resources, non-verbal communication, and computer skills; and (5) a Volunteer Tutoring Program that matches employees with tutors who provide one-on-one instruction. Learners can pursue individual learning goals at convenient times and locations. (A Tutor Training Certificate is available through ProLiteracy.) (Visit <https://www.talent.wisc.edu/home/Hide-A-Tab/CulturalLinguisticServicesHome/WorkplaceLearningProgram/tabid/136/Default.aspx>.)

## 4. Basic skills services for community members

As part of their community service mission, some universities offer basic skills related services to members of the surrounding community. In some cases, these are tied in with service-learning courses in which university students develop expertise in adult education while also providing a service to their communities. Examples include:

- City University of New York, through its New York City College of Technology, has collaborated with Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to provide electronics training to TWU members. This training was designed to help unionized workers to prepare for new jobs repairing the many types of electronic equipment found throughout the city's sprawling and complex subway and bus Customized "tech-prep" math classes enabled workers to succeed in the electronics training. (Visit <http://www.citytech.cuny.edu/about-us/facts.aspx> and <http://twulocal100tuf.org/index.php>.)

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*"Our greatness has always come from people who expect nothing and take nothing for granted – folks who work hard for what they have, then reach back and help others after them."*

Michelle Obama

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- Hamline University's School of Education partners with a nearby elementary school to provide student teaching and community service opportunities for Hamline students. As an outgrowth of that partnership, the school and university are considering how to help parents at the school become para-educators in the district. These discussions are raising questions about how parents and communities can be better engaged with schools and how education might be seen as a family right and not just a children's issue.
- Marymount Manhattan College operates a college-prep (writing and math) program and degree programs to women inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility north of New York City. Students have access to books, supplies, and a computer lab, library, and study area. Reflecting the College's commitment to providing a rich college experience, Bedford students are offered multiple academic and extra-curricular activities including guest speakers, skills enhancement workshops, Read Arounds (where they share creative work), poetry slams, exhibits of students' art, and a student-written newsletter distributed to all inmates. (Visit <https://www.mmm.edu/academics/bedford-hills-college-program.php>.)
- New York University: As stated in the NYU example above (under "Professional Development"), New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study has offered a service-learning course in which undergraduates developed an understanding of the adult literacy issue through volunteer experience teaching in one of several partner adult literacy programs. The undergraduates worked with education program staff to help with ESL, GED-prep, and other basic skills activities. While the service-learning course required the undergraduates to read assigned texts, hear from guest speakers, and write research papers, most of the learning done by the Gallatin students was through direct interaction with real, local issues and people in New York City communities. The students thereby developed expertise and connections for further work in the future, while also providing a service to local learners and basic skills organizations. (Visit <https://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing/literacyproject.html#literacyproject>.)
- Pennsylvania State University's Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy collaborates with the Lycoming County Community Action Agency to offer *Family Pathways*, a four-component family literacy program in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. *Family Pathways* provides adult education, parenting classes, and interactive literacy activities for caregivers and children to families served in local Head Start and Early Head Start programs. (Visit <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/family-pathways-program>). Penn State's Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy (Goodling Institute's home) offers a Career Pathway's program to residents of two counties. Services include adult basic education, GED test preparation, English as a Second Language, College and Career Readiness, and Case Management, and Distance Learning. (Visit <https://ed.psu.edu/isal/career-pathways-program>.)

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- Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education: Founded in the late 1980s by two undergraduates at the University of North Carolina, SCALE continues as a national network of 31 university-campus-based literacy programs in six states. At each campus, undergraduates volunteer in a local basic skills-related program (for adults or children). SCALE promotes a participatory, social-justice approach to literacy education; runs an annual national conference; and operates an on-line resource collection. Among other supports, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has provided office facilities to SCALE. (Visit <https://readwriteact.org> .)
- The University of Massachusetts/Dartmouth Labor Education Center operates the Workers' Education Program (WEP). Begun in 1986 to bring English classes to needles trade workers in their factories, WEP has grown in the populations served, services provided, partnerships created, industries reached, and funding received. Classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages, citizenship preparation, and preparation for the GED exam have been offered in factories, union halls, and community centers in nearby cities. This program has been recognized by the Massachusetts Department of Education as a high quality program, consistently meeting standards for achievement of student goals and attendance. In one innovation, undergraduate students at UMass Dartmouth volunteer to help in classes under supervision of WEP teachers. Staff have developed expertise in all phases of workplace education, including workplace and individual needs assessment, contextualized curriculum development, and grant writing and management. Unions are shown how to support WEP by helping graduates move into rewarding jobs, referring members to WEP, and working with employers to establish classes in their workplaces. (Visit <https://www.umassd.edu/labored/workerseducationprogram/> .)
- University of Southern Maine's Casco Bay Partnership for Workplace Education used funding from the National Workplace Literacy Program of the U.S. Department of Education to provide workplace basic skills services to nearly 2400 workers in seven Portland-area companies. A final report describes the project's accomplishments and lessons learned. (Visit <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED426249.pdf> .)

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#### 5. In-kind supports to basic education efforts

Universities have made campus facilities and other in-kind supports available to adult education agencies to use for meetings and other events. Examples include:

- New York University: In the early 2000s, NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study provided conference facilities for two day-long literacy leadership conferences of the Grassroots Literacy Coalition, a local network of adult literacy advocates. These events were tied to Gallatin's undergraduate service learning course on adult literacy education.
- Rutgers University's Center for Women and Work for many years played host to meetings of the adult literacy committee of the New Jersey State Employment and Training Committee. For several years, the university also hosted monthly meetings of the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning.

#### 4. Leadership and advocacy for adult basic skills efforts at local, state, and national levels

Embedded in the above examples are the leadership and advocacy roles that universities have taken in support of adult basic skills education and the individuals, families, and communities served.

This leadership can vary from being low-key and implicit to more overt. Universities can serve as relatively neutral conveners of diverse stakeholders and communities; providers of research, trained professionals, meeting facilities, and other practical supports; and connectors to funders and policy makers.

Universities can tie this support for adult basic skills efforts to their larger missions of using education as a tool for ensuring the current and future well-being of their communities and states.

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*"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."*

Benjamin Franklin



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## How You Can Get Started

Outlined below are some steps that you might take to help your university (a) decide whether and how to get involved in an adult basic skills-related effort and (b) move forward:

### **Phase I: Initial planning**

*Develop your background knowledge – and share what you know -- about why and how universities have involved themselves in efforts to strengthen basic skills in their communities and states, on their own campuses, and/or in collaborations with other higher education institutions or other partners.*

To start, your university should assign one or more staff members to do some background reading about the university-based efforts above and about the adult basic skills field as a whole. You might also talk directly with representatives of the above-described university programs, to learn why and how they got involved, the results of their efforts, and their suggestions for other universities.

You might then talk further with adult basic education resource persons at your state or community level, to clarify more specifically what basic skills supports are currently available, where the gaps are, and how you might work with existing organizations to carry out one or more of the activities described above.

Consider why you might get involved in this issue.

Are you interested in adult basic skills as:

- a. A research topic for your school of education or other academic area (e.g., workforce and economic development, health literacy, family development, intercultural communications)?
- b. An area your university might provide professional training in (e.g., through your schools of education, business, social work, health, labor studies, etc.)? (Note the need to make such professional development courses affordable for adult educators and others who operate on limited budgets.)

- c. A focus for service learning activities for your undergraduates?
- d. An issue that your human resources department should consider as a component of the supports it gives to university employees?
- e. A community issue that your university might help with in some way?
- f. Some combination of a through e.

### **Phase II: Getting involved in one or more ways**

With your initial planning in mind, you might now reach out to potential partners and get involved in one or more ways in a basic-skills activity in your community or state, at the national level, or on your campus. If you get involved in more than one activity, you might establish a coordinating committee or team to ensure that the efforts are in sync and learn from and build on each other, to enhance efficiency of each of them individually and as a collective university effort. You might:

- Meet with the organizations you might partner with.
- Clarify their needs and where your institution might be of help.
- Develop an initial action plan.
- Monitor, adjust, and build on your activities as you proceed.
- Tap into the expertise of a group of advisors from other universities or from other agencies, to share lessons learned and get feedback.
- Consider forming an adult basic skills consortium or task force of higher-education institutions in your community or state, to bring together universities in a coordinated effort.

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## In Conclusion . . .

*Forward-thinking universities now have opportunities to make a significant difference on an issue that overlaps with many of the goals and programs of a typical university.*

*By getting involved in thoughtful, meaningful ways, your university can target its resources to strengthening and expanding educational opportunities for many individuals. At the same time, you can also enhance trust and collaboration among stakeholders who have common interests but too often don't communicate and collaborate.*

*Your thoughtful, informed, patient leadership can have multiple benefits for diverse stakeholders at this time of challenge --and opportunity -- for our nation.*



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## Endnotes . . .

1. As a major component of higher education, community colleges are a very important player in U.S. adult basic skills efforts. They provide basic skills supports for their own students, career training and pathways to individuals who have basic skills limitations, and leadership and advocacy for basic skills initiatives. While acknowledging community college leadership in these areas, this document focuses on another component of higher education -- universities that provide baccalaureate and graduate education, research, and other services -- as a distinct and also very important player.
2. A note about terminology: This document uses a number of terms (e.g., adult basic skills education, adult basic skills programs, adult basic skills services, adult literacy, adult education, basic education, basic skills development) to describe the types of services described in this section. Likewise, a mix of terms is used (e.g., adult learner, participant, student) describe those who participate in such services.
3. A February 2018 paper by the Open Door Collective ("Basic Skills, a Key to Advancing the Workforce") highlights data about the benefits of adult basic skills education on worker incomes. Available at [www.opendoorcollective.org](http://www.opendoorcollective.org)).
4. A February 2017 report by the National Skills Coalition ("Foundational Skills in the Service Sector") describes the basic skills (i.e., math, reading, and technological proficiency) gaps of workers in the U.S. service jobs. Available at <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-foundational-skills-FINAL.pdf> .)
5. See the Center for Law and Social Policy's January 2015 report "Yesterday's Nontraditional Student Is Today's Traditional Student: Nontraditional Student Facts" at <https://www.clasp.org/publications/fact-sheet/yesterdays-nontraditional-student-todays-traditional-student-nontraditional> .)

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