



9-1-2007

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Dianne Glass

Kansas Board of Regents

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Recommended Citation

Glass, Dianne (2007) "Diversity in Kansas Adult Education Programs," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 35: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1173>

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Diversity in Kansas Adult Education Programs

Dianne Glass

Kansas is not typically considered a state with a great deal of diversity. In the past few years, however, Kansas has become more ethnically diverse. Kansas adult education programs could serve as a bellwether for diversity across Kansas.

With the advent of federally funded adult education programs in Kansas in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kansas adult education programs served a largely White population (71% in 1970).¹ However, the percentages of African Americans (20%) and Native Americans (6%) receiving services in adult education programs were higher than the percentages of African Americans and Native Americans in the general population. These two examples of ethnic diversity were limited almost exclusively to programs in larger urban areas such as Wichita, Kansas City, and Topeka for African American participants and to programs in northeast Kansas for Native American participants. Kansas adult education programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s were also characterized by other limitations on diversity. The overwhelming majority of participants were females (75% in 1970), with the majority of participants in the 25 to 44 years age group.

By the late 1970s, political refugees from Southeast Asia began to impact the diversity of adult education in Kansas. However, the thousands of Southeast Asian refugees and their families in Kansas adult education programs from 1975 to 1990 were served almost exclusively in programs located in communities with beef packing facilities—Liberal, Garden City, Dodge City, and Emporia.

As late as 1988, Asians, primarily Southeast Asians, in the towns listed above, composed the largest non-White population in Kansas adult education programs; and the influx of political refugees impacted not only the ethnicity of Kansas adult education, but also the gender. By 1990, the percentage of male participants had increased to almost 40% of the adult education population. The political refugees from Southeast Asia took full advantage of the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes provided by Kansas adult education programs and of the other opportunities historically afforded to hard-working immigrants. As these refugees left the beef packing plants, a new group of immigrants quickly replaced them. By 1994, Hispanics, living and working primarily in the same communities with beef packing facilities, became the largest non-White population in Kansas adult education programs. In 1994, Hispanics comprised 17% of adult learners served while African Americans (not of Hispanic origin) comprised 16%. Asians comprised 10%, and White (not of Hispanic origin) comprised only 53%.

Dianne Glass has been involved in adult education since 1973 when she taught her first Adult Basic Education (ABE) class. She joined the Kansas Department of Education in 1992 as an Education Program Consultant. In July 1999, her unit was transferred to the Kansas Board of Regents. In August 2000 she became State Director of Adult Education.

A new Hispanic workforce that replaced the former beef packing plant employees from Southeast Asia revitalized these communities and changed the complexion of their local adult education programs. Programs which had become expert at providing quality ESL services to Asians quickly became experts at providing quality ESL services to Hispanics. Within a few years, these programs expanded their other educational programs to serve former ESL learners who had progressed to taking Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) classes. Unlike the political refugee population from Southeast Asia, which was served almost exclusively in adult education programs in communities with beef packing facilities, the Hispanic immigrant population quickly began to appear in adult education programs in other communities within the state. By Fiscal Year 2007 (FY07), Hispanics comprised 78% of the population of learners in the Garden City Community College Adult Education Program, 90% of the population of learners in the Seward County Community College Adult Education Program in Liberal, and 91% of the adult learner population in the Dodge City Community College Adult Education Program. Hispanics were also the largest ethnic group (55%) served in the Kansas City suburban Johnson County Community College Project Finish program, the largest adult education program in the state located at the opposite end of the state from the Dodge City, Garden City, and Liberal programs. In FY07, Hispanics comprised 41% of the total population served in the Wichita Area Technical College program (the second largest program in the state), 40% of the total population served in the Kansas City Kansas Community College program, and 35% of the total population served in the Kaw Area Technical School program in Topeka. Even the Wichita Indochinese, Inc. program, which was originally established to aid in the resettlement of political refugees from Asia, reported that Hispanics comprised 40% of the population of its FY07 adult learners.

In Fiscal Year 2002 (FY02), Hispanics became the largest ethnic group served in Kansas adult education programs. By the end of FY07, Hispanics comprised 41% of the total adult education population in Kansas while Whites (not of Hispanic origin) comprised 37%. African Americans (not of Hispanic origin) comprised 11%. Asians comprised 8%, and Native Americans comprised 3%—a significant demographic shift within only 30 years.

In addition to the dramatic shift in ethnicity, Kansas adult education programs have also seen a major shift in the age of learners served and an increase in the percentage of males served. The “typical” learner in an adult education program in Kansas in 1970 was a White female who was approximately 34 years old. In FY07, the “typical” learner was younger and non-White. While the learner was still more likely to be female (57%), she was also younger. In FY07, 46% of all adult learners served were in the 16-24 year age group compared to less than 30% in that age group in 1970, and this “typical” learner is more likely to be Hispanic (41%) than any other ethnic group.

In addition to the shift in the adult learner population since 1970, Kansas adult education directors, individuals who lead local adult education programs, have become more diverse. In 1990, of the 32 local program directors, 18 were male, and 14 were female. All were White. In 2007, of the 31 local program directors, 23 are female, and only 8 are male. Of these, one director is Hispanic, and one is Native American; two are African American, and one is Asian.

Table
Number of African American Participants in Local Adult Education Programs
for Fiscal Years 2005 and 2007 by Location

Location	Participants by Fiscal Year (FY)		Difference by Number and Percentage
	FY05	FY07	
Emporia	13	114	101 (877%)
Garden City	3	17	14 (567%)
Liberal	3	9	6 (300%)

A potential impact on the increasing diversity of adult learners in Kansas adult education programs is the newest group of political refugees, Somalis, especially Somali Bantus. These new immigrants are settling in the same communities as the Southeast Asian refugees did in the 1980s and are seeking the same employment opportunities in the beef packing plants. The table above provides a comparison between the number of African Americans served in three local adult education programs in FY05 and FY07. The increase in the numbers and percentages is due almost exclusively to the Somalis.

The history of Kansas adult education indicates that an increasingly diverse population will be served by Kansas programs and that local economies depend upon the adult education centers providing adult learners, whoever they are, excellent educational services. Adult basic education in Kansas reflects the changing diversity of the workforce in Kansas, and therefore it is necessary to improve the state's human capital essential for continued economic growth. Political leaders, economists, policymakers, and business leaders would benefit by keeping an eye on what's happening in Kansas adult education programs.

Endnote

¹ All data used in this paper are from Kansas Adult Education Annual Reports, Fiscal Years 1975–2007.