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Early studies of rural adult learners suggested that most rural adults were interested only in recreational or avocational learning. A recent study which analyzed both regional and national demographic data suggests otherwise. This study provides us with a clearer picture of the learning needs and characteristics of rural adult learners.

# The Rural Adult: A Portrait of Characteristics, Needs and Styles

by Roger S. McCannon

More recently there has been greater attention on serving the educational needs of rural adults. Life in our agripolitan countryside has become more complex and continued learning has become necessary for both occupational and personal advancement. Rural adults are turning toward education in increasing numbers as a means of improving and enriching their lives. Educational providers are attempting to meet rural adults' learning needs. Despite this new interest, most of the literature of adult postsecondary education focuses upon urban programs and urban adult learners. Less attention has been given to developing an understanding of rural adults' educational interests and needs. This study undertook the challenge of developing a statistical base of information about rural adults' educational needs, interests and participation patterns.

## Background

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education reports that there is increasing participation by adults of all ages in adult education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 1982). According to the 1981 triennial supplement to the Current Population Survey, more than 21 million adults age 17 and older participated in some form of adult education. Of this total, nearly 6 million, or 28 percent, were adults living in rural areas (see Table 1).

In his classic study, Houle (1961) determined that adult learners had three types of orientation toward learning: some were goal-oriented, others were activity-oriented, and still others were learning-oriented. Other authors (Cross, 1981; Boshier, 1977; Knox, 1976; Knowles, 1980; Tough,

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**Table 1. Participation in Adult Education by Residential Status: 1981**

Residential Status	1981	
	Number	Percent of total
<b>RURAL</b>		
Total Population not in MSA* (Farm and Rural Nonfarm)	52,365,000	31.6
Participants in Adult Education	5,865,000	27.6
<b>URBAN</b>		
Total Population in MSA*	113,464,000	68.4
Participants in Adult Education	15,387,000	72.4

\*Metropolitan Statistical Area

1971) have found that adults enter learning situations with a particular focus that seems to fit their immediate needs. Cross (1981) reports that data from 35 large-scale state and national surveys tend to suggest that, in general, adult learners have shown increasing interest both in occupational training and in social life and recreation education. However, most of these studies were focused upon urban areas. In one large national study (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965) conducted over 20 years ago, it was concluded that rural adults were not very much interested in continuing their learning.

Very few recent studies have looked either at rural adults' educational needs or at their reasons for engaging in learning activities. A study of part-time enrollment in higher education in this country in fall 1974 (Valley, 1976) found less participation in formal credit educational programs in rural states than in urban states. California had the highest percentage of part-time credit enrollment with 53.1 percent, and Iowa had the lowest at 17.6 percent. To estimate the size and focus of the adult learning force in Iowa (essentially a rural state), the Educational Testing Service conducted a study (Hamilton, 1976) which showed that an estimated 676,800 adults in Iowa wanted additional education. The results were compared with those of a national study conducted in 1972 by the Commission on Nontraditional Study. The result of the two studies are presented in Table 2. They suggest that the adults surveyed were more interested in personal satisfaction and were slightly less oriented toward vocational advancement.

**Table 2. Rank Order of Adults' Focus on Learning**

Reason	Iowa, 1976	Nation, 1972
To be better informed	1	1
Personal satisfaction	2	2
Improve income	3	4
Prepare for different job	4	3
Current job requirement	5	5

During the summer of 1976, the University of Minnesota conducted a survey of 3,606 households in rural western Minnesota to assess the perceived needs for education beyond high school (Copa, 1976). One conclusion drawn from the study was that adults in this rural area of Minnesota were more interested in continuing their education for personal development and self-improvement (60 percent) than they were for reasons of vocational advancement through job training (40 percent).

Between 1975 and 1982, students enrolled in evening courses at the University of Minnesota-Morris, which is lo-

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cated in rural western Minnesota, have been surveyed each quarter. When asked what was the most important reason for enrolling, 55 percent said that they attended for personal enrichment or "just for fun." Only 13 percent said that job training or professional advancement was the most important reason for enrolling. In a more recent study, Treadway (1984) concluded that rural people are looking for education that relates more immediately to their needs and has a practical consequence.

Collectively, these isolated studies do not allow one to draw hard conclusions. They suggest that, at least in the past, rural adults have selected learning activities more for reasons of personal development than for reasons of vocational advancement. However, because mandated continuing education requirements have increased for various occupations and professions in most states, this orientation may now be changing. With the increasing job growth in professional services now being found in rural areas, more individuals in many occupations will need continuing professional education.

**Nature of the Study**

At present, designers of rural postsecondary education programs are handicapped by a dearth of information about rural adults' educational interests, characteristics, motivations and participation patterns. That is not to say that research studies and local needs assessments have not been conducted. Rather, we have not "taken stock" and developed a base-line from which to judge improvement in our practice and upon which sound discussions and decisions can be founded. This study provides—in a profile form—more current information to assist practitioners and policy makers to better understand the educational needs of rural adult learners.

Two types of data were analyzed in this study. First, national data (based upon a sample of 3,558 rural adults) were obtained through an existing data file at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Second, regional data were collected (on 812 adults) through a series of original surveys in five midwestern states. Information from these two sources are merged to provide a demographic profile of the rural adult learner.

**Description of National Data and Procedure**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) sponsors a supplement to the Current Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census every three years. Titled "Participation in Adult Education," this study has been conducted during the month of May in each of the following years: 1969, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1981 and 1984. Those individuals surveyed were selected from census files with coverage in all 50 states; approximately 60,000 households were queried at the time of each survey. At the time of this study, the most current information available from NCES was the 1981 data tapes. Thus, the information presented here is an analysis of 3,558 rural adult learners who reported having participated in adult education during the 12-month period preceding May 1981. Information variables contained in the 1981 NCES data on those 3,558 surveyed participants included: age and sex; race and ethnic groups; level of education; annual family income; geographic area of residence; labor force status; occupation of employed participants; types of courses taken; reasons for taking courses; who provided the instruction; and, major sources of payment for courses.

Space here does not allow for a complete analysis of all

NCES data. What I have attempted to do is to selectively review certain variables and cross-tabulate them, giving us a portrait of rural adult learners' characteristics, needs and styles. A full presentation and a more detailed analysis of these data is available in McCannon (1975).

**Findings from National Data**

Tables 3, 4 and 5 summarize information on the sex, age, reason for participation, and subject areas of courses taken by rural adults. Table 3 shows that 55.8 percent of the survey population were women and 44.2 percent were men. Further, the NCES data shows that 94.9 percent of the 3,558 survey respondents (or 3,378) were non-farm residents; that is to say, they resided in a small community or town or lived in the open countryside, but were not engaged in farming. The data summarized in Tables 3, 4, and 5 allow us to draw the following conclusions:

**Age and Sex**—Nearly three-fourths of all the respondents (both female and male) were between the ages of 23-50. There were slightly more older women participants than men.

**Table 3. Age and Sex of Rural Adult Participants in Adult Education: 1981**

Age	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
16 - 17	37	2.4	38	1.9
18 - 22	131	8.3	199	10.1
23 - 30	445	28.3	537	27.0
31 - 40	464	29.5	586	29.5
41 - 50	253	16.1	292	14.7
51 - 60	168	10.7	219	11.0
61 - 70	61	3.9	89	4.5
71 - +	13	.8	26	1.3A
	N = 1572		N = 1986	

**Table 4. Main Reason of Rural Participants in Adult Education for Taking Courses by Sex: 1981**

Reason	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Personal or Social Improve, Advance, Update Current Job	333	21.2	744	37.6
Train for New Occupation	808	51.5	722	36.5
New Job in Current Occupation	151	9.6	176	8.9
Other Job Related	24	1.5	36	1.8
Train for Volunteer Work	100	6.4	66	3.3
General Education	36	2.3	27	1.4
Naturalization	103	6.6	182	9.2
Other Non Job Related	—	—	2	.1
	14	.9	23	1.2

**Reason for Participation**—The most important reason listed by rural adults was to improve, advance or update their current occupation. If the reasons for participation (shown on Table 4) were collapsed into two primary reasons, occupational enhancement and personal development, we can see that over two-thirds (69 percent) of the males and just over one-half (50 percent) of the females were motivated for occupational reasons.

**Subjects Enrolled In**—Business subjects ranked first for rural adults; 18.3 percent reported enrolling in business subjects. There were 12.4 percent enrolled in health care subjects and 9.1 percent in education subjects.

This analysis provides the first national base-line of information about rural adult learners. These data suggest that the predominant intent for participating in adult education programs is for occupational enhancement, with personal development as a strong secondary interest.

**Table 5. Rank Order of Subject Areas (Courses) Enrolled in by Rural Adults: 1981**

Subject Area	Number	Percent
Business	650	18.3
Health Care	439	12.4
Engineering and Computer Science	419	11.8
Education	324	9.1
Philosophy or Religion	244	6.9
Physical Education or Leisure	221	6.2
Arts	213	5.9
Language	152	4.3
Health Education	137	3.9
Home Economics	134	3.8
Social Science	133	3.7
Personal Service	101	2.8
Life and Physical Science	87	2.5
Agriculture	59	1.7
Inter-Disciplinary	36	1.0
Other	205	5.8

**Description of Regional Data and Procedure**

In this section we are focusing entirely upon postsecondary education and the experiences of adults who were enrolled in higher education institutions in a rural setting. Since the data analyzed from NCES were collected in May 1981, an effort to augment and verify it with more current information was undertaken. These regional data were collected in September 1984. Also, the NCES data didn't tell us much about barriers adults experience, nor the needs and preferences they have for services. These "augmentation studies" allowed us an opportunity to probe a bit more into these areas.

Five postsecondary education institutions in the mid-west were selected as sites for these augmentation studies. Included were: Drake University (Iowa); John A. Logan College (Illinois); The University of Minnesota-Morris; The University of North Dakota; and, the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. These institutions represent a variety of types of postsecondary education, i.e., two- and four-year colleges, public and private institutions, single focus ad comprehensive missions, and autonomous and coordinate campuses.

**Findings from Regional Data**

The data collected from these institutions allowed us to analyze responses from 812 adult learners. Much of the

information gathered substantiated the conclusions drawn from our analysis of the NCES data. Additional information on barriers and needs expressed by adults enrolled in three of the five institutions (Logan College, Minnesota-Morris and Wisconsin-River Falls) is presented in Tables 6 and 7. This data allows us to draw the following conclusions:

**Table 6. Major Obstacles to Beginning/Returning to College for Adult Learners by Sex**

Obstacle	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Distance	17	11.8	109	27.8
Costs	54	37.7	192	48.9
Time	55	38.4	176	44.8
Scheduling				
Conflict	37	25.8	96	24.4
Conflicts with Job	40	27.9	95	24.2
Lack of Confidence	14	9.7	84	21.4
Lack of Desired Courses	28	19.5	54	13.7
Other Commitments	27	11.8	80	20.4
Other	15	10.4	31	7.9
	N = 143		N = 392	

**Table 7. Adult Learners Needs by Sex**

Need	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Financial Aid	43	30.0	158	40.3
More Information	25	17.4	81	20.6
Babysitting Services	2	1.3	52	13.2
Time Off from Work	31	21.6	102	26.0
Support from Employer	15	10.4	21	5.3
Support from Family	8	5.5	74	18.8
Increased Self Confidence	23	16.0	104	26.5
Other	22	15.3	49	12.5
	N = 143		N = 392	

**Obstacles**—Distance, costs, time and self-confidence were more often reported by women as being the biggest obstacles to beginning or returning to college than men. Men reported conflicts with job and lack of desired courses as obstacles at slightly higher rates than women. Comparisons among students at the three institutions suggests that costs and lack of desired courses are lesser obstacles at Logan College than at the University of Minnesota-Morris and the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

**Adult Learners' Needs**—The need for financial aid, information and time off from work are important factors to both men and women students in order to help them continue their education. Women cited the need for babysitting services, family support and increased self-

confidence at higher rates than men. From other questions in our survey, we found preferences for scheduling of courses to be for late afternoon and evening courses, weekend courses and clustered courses.

The total regional sample, or 812 individuals who responded to our regional surveys, were participants in adult education at five different types of postsecondary institutions. Yet, their responses painted a similar picture to those from the NCES study. Most were enrolled in courses for occupational enrichment or personal development. Similar to the NCES sample, business subjects were of most interest to them and most had to pay for their courses from personal resources. Again, women made up the majority of participants. The responses from these 812 individuals allow us to augment, at least on a regional basis and with more current data, the information which NCES collected during 1981. This augmentation study focuses on the responses from individuals enrolled in programs offered by postsecondary education institutions in rural settings, thus giving us first-hand information from rural adult learners.

#### Summary, Limitations and Recommendations

In the summer of 1981, a national invitational meeting on rural adult postsecondary education was held in Kansas City. One of the results from that meeting was an agenda for action. One of the items on that agenda was to "undertake a comprehensive national study of rural adults and their educational needs." Hopefully, this study fulfills that objective.

We knew that existing data was available from NCES that could give us some insights into rural adult learners' needs, but we also knew that the information would be dated at the time of publication, thus, we felt a need to augment it with more current information. Time and budget restrictions did not follow us (nor did we feel it necessary) to undertake a large-scale, original national study.

We received a great deal of cooperation with the augmentation studies at the regional institutions. The augmentation study section does provide us with a first-hand view of adults' motivations and participation patterns that were involved in postsecondary education from rural areas. We feel these individual's responses are representative of rural adult learners; however, we recognize that the sample was drawn entirely from the mid-west region of our country. Perhaps someone in the East, South or West can replicate our study and corroborate (or refute) our findings.

All of us associated with the Action Agenda Project who reviewed this study were struck with the predominance of similarities between the responses of rural and urban adult learners (comparisons were made between rural and

urban adults and are presented in the aforementioned publication from Kansas State University). This suggests that equal access to quality postsecondary education is a vital concern for adult learners wherever they live. In a country committed to equal access and with lifelong learning becoming an accepted concept, all people have a right to the benefits of quality learning regardless of age, race, income or place of residence, even if that place of residence is a small town surrounded by wide open spaces.

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