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# Helping the Adult Learner Succeed: How Community College Libraries in Massachusetts are Serving this Growing Population

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## **Helping the Adult Learner Succeed: How Community College Libraries in Massachusetts are Serving this Growing Population**

Katherine A. Turcotte<sup>1</sup>  
Simmons College SLIS 2015

**ABSTRACT:** Education is something that is valued more each and every day. A growing number of people in today's society realize the importance of education and the increasing need to return to school. As the number of adult learners continues to rise, so too does the need to reach out to this population to make sure they are being presented with the appropriate tools and resources needed to succeed. Because it is theorized that adults (those age 25+) who return to school are likely to enroll in a community college, rather than a four year university, this study looks specifically at community colleges in Massachusetts in an effort to judge what is being done to help this often overlooked population, as well as what could be improved. To make this determination, a brief survey was sent to 25 reference librarians at 13 different Massachusetts community colleges. The results of the survey were then analyzed, along with previously written literature on this topic. The survey confirmed earlier findings that adult learners commonly struggle with issues of a technological nature. These issues include troubles using computers and the internet, as well as using word processing software, and databases. To help adult learners succeed, collaboration is a key component. This collaboration should extend to the information technology department, department heads, librarians, instructors, information literacy coordinators, and most importantly, the student. Communication between all of these groups is needed to ensure the success of adult learners. This paper will explore these barriers, as well as other obstacles adult learners face, and also provide further recommendations as to what can be done to help this growing population of students.

**KEYWORDS:** Adult Learner, Community College, Higher Education, Library Instruction, Reference, Traditional Student

**INTRODUCTION:** Adults choosing to return to college is rising. Cannady et al. points out that, "The number of adult learners in institutions of higher education is increasing, and these students' reasons for attending, ways of learning, challenges, and methods for overcoming challenges often differ from those of traditional-age students (2012, p. 156). Similarly, Cooke writes, "Adult learners are becoming a much larger demographic at colleges and universities around the world, and the specific needs, characteristics, and anxieties of adult learners are often overlooked" (2010, p.208). Adult learners are faced with many unique problems and challenges to overcome, such as library anxiety or apprehension to technology (Cooke, 2010, p. 210). With these difficulties in mind, this study aims to determine what community college libraries in Massachusetts are doing to help these students succeed, as well as look at what areas could be enhanced or improved.

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Adults who return to college after being away from the classroom often encounter several obstacles different from those facing the traditional college student. These issues include challenges with technology, time management, undeveloped study habits, and anxiety due to a changing environment and surroundings (Cooke, 2010, p. 213). While the traditional-age student may also encounter troubles in these areas, adult learners experience these issues differently. For instance, a student entering college directly out of high school may struggle with time management in terms of managing school work and social activities, while an adult learner is often attempting to manage not only schoolwork, but also hold down a job and support a family. Although both groups encounter time management issues, the circumstances of each are very different. Similarly, undeveloped study habits in a traditional student may be caused by inexperience or lack of motivation due to uncertainty of goals, while an adult learner may have undeveloped study habits because they've been away from the classroom for a period of time, which can still be considered inexperience, but in a different way than that of the traditional student. Both populations of students also experience anxiety due to a changing environment differently. Unlike students who enter college right out of high school, many adult learners suffer from anxiety because of "perceived competition with younger, traditional undergraduate students" (Cooke, 2010, p. 213). Many times adult learners also feel anxious because they are unfamiliar with the workings of the library or because they are not yet comfortable with the advancing technology around them, things that many traditional students have grown up with. There are also several physical barriers that stand in the way of many adult learners which are far less likely to be seen in traditional students. These include "visual, aural, or mobility issues," all of which could affect the success of adult learners (Cooke, 2010, p. 213).

In an attempt to mitigate these obstacles and to help adult learners cope with the stress of returning to school, libraries should provide resources aimed directly at the adult learner. These resources could include library instruction, basic computing classes, open forums, lectures, or providing information or group sessions on time management or other identified areas of concern. Campus libraries often act as a safe haven or communal meeting place for college students. This includes students entering college right out of high school, as well as those who have been away from the school setting for several years. The goal of the library is to be a welcoming place where students can feel comfortable, ask questions, and get work accomplished. All students, regardless of their age or education experience, deserve a space where they can relax, work, socialize, research, and receive assistance without apprehension. Although the library is for all to use equally, because adult learners have many unique needs, libraries must reach out to this population and provide them with services specifically tailored to their needs. While many campuses cater towards the college student who enters directly after high school (age 18-24), often by providing orientation sessions or first year writing classes, it is unclear what is being done to assist the adult learner (age 25+) returning to school. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the average age of a community college student is 29 years old ("Students at Community Colleges," n.d.). With the average age of the college student rising, what are community colleges in Massachusetts, and more specifically, their libraries, doing to help adult learners? Through a survey given to reference librarians at community colleges across the state, this study aims to reveal what community college libraries are doing to support this population both academically at school, as well as in preparation for the workplace.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:** Rachel E. Cannady, Stephanie B. King, and Jack G. Blendinger, of Mississippi State University, recognized that adult learners are enrolling in college in increasing numbers, and “these students’ reasons for attending, ways of learning, challenges, and methods for overcoming challenges often differ from those of traditional-age students” (2012, p. 156). Because of their different needs, adult learners often get overlooked or lost in the sea of traditional-age students. For this reason, special attention must be paid to this population and these students’ needs must be addressed directly. Cannady et al. discovered that adult learners have many life experiences that play into their education experience that traditional-age students don’t possess. “These experiences are a resource for learning and a foundation to which the adult learner can connect new learning. When instructors use adult learners’ experiences, they demonstrate acceptance and respect for the learners by using their experiences as a resource for learning” (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012, p. 158). Cannady et al. also determined what obstacles stood in the way of adult learners and what struggles they face. The adult learner often has difficulty “with research and using library resources. Their struggles may be related to their location away from campus, unfamiliarity with technology, lack of basic research skills, feelings of anxiety, and lack of knowledge about resources available in the library” (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012, p. 158). The researchers in this study looked at what resources were being offered to adult learners in an effort to minimize these stressors as well as to increase their success rate. By doing this, it also helped in determining what else could be done to support this group of students. Cannady et al. concluded that collaboration between the library, department heads, faculty, and the student is an exceptionally important aspect to the success of adult learners. Likewise, “proactive outreach strategies to enhance library and research skills can be tailored to fit the needs of adult learners. By providing a variety of options for communication and instruction, including chat, e-mail, telephone, and LibGuides pages, students can select the means they are most comfortable using” (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012, p. 166). By collaborating with all involved in the students learning experience as well as by proactively reaching out to the student, librarians and others working in higher education can positively impact the success of the adult learner.

Barbara Mullins and Betsy Park explored the expectations faculty have for adult learners and the library they use. Like Cannady et al., Mullins and Park recognized the increase of students age 25+ enrolling in higher education. Interested in this increase, they looked at why people of this age were returning to college after, in some cases, several years. Through their research, they found that the major reasons adults had for seeking out a higher education were “to enter, change or advance their career” (Mullins & Park, 2000, p. 382). Mullins and Park also looked into what difficulties these adult learners might encounter once enrolled and on campus. Much of what they came up with revolved around the notion that “many students are hesitant to seek assistance and have difficulty identifying precisely what it is they are struggling with” (Mullins & Park, 2000, p. 384). Mullins and Park developed a survey, which was distributed to faculty members at the University of Memphis. Upon completion, the survey responses were analyzed and examined for relationships between “faculty perceptions of characteristics of adult students and of adult students’ use of library resources” (Mullins & Park, 2000, p. 385). Ultimately the study found that students do not make full use of the library or the library’s resources and that instruction is needed on the library’s computers. Interestingly, the study also found that while 60% of faculty members agree that library instruction classes are beneficial, they still believe that students should learn and develop research skill independently. From the number of “no opinion”

responses received, Mullins and Park determined that “faculty really do not know these students very well or may be unfamiliar with the literature of the adult learner” (2000, p. 389). Overall, this study reinforced the need for adult learners to participate in library instruction classes, as well as for librarians and faculty members to work together in an effort to help these particular learners to succeed.

Lincoln Land Community College Literacy Coordinator, Carol Little (2001), promotes the idea of literacy programs partnering with libraries to help adult learners. Little stresses the importance of understanding the characteristics and specific needs of this population. She identifies some of the characteristics of many adult learners as: defensiveness, low self-esteem, and uncomfortableness. Little explains that having patience is necessary when working with adult learners as they may be new to technology or the rules and workings of the library. Little examined how literacy and library staff can work together to provide adult learners with the resources needed to have a rewarding college career. Of this Little says, “Without question, direct, open communication, mutual respect, and appreciation are the three essential components for libraries and literacy programs to form successful partnerships” (2001, p. 28). Just as Mullins and Park determined that collaboration plays a role in the success of adult learners, Little also believes that partnerships, like those between libraries and literacy programs, will benefit the adult learner greatly.

Researcher, Lizah Ismail, used a survey to investigate whether “a personal librarian service through a Course Management System” (2011, p. 244) was helpful to adult learners when it came to library assistance. It was noticed that adult learners often required more support than the traditional student; therefore, library services were offered through Moodle, the course management system being used. The study found that while none of the respondents disliked the personal librarian service, the majority of students rarely took advantage of it. This study also found that although the library assistance through Moodle was readily and easily available, most students preferred to reach out to librarians by email or a face-to-face meeting. Several adult learners also reported that they always read the Library Forum postings found on Moodle and found them very helpful. Interestingly, unlike other studies involving adult learners, this study found that “none of the adult learners surveyed were uncomfortable with any of the technology applications” and were “not adverse to using technology to communicate” (Ismail, 2011, p. 256). While Ismail’s findings regarding technology were different than others, this study is still important because it shows that many adult learners did not take advantage of the services provided on Moodle. While no evidence of this was found, this remains an interesting concept as a student failing to embrace the tools provided could very well have a lower college success rate than someone who uses these resources regularly. In order to have a more definitive answer regarding this issue, more research must be conducted.

Just as Mullins and Park found that library instruction is a key component in the success of adult learners, Nicole Cooke also looked at this idea by examining the barriers that adult learners face and how library instruction classes can be of value. Cooke completed this study by reviewing 35 years of related literature. Cooke points out that the goals of library instruction are, “(a) that students develop the art of discrimination to be able to judge the value of books to develop critical judgment, (b) that students become independent learners and learn how to teach themselves, and (c) that students continue to read and study and become lifelong learners” (2010,

p. 215). Adult learners face several barriers that restrict or prevent them from succeeding in college. These barriers range from lack of proficiency with academic research or technology, or not being aware of the various information resources (print, electronic) available. Many adult learners also suffer from library anxiety where they can be afraid to ask questions as they don't want to appear ignorant or they feel overwhelmed by the research process or college in general. Cooke explains that these barriers can be both mental as well as physical. Mental barriers include "excessive life obligations, fear of technology, fear of inadequate study and cognitive skills, fear of achieving poor grades, or perceived competition with younger, traditional undergraduate students" (2010, p. 213). Physical barriers that adult learners face deal with "visual, aural, or mobility issues that could affect their performance" (Cooke, 2010, p. 213). Ultimately Cooke's review found that "adult learners have unique needs, they have library anxiety and a variety of barriers that affect learning; libraries and librarians have to be proactive and compassionate when approaching them, and andragogical and experimental learning models should be utilized when designing instructional resources and services for them" (2010, p. 223). The analysis also found that library instruction sessions can be useful when it comes to battling and defeating library anxiety, as well as "technostress," a stressor associated with new and changing technology. Cooke recommends "interactive library instruction as a means of combating technostress." She goes on to explain that "As adult learners actively participate and learn, they will gain confidence and independence with navigating the library and technology tools" (2010, p. 219).

Authors Sara Barton and Alexia Strout-Dapaz discuss the value of reference services for adult learners, as well as the importance for these reference services to be flexible, using various instructional techniques. Like Mullins and Park, as well as Cooke, Barton and Strout-Dapaz find library instruction to be beneficial to adult learners. To begin their study, Barton and Strout-Dapaz evaluated three dimensions in an effort to better serve the adult learner population. The dimensions assessed are: "technological savvy, learning styles with print and electronic resources, and instructional methods provided by the encounter" (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 96). Because many adult learners may have an education gap, student's learning style and technology skills must be evaluated prior to an instructional session. With technology changing every day, many adult learners feel uncomfortable working with technology and fear it simply for lack of understanding. Based on the dimensions previously assessed, this study began with three assumptions about adult learners: 1) There is an education gap in their formal education, 2) They have a low level of confidence regarding technology, and 3) Library instruction sessions are valuable because they "increase a person's ability manipulate technology" (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 97). A survey was then developed to evaluate the three assumptions, as well as to gather information regarding the adult learner's reference use, their comfort with the reference desk, and their levels of technology training.

This study found that "training, even if it is over one subject database, increases students' comfort level with other resources, especially the internet" (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 99). This study also found that "The more comfortable people are with using the library, the more helpful they find the reference desk. Older people tend to find the reference desk the most helpful" (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 99). Interestingly, although adult learners are less comfortable using electronic resources than the traditional-age student, they do not seem to be any more comfortable with resources in a printed format. It's important to note that based on the survey results of this study, "there is a correlation between students taking a library class and

their ability to use other resources” (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 98). After analyzing the survey results, Barton and Strout-Dapaz determined that reference services for adult learners must be flexible and variant. With this in mind, their proposed action was to use A Close Encounter Model. This proposed model begins with the premise that “Every reference encounter is an instructional one. Every instructional encounter involves 3 dimensions: technological savvy (student), learning styles (student), and instructional methods (librarian). Whether at a reference desk, in a library instruction class, or personalized instruction, librarians must tailor the instructional methods to the individual’s technical savvy and learning style” (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 101). This model was proposed because it meets “a variety of information needs and creates technological confidence while providing the tools necessary to manage information overload” (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2000, p. 102).

While much of the available literature on adult learners focuses on the obstacles that stand in the way of these students, as well as what can be offered to help this population succeed, Patience L. Simmonds conducted research to find out just what it was that students wanted out of their library. She did this by holding focus groups, distributing questionnaires, and hosting interviews with adult students to “find out exactly in their own words what they think about the library, its services, resources, quality of service, and what they expect the library to do about it” (Simmonds, 2000, p. 398). This study aimed to reach out to both current library users (by holding focus groups), as well as non-library users (by providing questionnaires). Her study found that adult learners wanted to attend orientations or information sessions that were specifically geared towards students like themselves, reference help that is available at all hours which the library is open, as well as more resources, particularly, “more resources to initiate them into their future careers” (Simmonds, 2000, p. 402). Her study also found that what adult learners disliked the most about the library were its hours of operation. According to Simmonds, “Adult learners wanted a peaceful environment to study, approachable and knowledgeable library staff who understand the needs of students, and would not treat them with disrespect and jest even if they asked obvious questions” (2000, p. 404). Interestingly, she found that adult learners would be more inclined to use the various resources provided by the library if there were more instruction tailored specifically to them. Thus, Simmonds is yet another researcher to discover the benefits of library instruction.

**METHODOLOGY:** In an effort to determine what community college libraries across Massachusetts are doing to provide adult learners with the tools and resources needed to succeed, as well as to define what else can be done to assist these students, reference librarians of community colleges were selected based on geographic location to participate in a brief online questionnaire, which consisted of nine questions and was estimated to take about 10 minutes to complete. The survey questions can be found in Appendix 1. For this research project, the survey asked questions regarding both the educational institution as a whole, as well as the library itself. Once the participating reference librarians submitted their responses, the survey results were collected and analyzed. A visual representation of this data can be found in Appendix 2. In total, there were 25 surveys distributed to reference librarians across 13 Massachusetts community college libraries. Out of the 25 surveys distributed, 6 (24%) were returned and analyzed. Although there were few responses, the information they provided was still helpful and proves to be a good starting point for this, as well as future research.

**FINDINGS:** The majority of those participating in the survey (33%) said their educational institution as a whole provided study skills and instruction classes geared towards adult learners. Of those institutions that did not have any specific programs or resources specifically for adult learners, 83% were unsure whether or not there were any plans for resources like this in the future. The results were similar when it came to the library itself: 17% of libraries surveyed offered services specifically tailored to adult learners, while 50% were unsure if their library offered assistance of this nature, and 33% responded that their library had no plans for anything like this in the future. While the majority of respondents whose library do provide services geared at adult learners stated their library provided library instruction classes aimed at adult learners, there were no reports of any instruction classes on technology, using learning platforms like Blackboard or Moodle, time management, or study skills. All those who participated in the survey reported that their library housed materials to support the success of adult learners- 83% said they had a small collection while 17% had a large assortment of materials aimed at this population.

Based on the survey results, library users who are adult learners is between 25% and 50%, with the library seeing the most traffic of adult learners (50%) in the mid-morning (9am-12pm) and in the evening (3pm-6pm). Knowing information such as the percent of library users who are adult learners, as well as the times when there is the most traffic of this population can be helpful when it comes to scheduling events to benefit the scholastic needs of the adult learner. It's important to arrange programs and tailored services during times where adult learners are on campus and also to ensure that these events are convenient and accessible for them. For instance, libraries involved in this survey, might consider holding events for this population midmorning and late afternoon/early evening.

Everyone (100%) who participated in the survey reported that using computers and the internet, as well as using software like Microsoft Office were among the most common issues adult learners had. This is an interesting finding because while all of the respondents stated the use of technology to be one of the leading obstacles adult learners face, none of the libraries are responding to this need by providing classes, lecture, demonstrations, or any other service that could help adult learners overcome this barrier. Similarly, 83% of participants responding to the survey stated that participating in online classes seemed to be a challenge for adult learners, and 67% said using databases and finding academic articles also appeared to be a common concern. There were no participants who felt as if adult learners had a problem navigating and finding their way around campus.

Lastly, the participants in this survey were asked what ideas or suggestions they had to increase the success of this population. It was suggested to collaborate with Information Technology departments in developing "how to" workshops before the semester begins, as well as holding a college-wide conversation about support for adult learners. Others suggested having instruction classes specifically for this group of students and also to obtain more materials that are geared especially toward their needs.

**CONCLUSION:** This survey confirms earlier findings that adult learners commonly struggle with issues of a technological nature. These issues include troubles using computers and the internet, as well as using word processing software, and databases. Adult learners often



experience library anxiety due to unfamiliarity with the workings of the library (Cannady, King, & Blendinger, 2012, p. 158) or perceived competition with younger, traditional undergraduate students (Cooke, 2010, p. 213). To help adult learners succeed, collaboration is a key component. This collaboration should extend to the Information Technology department, department heads, librarians, instructors, information literacy coordinators, and most importantly, the student. Communication between all of these groups is needed to ensure the success of adult learners.

Along with collaboration, instruction classes play a huge role when it comes to adult learners reaching their full potential in college. According to Baron and Strout-Dapaz, “training, even if it is over one subject database, increases students’ comfort level with other resources, especially the internet” (2000, p. 99). The results of this study suggest that this is an area where libraries are falling short. To ensure student success, it is imperative to have open communication as well as to prepare and guide students through the use of library instruction classes. To assist these students further, instruction classes could be held separately from the traditional undergraduate students, and be tailored specifically toward adult learners. Holding instruction classes for adult learners apart from traditional-age students would be beneficial because it could potentially minimize troubles related to library anxiety or technostress. It would also be beneficial to adult learners for colleges/ college libraries to hold “how to” workshops prior to the beginning of the semester that would cover things such as using learning platforms like Blackboard or Moodle, using word processing software, especially Microsoft Word and other Microsoft Office software, as well as simply using the internet.

Housing materials in the library aimed at the success of adult learners is also important. Although 17% of respondents in this study reported having a large collection of such items, the majority of libraries reported to only having a small collection. To provide appropriate resources for today’s adult learner, libraries should consider developing these collections. Books that may be of interest for the adult learner when conducting collection development may be: *Traditional Degrees for Nontraditional Students: How to Earn a Top Diploma From America's Great Colleges At Any Age* written by Carole Fungaroli Sargent, *New Beginnings: A Reference Guide for Adult Learners* by Linda Simon, or *The Adult Learner's Companion: A Guide for the Adult College Student* by Deborah Davis. Libraries may also want to consider purchasing materials to be used by librarians and the library staff for professional development. Books here could include: *The Adult Learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* by Malcolm S. Knowles, *Adult Learning Principles: Maximizing the Learning Experience of Adult Learners* written by Jane John-Nwankwo, or *Planning Programs for Adult Learners: A Practical Guide* by Rosemary S. Caffarella.

With the adult learner population continuing to increase, providing this group with the tools and resources needed to succeed is becoming increasingly more important. In order to better help these students, it is important to understand the barriers that stand in their way, as well as what techniques can be used to help them overcome these obstacles.

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## APPENDIX 1 – Survey Questions

**1. What resources, tools, or events does your EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION provide that are specifically geared towards the success adult learners?**

- Orientation (separate from the rest of the school)
- Technology classes aimed at adult learners
- Study skills classes aimed at adult learners
- Time management classes aimed at adult learners
- Instruction class for using online learning platforms (Moodle, Blackboard, Aplia, etc.)
- Other:

**2. If your EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION does not have any specific resources, tools, or events geared towards adult learners, are there any plans to in the future?**

Please feel free to add any other additional comments in the "other" box.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other:

**3. What resources, tools, or events does your LIBRARY provide that are specifically geared towards the success adult learners?**

- Technology classes aimed at adult learners
- Study skills classes aimed at adult learners
- time management classes aimed at adult learners
- Instruction classes for using online learning platform (Moodle. Blackboard, Aplia, etc.)
- Library instruction classes aimed at adult learners
- Other:

**4. If your LIBRARY does not have any specific resources, tools, or events geared towards adult learners, are there any plans to in the future?**

Please feel free to add any other additional comments in the "other" box.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other:

**5. Does your library house materials in the collection that support the success of adult learners?**

Please feel free to add any other additional comments in the "other" box.

- Yes, we have a large assortment of materials that support the success of adult learners
- Yes, but it's a small selection
- No, we don't have materials to support the success of adult learners
- Other:

**6. Approximately what percent of library users (at your library) are adult learners?**

Please feel free to add any other additional comments in the "other" box.

- Less than 25 %
- 25%
- 50%
- 75%
- 100%
- Other:

**7. What time of day does your library see the most traffic of adult learners?**

Please feel free to add any other additional comments in the "other" box.

- Early morning (5am-9am)
- Mid-morning (9am-12pm)
- Afternoon (12pm-3pm)
- Evening (3pm-6pm)
- Night ( 6pm-10pm)
- Late Night (10pm-2am)

**8. What are the most common concerns or issues adult learner at your library face?**

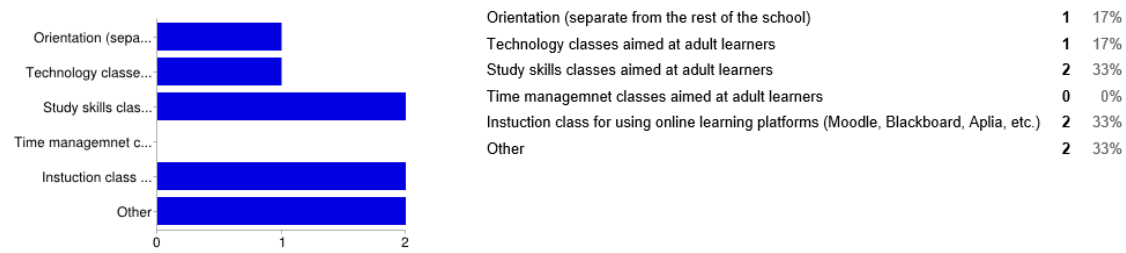
- Finding time to study / Developing good study skills
- Using computers and the internet
- Keeping up with the pace of the class
- Navigating around campus
- Using databases / Finding scholarly or academic articles
- Participating in online classes
- Using software (i.e. Microsoft Office, Adobe, etc.)
- Citing references
- Finding books or other physical materials in the library
- Other:

**9. Given the opportunity, what are some changes you'd make to your library to increase the success rate of adult learners?**

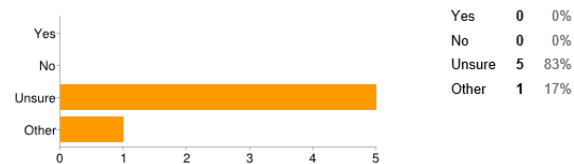
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## APPENDIX 2 – Visual Representation of Data

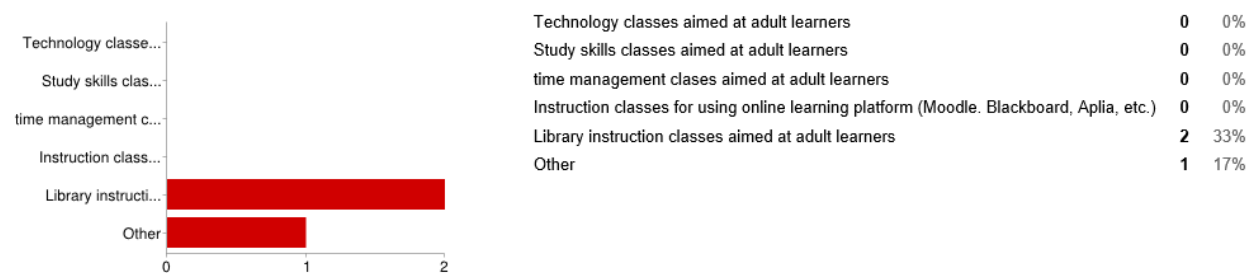
### 1. What resources, tools, or events does your EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION provide that are specifically geared towards the success adult learners?



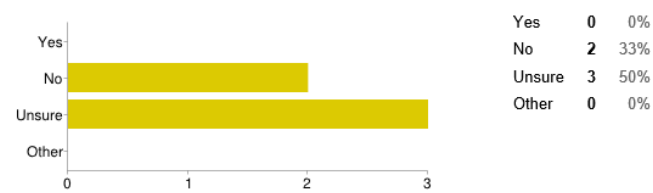
### 2. If your EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION does not have any specific resources, tools, or events geared towards adult learners, are there any plans to in the future?



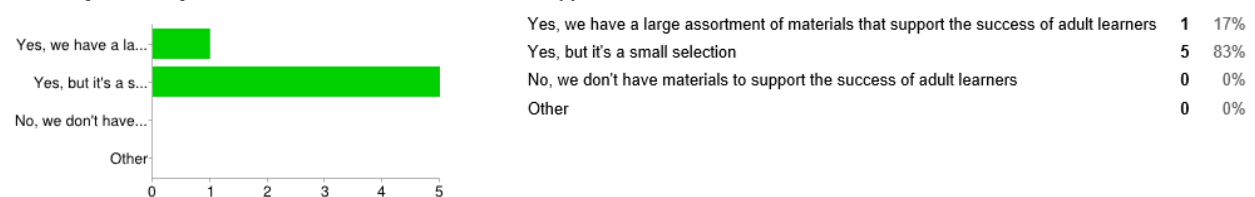
### 3. What resources, tools, or events does your LIBRARY provide that are specifically geared towards the success adult learners?



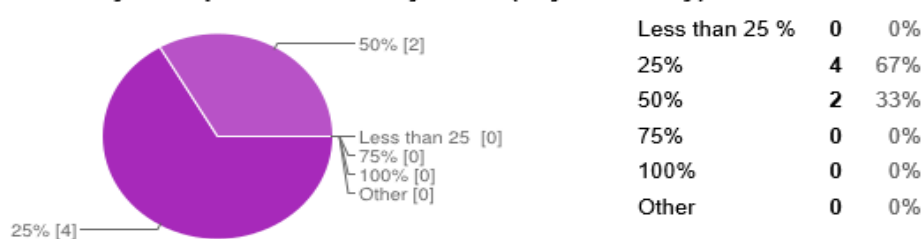
### 4. If your LIBRARY does not have any specific resources, tools, or events geared towards adult learners, are there any plans to in the future?



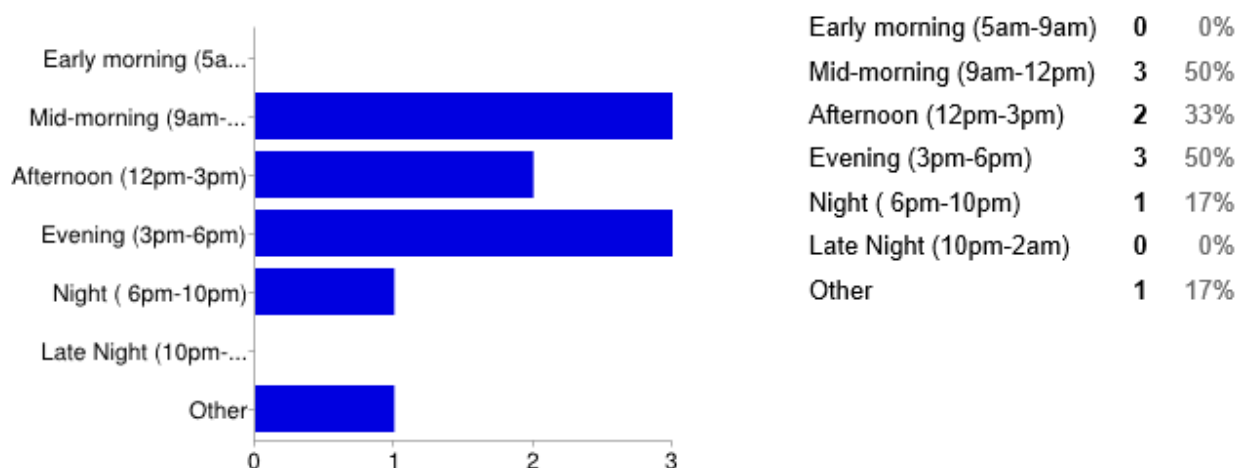
### 5. Does your library house materials in the collection that support the success of adult learners?



### 6. Approximately what percent of library users (at your library) are adult learners?



### 7. What time of day does your library see the most traffic of adult learners?



### 8. What are the most common concerns or issues adult learner at your library face?

