

Adult Education Evaluation

Phase III Final Report

Summary of Evaluation Findings, Technical Assistance, and Recommendations

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UMassAmherst

Donahue Institute
Applied Research and
Program Evaluation

Adult Education Evaluation Phase III Final Report

Summary of Evaluation Findings, Technical Assistance, and Recommendations

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Introduction

This report summarizes the activities, work products, key findings, and recommendations from the evaluation and technical assistance work comprising the Phase III (FY23) collaboration between the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) and the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) division of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

This collaborative work was grounded in ACLS’s commitment to community, equity, diversity, and data-driven decision making for continuous improvement. UMDI activities this year focused on developing insights to guide ACLS in planning data-driven improvements to their systems over the next 5 years. We developed baseline understandings of system-level student performance and student and staff experiences that will serve as reference points for measuring future change. We also began a process of identifying, prioritizing, and filling gaps in the data and data systems that ACLS needs to understand, improve, and advocate for Massachusetts adult education. The findings, insights, and recommendations in this report can serve as a foundation from which ACLS—as the steward of the Massachusetts public adult education system—can develop a shared road map for system-level evaluation in collaboration with the broader adult education community in the Commonwealth.

This report includes findings from baseline analyses of student performance data and surveys of adult education students and personnel. It also summarizes UMDI’s technical assistance work around identifying gaps in ACLS system-level data, engaging with the Adult Education Advisory Council, and developing recommendations for a 5-year system-level monitoring and evaluation plan.

In the interest of creating an understandable and shareable document, we focused the body of the report on our insights and interpretations of the data. For those readers interested in seeing more of the data or in digging more deeply, please refer to the extensive appendices, which are referenced throughout the report.

Structure of This Report

We begin with a summary of key findings and recommendations, followed by a few notes about the background of this phase of the evaluation.

Next, you will find two evaluation sections (student performance data and survey data). Each of these sections begins by reiterating the key findings that emerged from their respective analyses, before describing the data and overall findings. The survey analysis section concludes with a set of reflections and recommendations that we developed from the analysis of data from director, staff, and student surveys (page 32).

A summary of technical assistance activities follows the evaluation sections. The report closes with a detailed set of recommendations, beginning on page 39.

Key Findings Summary

The following summarizes key findings from Phase III (FY23) evaluation activities. See individual analysis sections for details.

Student Performance Data

1. Prior to participation, two thirds of adult basic education (ABE)/adult secondary education (ASE) students had completed some high school (Grades 9–12, without diploma), while two thirds of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students had prior education of high school completion or more.
2. Analysis shows that about one third of ABE/ASE participants and about one half of ESOL participants had achieved Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) credit in the program year 2021–2022.
3. There was no meaningful variation in average MSG by race. There was modest variation in average MSG by gender and program setting.
4. Rates of high school equivalency (HSE) attainment for ABE/ASE participants varied by level of prior education. The amount of variation was larger for some racial/ethnic groups than for others.
5. Participants in higher education settings, in both ABE/ASE and ESOL programs, had the highest average rates of postsecondary education or training (PSE/T) entry.

Surveys – Directors and Staff

1. On average, directors had been in the adult education field much longer than staff.
2. The top reasons directors and staff stayed in their positions were (1) they felt valued and (2) they were committed to the field and to their students.
3. Relating to students' experiences was a more common reason to stay in their job for staff of color than for White staff.
4. Approximately one half of directors and one third of staff reported having seriously considered leaving their position.
5. There was notable variation by program setting in staff and director responses related to staying in and leaving their positions.
6. Most staff (80%) who were involved with remote instruction/services were comfortable with their level of involvement.
7. Directors reported that funding, and to some extent policy, limited their options for hiring and retaining staff; they expressed interest in more opportunities to collaborate to address common challenges.

Surveys – Students

1. Most students had been participating in adult education for 1 year or less.
2. Across all settings, 40%–50% of students took adult education classes to improve their employment options.
3. Work schedule was the most common reason students had difficulty attending either in-person or online classes (for students in settings other than corrections), followed by childcare and transportation.

Recommendations Summary

The following summarizes UMDI’s recommendations based on evaluation and technical assistance activities during Phase III. A more detailed discussion of these key recommendations begins on page 39.

Recommendations for 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan activities are in Appendix A. Recommendations from the Data Gaps work are in Appendix B. Reflections and recommendations from the survey data analysis are at the end of the survey section, beginning on page 32.

1. Develop a 5-year plan for system-level monitoring and evaluation.

System-level evaluation is a critical tool for decision making, program improvement, and advocacy. A 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan could serve as a shared roadmap for system-level inquiry for the Massachusetts public adult education community, creating an opportunity to build shared ownership of a vision for gathering and analyzing data that could inform improvements to the adult education system for students and providers.

2. Work with the field to further define equity in the context of adult education.

Advancing equity is a foundational value and goal of many in the adult education community. Regularly revisiting what equity means—acknowledging the experiences and expertise of those in the field—is essential to advancing that goal.

3. Advance strategies for improving student persistence.

Further exploration of persistence rates—and student experiences—by program characteristics, such as setting (e.g., community-based organization, school district) and region, could provide greater insight into these challenges to student persistence.

4. Advance strategies for improving staff retention.

Refining systems for tracking program staffing (including retention and turnover) is an important first step in addressing concerns about staff retention at a system level.

5. Improve the collection and management of waitlist data.

Developing a greater understanding of unmet demand for services—both the number of students waiting for service and the type(s) of service being requested—could aid ACLS and programs in designing and aligning services with need, and with advocating for additional resources.

6. Support programs in collaboration and coalition building.

Creating additional opportunities for programs—especially directors—to engage in creative problem solving with each other and with ACLS would improve the collective performance of the field.

7. Continue to explore student needs and goals.

Understanding the various needs and goals of adult education students may serve to surface additional ideas for monitoring and improving student participation and performance that are mutually beneficial to programs, to students, and to system-level management.

8. Refine student outcome data and analysis to better reflect student experiences.

Continuing to explore patterns of student performance and refining the measures to do so may result in additional insight that could positively impact programs and the system.

Background

“Working with providers and partners, ACLS stewards a public adult education system that puts no-cost quality instruction, advising, job training, and career pathways within reach of all adult students in Massachusetts.” This is the mission of the ACLS division of DESE. Each year, ACLS provides learning opportunities to approximately 18,000 students who seek services relevant to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), adult basic education (ABE), and/or high school equivalency (HSE).

Over the past several years, UMDI has collaborated with ACLS to engage with the field and analyze system-level data, with the goal of gathering insights about the experiences of students and staff to inform data-driven system-level improvements. The current third phase of collaboration between ACLS and UMDI (beginning in fall 2022) builds on the findings, insights, and recommendations from previous phases. Each phase of the work has prioritized and centered antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion through, for example, including a diversity of groups and voices in data collection, assessing and reporting on inequities in participation and outcomes, and engaging with ACLS leadership around these topics.

Phase I: In spring 2019, ACLS and DESE contracted with UMDI to conduct an evaluation of the Massachusetts adult education system. This multi-method evaluation gathered the perspectives of students, directors, teachers, advisors, ACLS staff, and other stakeholders, and collected data through focus groups, interviews, and online surveys. Data collection surfaced a range of information, from student academic and workforce needs, to program successes and challenges, to recommendations for potential changes to the adult education system.

Phase II: In spring 2022, ACLS and DESE contracted with UMDI to complete a second phase of the evaluation, an initial exploration of issues centered on pay and pay equity. This targeted evaluation included two streams of work. The first analyzed staff compensation data across a range of individual and program characteristics—using data from program budgets and from the Literacy, Adult and Community Education System (LACES). The second workstream collected data from directors and staff in focus groups, asking questions about factors related to staff retention and attrition, including compensation.

Phase III: In FY23, UMDI worked with ACLS on a third phase of the evaluation focusing on establishing baseline data and developing insights for guiding ACLS in planning data-driven improvements at the system level over the next 5 years. The work included two evaluation elements and three technical assistance elements. We conducted a baseline analysis of system-level student performance using student-level data from LACES paired with other information on programs and students (provided by ACLS) for program year 2021–2022. We also developed, administered, and analyzed data from surveys of students, staff, and directors in ACLS-funded programs in spring 2023. Technical assistance activities centered on identifying gaps in ACLS system-level data, engaging with the Adult Education Advisory Council, and developing recommendations for a 5-year system-level monitoring and evaluation plan.

Student Performance Data Baseline Analysis

Key Findings

- Prior to participation, two thirds of adult basic education (ABE)/adult secondary education (ASE) students had completed some high school (Grades 9–12, without diploma), while two thirds of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students had prior education of high school completion or more.¹**
- Analysis shows that about one third of ABE/ASE participants and about one half of ESOL participants had achieved Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) credit in the program year 2021–2022.** The average Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) credit was 0.33 for ABE/ASE participants and 0.48 for ESOL participants in program year 2021–2022 (MSG ranges from 0–1.7).^{2,3}
- There was no meaningful variation in average MSG by race. There was modest variation in average MSG by gender and program setting.** For example:
 - Students in ABE/ASE in school district program settings (LEA) had higher than average MSG (0.36 vs. 0.33).
 - Students in ABE/ASE in correctional institutions (COR) had lower than average MSG (0.28 vs. 0.33).
- Rates of high school equivalency (HSE) attainment for ABE/ASE participants varied by level of prior education. The amount of variation was larger for some racial/ethnic groups than for others.** Overall, ABE/ASE participants with some prior high school education had a higher average HSE attainment rate (13.7%) than participants with eighth grade or less prior education (11.3%). However, this difference in attainment rate between the two prior education groups was smaller for White students (14.7% vs. 13.4%, including White Hispanic students) than for African American/Black students (12.9% vs. 5.9%) and Hispanic students (11.7% vs. 7.3%).
- Participants in higher education settings, in both ABE/ASE and ESOL programs, had the highest average rates of postsecondary education or training (PSE/T) entry.** (ABE/ASE 7.9% for higher education settings vs. 3.8% overall; ESOL 3.4% for higher education settings vs. 1.5% overall).

¹ Based on data from program year 2021–2022. There were 19,771 students in total: 14,075 in ESOL and 5,696 in ABE/ASE.

² Measurable Skills Gain is a measurement of performance combining (1) increases in Educational Functional Levels (pretests to posttests); (2) attainment of an HSE such as HiSET or a GED; and (3) entry into postsecondary education or training (PSE/T). MSG credits begin at 0 and increase non-linearly. The first gain, regardless of type, moves the credit from 0 to 1. Subsequent gains within the same program year each add 0.1 to the program's credit for that student. For both ABE/ASE and ESOL, there are six EFL levels. In the 2021–2022 data, MSG credits ranged from 0–1.7. For the majority of students, MSG credit was 0 (68% in ABE/ASE and 55% in ESOL). For more information, see <https://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/accountability/outcomes/msg.html>.

³ MSG averages include all participants who are pre-tested and have at least 12 hours of instruction, including students who did not persist long enough to posttest (a minimum of 12 weeks following pretest) and have 0 for MSG credits. In the 2021–2022 data, 31% of ESOL participants and 48% of ABE/ASE participants had pretest but not posttest outcomes.

Overview

This section reports on analyses conducted to establish a baseline of student performance in the Massachusetts public adult education system, including understanding participant characteristics. As agreed with ACLS, the analyses sought (1) to understand the characteristics of adult education students and programs and (2) to establish a baseline of student performance. Attending to ACLS's focus on equity, the analyses also explored differences in student performance across participant characteristics (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, highest level of prior education) and program characteristics (i.e., region and type of host institution or setting).

Data and Analytical Approach

The question used to guide this phase of the analysis, developed from Phase I, was:

What are potential differences in success across programs and student groups defined by highest average student performance, greatest gains, and (if possible to assess) workforce outcomes?

The performance data analysis used student-level data from the Literacy, Adult and Community Education System (LACES) paired with other information on programs and students (provided by ACLS) for program year 2021–2022. Analyses were conducted relevant to Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) and two of its component performance measures, attainment of high school equivalency (HSE) and entry into qualifying postsecondary education or training (PSE/T). See Appendix C for a more detailed description of methods for this analysis.

Summary of Participant Data

Adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) are umbrella terms used to describe a range of educational services for adults, from basic literacy and numeracy to high school equivalency/adult diploma programs. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is designed for non-native English speakers to help adult learners develop English-language proficiency to meet their everyday, educational, and professional goals. Therefore, despite some overlap, the course of study, performance tests, and programmatic goals differ for ABE/ASE and ESOL programs and students.⁴

The participation and outcome data used for this analysis are from program year 2021–2022, the most recent complete year of data available. There was a total of 19,771 students in the data; 14,075 students were enrolled in ESOL, and 5,696 were enrolled in ABE/ASE.⁵ Enrollment numbers for previous years are included in Figure 1 for trend comparison.

Across ABE/ASE and ESOL, the majority of the students in the data were female (68%); 32% were male (see Figure 2).⁶ The racial/ethnic makeup of the ABE/ASE and ESOL students is summarized in Figure 3. There was significant overlap in the racial/ethnic categories; thus, percentages do not sum to 100%.⁷ For both ABE/ASE and ESOL students, the most common racial/ethnic category was White, followed by Hispanic/Latino, then Black or African American. Hispanic/Latino overlapped significantly with each of the racial groups, especially White (80%

⁴ In this analysis, *student* and *participant* are terms used interchangeably.

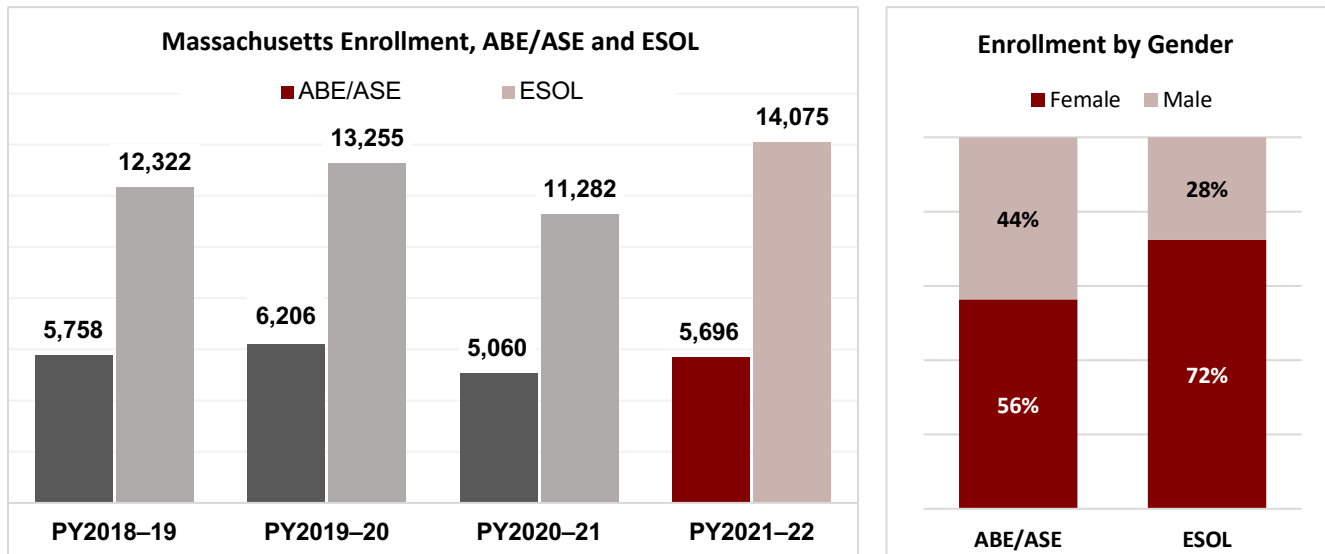
⁵ We classified students based on which test was used to assess their entry level. Within the program year, 133 students took both kinds of assessments, less than 1% of the total participants. In these cases, students were assigned to ABE/ASE or to ESOL based on their *initial* entry test for the program year: If it was an ESOL test, they were analyzed as an ESOL participant; if it was an ABE/ASE test, they were analyzed as an ABE/ASE participant.

⁶ The terms *male* and *female* reflect the data labels provided. Responses in the “other” gender category were less than 1%. Insights by gender were therefore limited to male and female participants.

⁷ Race and ethnicity data were recorded in two fields, one asking whether the student was Hispanic/Latino (as a yes/no question) and a second asking for the student's race (as a multi-response question, which included American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White).

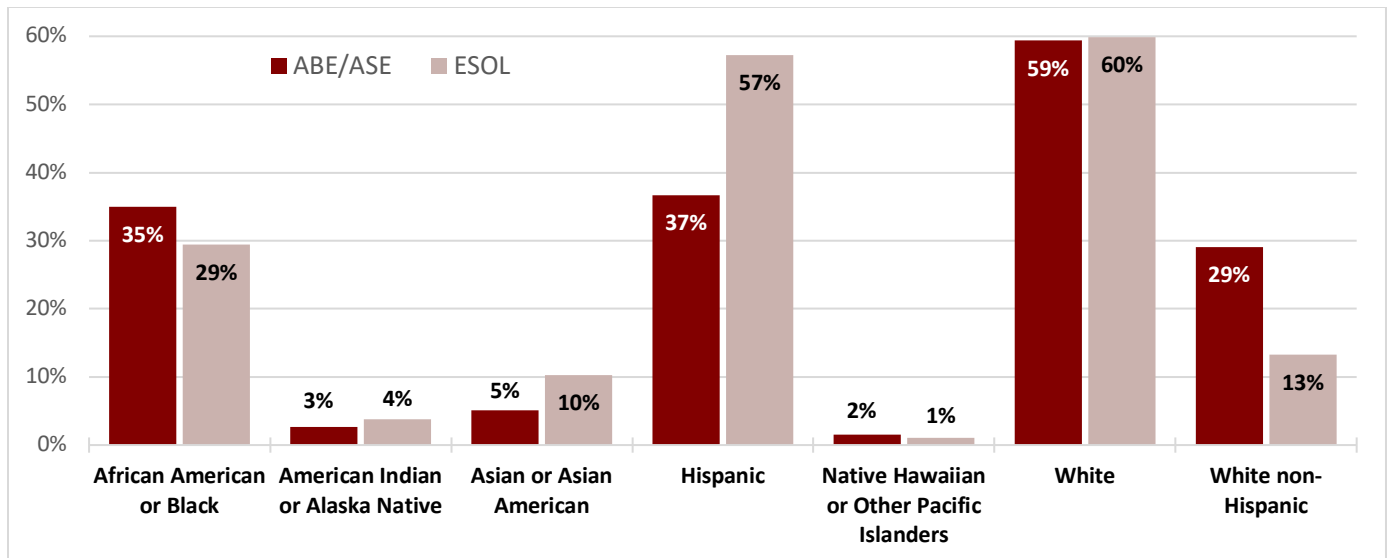
of students identified as Hispanic/Latino were also identified as White). Thus, Figure 3 includes an additional category for “White non-Hispanic.” Compared with ESOL participants, ABE/ASE participants had higher percentages of Black or African American and White non-Hispanic participants, and lower percentages of Hispanic/Latino and Asian participants. The White non-Hispanic race/ethnicity category is not a federally reported category and was not used in our analyses of student outcomes (see the Definitions of Specific Student Characteristics section on page 9) but is shared here for context.

Figures 1 and 2. Student Enrollment in ABE/ASE and ESOL and Enrollment by Gender, Program Year 2021–2022



Note. Total number of enrolled participants in program year 2021–2022 was N = 19,771. By gender, only male and female categories were analyzed due to very low numbers of participants in the data in the “other” category. In the appendix, data are reported for all, with “female” reported individually and “male” and “other” reported together, to protect individuals’ identities.

Figure 3. Race/Ethnicity of Students, ABE/ASE (n = 5,696) and ESOL (n = 14,075), Program Year 2021–2022



Note. The White non-Hispanic race/ethnicity category is not a federally reported category and was not used in our analyses of student outcomes but is shared here for context.

Summary of Analytical Approach

Performance was assessed using MSG credits and rates of achievement/entry of two of its component performance measures: attainment of HSE and entry into qualifying PSE/T.⁸ These performance measures were analyzed by participant gender, race, and highest level of education before participation. In addition, performance was analyzed by program, region, and program setting.⁹ Programs were grouped into four program settings for analysis: school districts (LEA), correctional institutions (COR), higher educational institutions (HRE), and community-based organizations (CBO).

Making Insights: Judging Difference and Similarity

In the performance analysis, groups that included 10 or fewer individuals were not considered for comparison and not displayed in reporting to reduce the likelihood of a breach of confidentiality.

No statistical testing was performed on the data, but judgments of meaningful differences and similarities were needed. To provide insights, groups were considered different from one another or from the overall average for HSE and PSE/T percentages when the differences in their corresponding rates were about 1–2 percentage points above or below one another or the total average. For differences in MSG across groups, two groups were considered different from one another and from the total average MSG when the difference in average MSG was greater than 0.03 credits. All comparisons were made separately for ABE participants and ESOL students because they progress on different test measurements, scales, goals, and classes. (Very few students do both. In the program year studied, only 133 participants, less than 1%, took both types of assessments.)

This report highlights findings from analysis that stood out from overall patterns of achievement, evaluated using differences from the average and from other groups. Only insights standing out from overall patterns were written about for inclusion in the body of the report. For a summary of all results, please refer to Appendix D.

Separate Analysis for ABE/ASE and ESOL

Separate analyses were completed for students in ABE and ASE classes/programs and those in ESOL classes/programs. As noted, courses of study, tests, and goals for ABE/ASE and ESOL differ greatly. Because the aims and means of ABE/ASE and ESOL differ, the scales associated with test and outcome scores also differ, as do the meaning and rates of their outcomes. For example, HSE attainment might not be an expected outcome for students enrolled in ESOL programs because of the level of English fluency required.¹⁰

Programs gathered data on each participant's entering Educational Functional Level (EFL), which was labeled in the data as either ABE/ASE or ESOL, depending on the assessment used. This information was used to assign each student to the ABE/ASE or ESOL group for analysis.¹¹ The ABE/ASE data included a small number of students who transitioned from ESOL within the same program year (133 students, fewer than 1% of all students; see Footnote #5).

Attending to Prior Educational Attainment

In addition to analyzing performance by program and student characteristics, each analysis was repeated, controlling for participants' prior educational attainment and using a simplified four-category grouping (no schooling through completion of eighth grade; completion of ninth through 12th grade, with no diploma or equivalency on program entry; high school completion with diploma; and some college through completion of

⁸ The other component of MSG is participant increases in Educational Functional Level (EFL). Analyses incorporating this component would add valuable insight but were not completed in the current phase due to scope and resource constraints. For more detail on MSG, HSE, and PSE/T, how they are collected, and how they were analyzed, please see Appendix C.

⁹ Full data tables are available in Appendix D. Region of the state where each program was located was also analyzed, using prior phases' regional definitions, but did not yield interpretable results reaching the level of key insights in the context of this analysis.

¹⁰ HSE assessments are also available in Spanish, and some ESOL students take and pass this assessment.

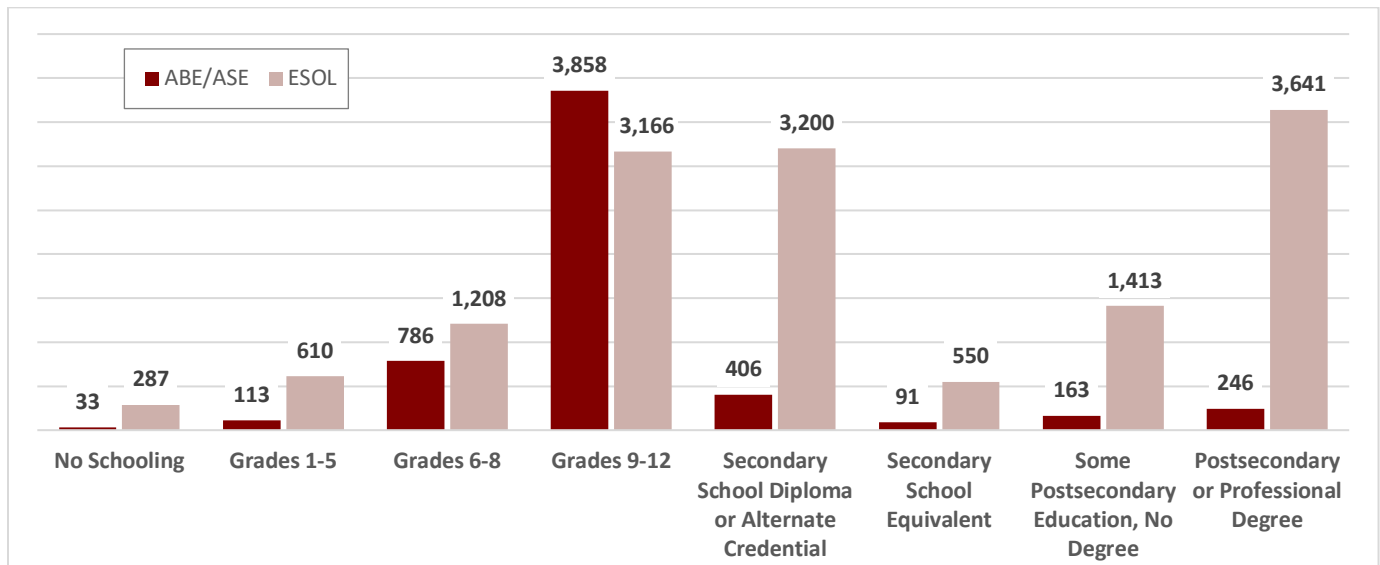
¹¹ Analysis of performance based on students' entering EFL did not fit within the scope of work this year.

an advanced degree). This categorization allowed for comparison of participants at roughly-similar levels of educational attainment and reporting out broader trends.

Prior Educational Attainment Levels				
Categories UMDI Used	No schooling through eighth-grade completion	Ninth through 12 th grade completion, no diploma nor equivalency	High school completion (diploma) or equivalency	Some college through advanced degree completion (any postsecondary level)
ACLS LACES Categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No schooling Grades 1–5 Grades 6–8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grades 9–12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary school diploma or alternate credential Secondary school equivalent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Postsecondary or professional degree Some postsecondary education, no degree

Prior to participation, two thirds of adult basic education (ABE)/adult secondary education (ASE) participants had completed some high school (Grades 9–12, without diploma), while two thirds of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) participants had prior education of high school completion or more. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of prior educational attainment of ABE/ASE and ESOL participants by the finer categories available in the LACES data before grouping into the four collapsed categories generated by UMDI. Figure 4 shows that the distribution of ABE/ASE students’ level of prior educational attainment was centered in Grades 9–12 with no high school degree or equivalency, with fewer students in each of the categories of educational attainment above and below that level. Figure 4 also shows that prior levels of educational attainment for ESOL students were more widely dispersed, with most ESOL students reporting one of three prior levels of education: (1) Grades 9–12 with no high school degree or equivalency, (2) secondary school diploma or alternative credential, or (3) postsecondary or professional degree, with the largest number of students in the most advanced category.¹²

Figure 4. Student Enrollment by Prior Educational Attainment, ABE/ASE and ESOL, Program Year 2021–2022



¹² Most secondary and postsecondary credentials among ESOL participants were likely earned outside the United States.

Definitions of Specific Student Characteristics

Gender: Only “male” and “female” categories for gender are included in this report because the number of participants reported as “other” were so few that suppression rules to protect the privacy of participants are in effect. Participants recorded as “other” were less than 1% of all students.

Race and ethnicity: UMDI grouped participants by race and ethnicity according to the categories defined by the federal government for reporting adult education data through the National Reporting System. This grouping strategy allowed overlapping categorizations, meaning individual participants could be included in multiple race/ethnicity categories.

Race and ethnicity are important to equity. Federal categories were used in this report. Therefore, major race groups are collated separately from Hispanic/Latino, considered an ethnicity.

Race categories:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- White

Ethnicity categories:

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino

In addition, someone can be in multiple categories, meaning analyses by race and ethnicity will show participants in more than one part of the analysis because people can identify in more than one category. As two examples, participants counted in the White category may be White and Hispanic, or a participant who is Asian and Black will appear in both the Black and Asian reported metrics, creating percentages above 100%.

Throughout this report, *White* is capitalized when it refers to a racial/ethnic identity to oppose the social treatment of Whiteness as an implicit, neutral, even invisible standard.

Limitations

Several limitations are worth noting as context for interpreting the findings in this section. See Appendix C more a more detailed discussion of limitations.

Race/Ethnicity Groupings

Using the race/ethnicity grouping strategy applied in this report can limit insight into cross-cutting groups that may be distinct in their experiences and outcomes such as White non-Hispanic participants and Black Hispanic and Asian Hispanic participants. UMDI also created additional disaggregated categories for an exploratory analysis (e.g., White non-Hispanic) but ultimately determined that familiar federal categories would be most useful to ACLS and the field. The race/ethnicity category “White non-Hispanic” is not included in federal reporting, but it is reported as an additional category in the data tables in the appendix to provide data for further insight.

Accounting for Preparation at Entry

This analysis used prior educational attainment to account for students’ level of preparation at entry into adult education programs. However, prior educational attainment does not allow for fine-grained distinctions in academic preparation and may not reflect students’ actual level of academic skill. Analysis using Educational Functional Level (EFL) at entry would offer additional insight but did not fit within the scope of work this year.

Distinguishing Zeros in MSG data

In this analysis, as in the MSG performance reports released by ACLS, MSG credits of zero do not distinguish lack of progress from attrition. A zero MSG credit can indicate two different things: students without post-tests (who may have exited), and students who post-tested but did not gain an MSG credit (i.e., did not increase educational functional levels, achieve HSE, or enter PSE/T). Individual providers can distinguish between these

two different student outcomes in their LACES data, but federally required system-level MSG reporting does not make this distinction.

Capturing PSE/T Entry

Not all post-secondary activity is captured in the data programs can report. PSE/T entry is difficult to capture fully because successful, qualifying entry into college or training programs is only counted after students have completed their programs and it is difficult for the programs to collect information on their former students. Further, PSE/T entry, as defined by federal policy, can only be credited after a 90-day pause following a student's separation from their ABE/ASE or ESOL program and for up to a year after their separation. These federal reporting restrictions add to the difficulty of capturing student success of this type.

Student Outcomes

This section presents findings relevant to three performance measures (MSG, HSE, and PSE/T) among ABE/ASE and ESOL participants, including notable differences in performance by race, gender, level of prior educational attainment, and program setting. All analyses are based on program year 2021–2022 data.

Summary of Findings

The following summarizes the findings described in this section.

Overall Performance: MSG, HSE, PSE/T

- The average MSG credit for ABE/ASE participants was 0.33 and 0.48 for ESOL participants.¹³
- The rate of HSE attainment was 11.8% for ABE/ASE participants and 0.4% for ESOL participants.¹⁴
- The rate of PSE/T entry was 3.8% for ABE/ASE participants and 1.5% for ESOL participants.

By Race/Ethnicity

Rates of HSE attainment for ABE/ASE participants varied by level of prior education. The amount of variation was larger for some racial/ethnic groups than for others. Overall, ABE/ASE participants with some prior high school education had a higher average HSE attainment rate (13.7%) than participants with eighth grade or less prior education (11.3%). However, this difference in attainment rate between the two prior education groups was smaller for White students (14.7% vs. 13.4%, including White Hispanic students) than for African American/Black students (12.9% vs. 5.9%) and Hispanic students (11.7% vs. 7.3%).

By Gender

Average MSG credits were similar by gender (female ABE/ASE, 0.33; male ABE/ASE, 0.32). However, female ABE/ASE participants had a higher rate of PSE/T entry than males (female 4.5%; male 3.0%), and male ABE/ASE participants had a higher HSE achievement rate than females (female, 11.0%; male, 12.9%).

By Program Setting

Average MSG credits for participants in each of the four program settings were close to the overall MSG credit average, both within ABE/ASE and ESOL. However, there were some notable differences in performance measures between the four program settings: students in community-based organizational settings perform near the average overall (CBO ABE/ASE avg., 0.30; CBO ESOL avg., 0.46); ABE/ASE participants in school district program settings had higher than average MSG credits (LEA ABE/ASE avg., 0.37); students in correctional institutions had lower than average MSG credits (COR ABE/ASE avg., 0.28); and in higher education settings, participants had the highest rates of PSE/T entry (HRE ABE/ASE, 7.9%; HRE ESOL, 3.4%). See Table 1.

¹³ Overall average MSG credit is the average across all students in ABE/ASE and in ESOL. Individual credit values ranged from 0–1.7. See Footnote #2 for more detail on MSG.

¹⁴ For overall HSE and PSE/T rates, the number of students with an HSE earned date or PSE/T entry date was divided by the total number of students. For rates by student characteristics, the denominator was the total number of participants in the subgroup (e.g., total number of male participants in ABE/ASE, total number of female participants in ESOL).

Overall Performance: MSG, HSE, PSE/T

- The average MSG credit for ABE/ASE participants was 0.33 and 0.48 for ESOL participants.
- The rate of HSE attainment was 11.8% for ABE/ASE participants and 0.4% for ESOL participants.
- The rate of PSE/T entry was 3.8% for ABE/ASE participants and 1.5% for ESOL participants.

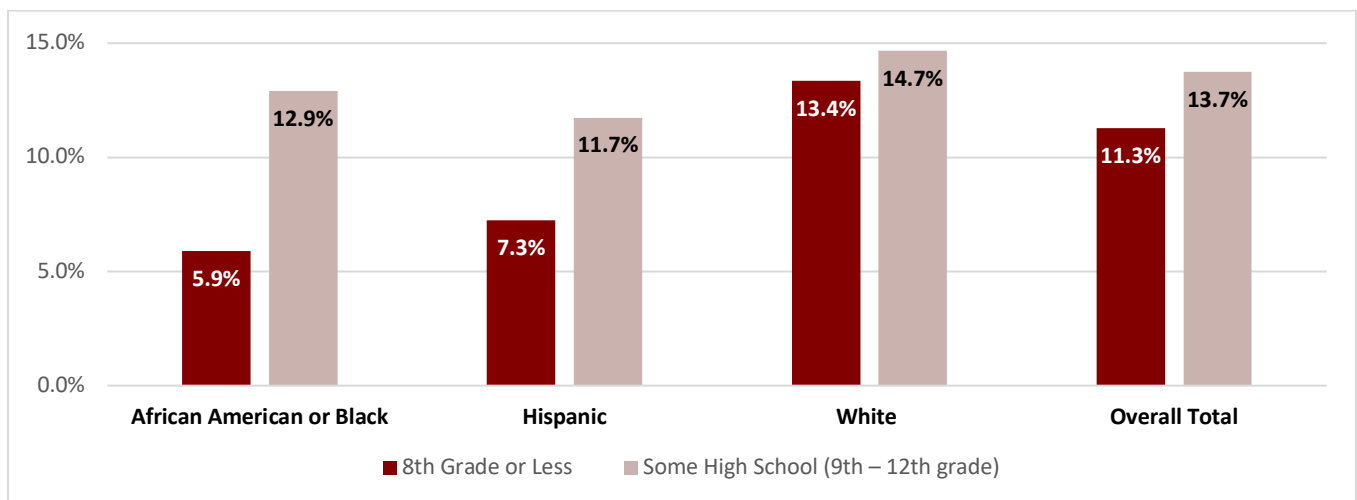
Performance by Race and Ethnicity

Average MSG credits were similar for all racial/ethnic groups and were clustered closely around the overall average within ABE/ASE (average = 0.33) and ESOL (average= 0.48).

Looking at rates of HSE attainment among ABE/ASE participants who had not completed high school, differences across prior education groups were notable when participants were grouped by race/ethnicity (see Figure 5).¹⁵

- White participants (including White Hispanic participants) had similar HSE attainment rates whether their prior education was eighth grade or less (13.4%) or some high school (14.7%). However, African American/Black and Hispanic participants' rates of HSE attainment were lower for those who entered with eighth grade or less prior education (5.9% and 7.3%, respectively) compared with those who entered with some high school education (12.9% and 11.7%, respectively).
- Among the group of students with eighth grade or less prior education, African American/Black and Hispanic participants had rates of HSE attainment (5.9% and 7.3%, respectively) several percentage points below the overall rate for that prior-education group (11.3%).
- Among students with some high school prior education, White participants had the highest rates of HSE attainment (14.7%), above the overall rate for that prior-education group (13.7%).

Figure 5. HSE Rate by Race/Ethnicity and Prior Educational Attainment, ABE/ASE and ESOL



Note. African American/Black and White are categories that both include Hispanic participants.

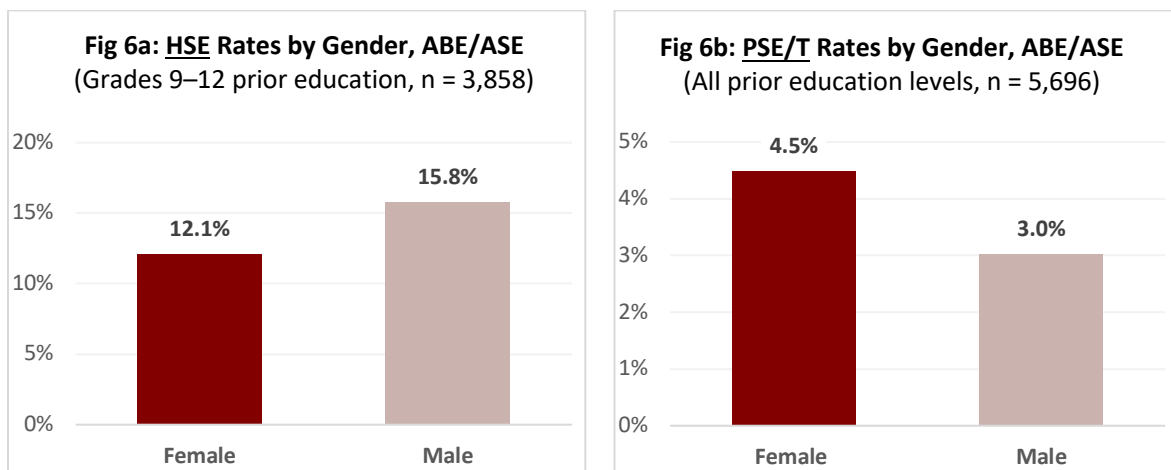
¹⁵ HSE attainment might not be an expected outcome for participants entering with eighth grade or less prior education, but the variation by race/ethnicity group is notable.

Performance by Gender

Average MSG credits for both female (ABE/ASE, 0.33; ESOL, 0.49) and male (ABE/ASE, 0.32; ESOL, 0.46) participants were close to the overall average in both ABE/ASE (0.33) and ESOL (0.48). This indicates overall parity by gender. However, notable variation by gender was observed among ABE/ASE participants for two of the outcomes that contribute to MSG (HSE achievement and PSE/T entry rates). See Figure 6.

- Among ABE/ASE participants with some prior high school education (Grades 9–12, 68% of all ABE/ASE participants), male participants’ rates of earning HSE (15.8%) were higher than female participants’ rates (12.1%).¹⁶ See Figure 6a.
- Female participants’ rates of enrolling in PSE/T (ABE/ASE, 4.5%; ESOL, 1.6%) were higher than male participants’ rates (ABE/ASE, 3.0%; ESOL, 1.1%).¹⁷ See Figure 6b.

Figure 6. High School Equivalency (HSE) and Postsecondary/Training (PSE/T) Rates by Gender (ABE/ASE)



Note. Note different scales. See Table 2 and Table 11 in Appendix D. Rates depicted do not show relative population size.

Performance by Program Setting

Data were grouped into four different program settings: community-based organizations (CBO), correctional institutions (COR), higher education (HRE), and school district settings (LEA). The average MSG credits for participants in each of these settings were close to the overall MSG credit average within both ABE/ASE and ESOL. However, a few meaningful differences were observed, and some of these differences became clearer when accounting for participants’ highest level of prior education. See

¹⁶ The “male” category includes a small number of individuals whose gender was recorded as “other.” They are recorded here to protect their identities.

¹⁷ For students included in the current analysis, HSE completion and PSE/T enrollment often do not occur sequentially, meaning that HSE completers and PSE/T students might not be the same group of students.

Table 1 for a summary of performance measures by program setting.

Table 1: Performance Measures by Program Setting

Average Measures	ABE/ASE					ESOL ¹⁸				
	Overall	By Program Setting				Overall	By Program Setting			
		CBO	COR	HRE	LEA		CBO	COR	HRE	LEA
MSG Credit	0.33	0.31	0.28	0.34	0.36	0.48	0.47	-	0.48	0.50
HSE Attainment Rate	11.8%	9.6%	11.4%	10.1%	15.5%	0.4%	0.2%	0%	0.6%	0.5%
PSE/T Entry Rate	3.8%	2.9%	1.4%	7.9%	2.3%	1.5%	1.1%	0%	3.4%	0.8%

Community-Based Organizations

The average MSG credit for programs in community-based organizations (ABE/ASE, 0.31; ESOL, 0.47) was close to the average MSG credit across program settings, in both ABE/ASE (0.33) and ESOL (0.48).

School Districts

The average MSG credit of ABE/ASE participants in school district program settings was higher than the overall average across program settings (0.36 vs. 0.33).

Higher Education

- **HSE:** ABE/ASE participants in higher education settings had lower than average HSE rates (10.1% vs. 11.8% overall).
- **PSE/T:** In higher education settings, participants had the highest PSE/T entry rates (ABE/ASE, 7.9%; ESOL, 3.4%) in both ABE/ASE and ESOL programs (compared to the overall average rates of 3.8% for ABE/ASE and 1.5% for ESOL).

These higher PSE/T entry rates for higher education settings hold even when looking within each category of prior educational attainment. In other words, students in higher education settings (in both ABE/ASE and ESOL) seem to enter postsecondary education and training at a slightly higher rate than in other program settings, regardless of prior education.

Correctional Institutions

The average MSG credit for ABE/ASE students in correctional institutions (0.28) was lower than the overall average (0.33) and the lowest average among all program setting types.

¹⁸ ESOL classes funded through ACLS are not offered in corrections settings.

Surveys of Adult Education Directors, Staff, and Students

Key Findings – Directors and Staff ^{19, 20}

1. **On average, directors had been in the adult education field much longer than staff.** The largest group of director respondents had worked in adult education for more than 20 years (32%), while the largest group of staff respondents had worked in adult education for 5 years or fewer (35%).
2. **The top reasons directors and staff stayed in their positions were (1) they felt valued and (2) they were committed to the field and to their students.**
3. **Relating to students' experiences was a more common reason to stay in their job for staff of color than for White staff.** African, African American, or Black, and Latino/a/x, Hispanic, or Spanish Origin staff reported *Being able to relate to my students' experience* as a top reason to stay in their position at three times the rate that White staff did (about 35% vs. 11%).
4. **Approximately one half of directors and one third of staff reported having seriously considered leaving their position.** Among directors who considered leaving, high work demands were the leading reason. For staff who considered leaving, the leading reason was low pay.
5. **There was notable variation by program setting in staff and director responses related to staying in and leaving their positions.** For example, responses from staff at community-based organizations (CBOs) indicated that low pay was a particular concern. Staff in corrections settings (CORs) had the highest rate among staff in any setting of having seriously considered leaving their positions.
6. **Most staff who were involved with remote instruction/services were comfortable with their level of involvement.** Of the 58% of staff respondents who reported involvement with remote instruction and/or remote services, most (80%) reported that their involvement fit their comfort and skill level.
7. **Directors reported that funding, and to some extent policy, limited their options for hiring and retaining staff; they expressed interest in more opportunities to collaborate to address common challenges.**

Key Findings – Students

8. **Most students had been participating in adult education for 1 year or less.** About half of student respondents had been participating in adult education for 6 months or less. Less than a third had been participating for more than 1 year.
9. **Across all settings, 40%–50% of students took adult education classes to improve their employment options.**
10. **Work schedule was the most common reason students had difficulty attending either in-person or online classes** (for students in settings other than corrections), followed by childcare and transportation. Online offerings seemed to lessen some of these challenges, though not dramatically.

¹⁹ UMDI and ACLS recognize that students are at the center of adult education work. This section begins with results from directors and staff because the priority for the survey data collection and analysis was to improve understanding of the factors related to retaining directors and staff—based on the belief that a stable workforce is essential to providing quality programming and services for students.

²⁰ Our reflections and recommendations based on analysis of survey data are at end of this section, beginning on page 32.

Overview

Based on data from surveys administered in spring 2023, this section summarizes selected high-level findings about the experiences of directors/administrators, staff, and students, with a focus on items that offer insight related to retention or attrition within each group. This focus emerged through conversation between ACLS and UMDI, reflecting and building on our previous work, and in response to concerns in the field about attracting and retaining staff during widespread staffing shortages in public education and beyond. One of the driving assumptions of this work is that improvements in student experiences and outcomes are linked to having a stable and well-trained adult education workforce.

Findings are reported on the three groups in two sections: first, directors and staff, then students. Each section summarizes high-level findings from the survey data submitted by those groups, including some notable differences across respondent characteristics of interest (i.e., age, gender, and race/ethnicity) and program setting. Response summaries for all survey questions, including those not covered in this section, can be found in Appendix E (directors), Appendix F (staff), Appendix G (students; CBOs, LEAs, or HREs), and Appendix H (students; CORs). Notably, summaries of many open-ended response items are only in these appendices.

Reflections and recommendations based on analysis of survey data are at the end of this section (page 32).

Methods

Surveys were developed to explore the experiences of (a) directors/administrators, (b) staff, and (c) students of ACLS-funded adult education programs. UMDI worked with ACLS to develop questions for each group to explore factors that might support or create barriers to engagement and retention.²¹ Survey instruments can be found in Appendix I (directors), Appendix J (staff), Appendix K (students; CBOs, LEAs, or HREs), and Appendix L (students; CORs).

Administration: All surveys were administered in February and March 2023. Directors and staff each received a unique survey link via email and completed the survey for their respective role online.²² Most student surveys were administered online, with an anonymous link shared through flyers and email/text communications from programs. Surveys administered to students in corrections settings were in paper format.

Response rates: The response rate for directors/administrators was 69% (92 responses from 134 invitations; 73 programs represented), and the response rate for staff was 47% (649 responses from 1,371 invitations; 80 programs represented).²³

A total of 3,259 students attending adult education programs that operate as part of community-based organizations (CBOs), school districts/local education agencies (LEAs), and higher education institutions (HREs) responded to the online survey. Additionally, 332 students from programs in correctional facilities (CORs; seven programs in county correctional institutions and four Massachusetts Department of Corrections sites) responded to the paper survey.²⁴

Respondent characteristics are summarized within the Directors and Staff section and Student section, respectively.

²¹ Two versions of the student survey were developed, one for students from programs in community-based organizations (CBOs), school districts/local education agencies (LEAs), and higher education institutions (HREs), and one for students from programs in correctional institutions (CORs). Instruments are in Appendix K (students; CBOs, LEAs, or HREs) and Appendix L (students; CORs).

²² UMDI collected and compiled staff and director names, titles, and email addresses for survey administration.

²³ These response rates were calculated based on the total counts for directors and staff from the UMDI-compiled contact list.

²⁴ No response rate was calculated for students since the total population of potential respondents was unknown. We distributed the survey in a variety of ways and, therefore, were unable to identify the total number of students who were informed about the survey.

Limitations: Much thought, care, and expertise went into the design, administration, and analysis of the surveys. Still, as with any research endeavor, limitations were present. Here, we itemize the most significant limitations—reasons to take caution in interpreting the survey results.²⁵

- The director, staff, and student surveys asked questions designed to explore why individuals in each of these roles leave. However, survey respondents were individuals who had *not* left, and their perspective cannot be assumed to represent those who had left.
- All survey participation was voluntary, and particularly for student respondents (though also for directors and staff), the choice to participate may have been related to factors that made respondents distinct from those who did not participate (selection bias/non-response bias). For example, the sample could be skewed toward those with fewer barriers to attending classes.
- Information about the student survey was distributed by ACLS-funded programs at the request of ACLS and UMDI, but variation in whether and how programs notified students about the survey and encouraged participation is likely, meaning that the experiences of students from some programs may have had higher representation than the experiences of students from other programs.
- Staff were not asked to identify their role (e.g., instructor, advisor, support staff); therefore, distinctions in experiences related to role could not be identified.
- In some cases, multiple email addresses (from different programs) were associated with staff who had the same name. We sent survey invitations to each email address, which might have resulted in some individuals being given the opportunity to complete the survey more than once.²⁶
- Although the response rate among directors was high, the total number of responses (92) was relatively small. When further divided into groups by respondent characteristics, subgroup sizes were sometimes very small. For directors, we share findings about differences based on subgroup sizes as small as five respondents. Thus, all director subgroup findings should be interpreted with caution.²⁷
- Surveys for students in programs in corrections settings were distributed by individual program staff or administrators, who were provided with written instructions. (Administrators were also offered opportunities to ask questions or seek clarification from UMDI via phone or email.) We were unable to verify the consistency of distribution, including adherence to confidentiality guidelines and making the Spanish version of the survey available to all students. Furthermore, the paper survey was not available in Chinese, Haitian Creole, or Portuguese.

²⁵ Though not a limitation per se, it is important to note that the survey was intended to be exploratory, and some findings raise rather than answer questions about the experiences of adult education directors, staff, and students in ACLS-funded programs.

²⁶ The alternative, to remove duplicate names from the distribution list, was rejected because duplicate names could belong to separate individuals, and we did not wish to inadvertently exclude staff from participation.

²⁷ For staff and student surveys, we only included groups of 20 or more in comparative analyses.

Directors and Staff

Director and Staff Respondent Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of director and staff respondents were similar. As seen in Figure 7 and Figure 8, the most common responses were: age 55 or older (41% of directors, 41% of staff), *Woman* (75% of directors, 80% of staff), and *White* (65% of directors, 67% of staff). Also, the largest groups of director and staff respondents worked in a CBO (46% of directors, 42% of staff).²⁸

On average, directors had been working in the adult education field much longer than staff. The most common length of time director respondents had worked in adult education was more than 20 years (32%), while the most common length of time staff respondents had worked in adult education was 1 to 5 years (35%). The most common length of time director respondents had been in their *current position* was 1 to 5 years (33%). Staff were not asked about length of time in their current position, but the most common length of time staff respondents had worked for their *current program* was 1 to 5 years (44%).

Figure 7. Director Respondents’ Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Age

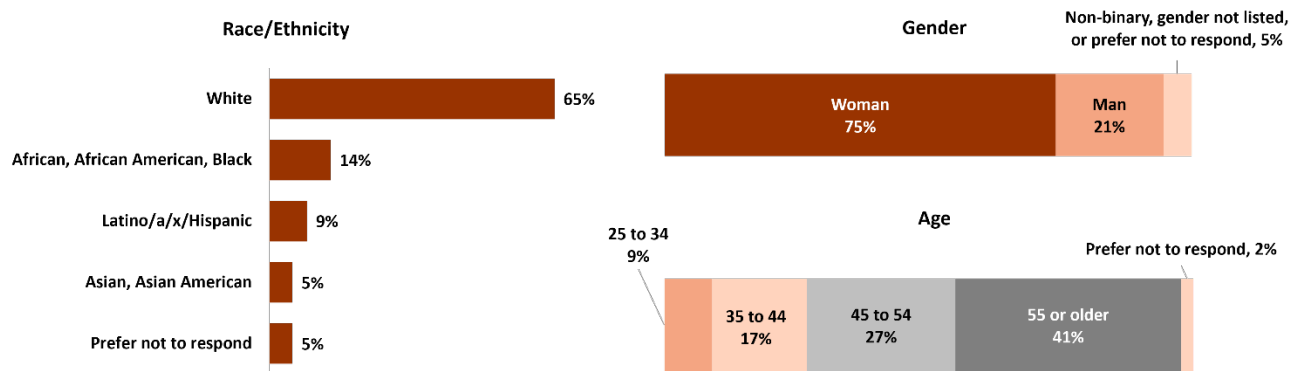
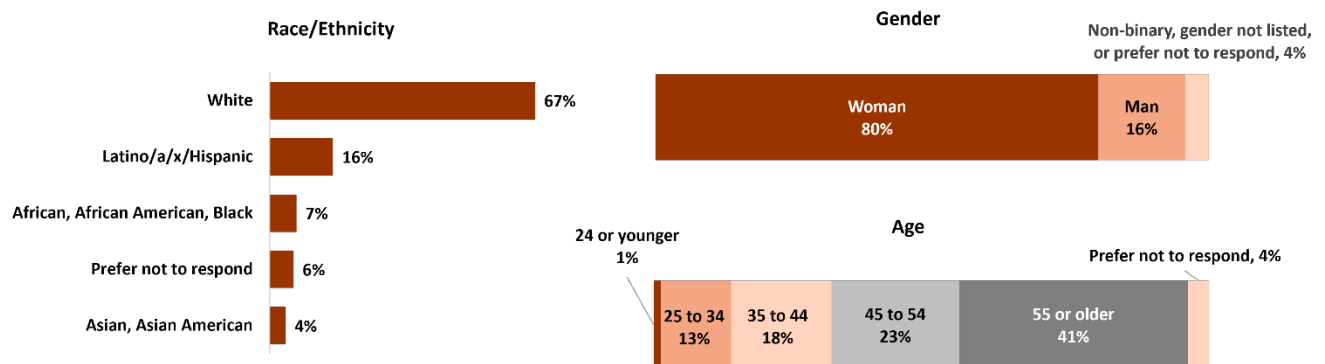


Figure 8. Staff Respondents’ Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Age



²⁸ Respondents could select more than one option for gender and more than one option for race/ethnicity.

Directors and Staff: Reasons for Staying and for Considering Leaving

Directors and staff were asked why they had stayed in their positions and if they had seriously considered leaving. Those who indicated they had seriously considered leaving were asked why.²⁹

A commitment to the adult education field kept many directors in their jobs. At the same time, many of the directors who considered leaving their positions did so because the work demands felt unmanageable. Many staff stayed in their jobs because they knew that their students valued them, while many of those who considered leaving did so because their pay felt inadequate.

Despite the draw of work that feels important and valued, fewer than 35% of staff respondents had worked in adult education for more than 10 years, suggesting the need for additional action to make these jobs viable careers. These findings reinforce what ACLS has been hearing from the field (including through UMDI’s Phase II work)—namely a concern about workforce turnover due to dissatisfaction with compensation and workload. Turnover can strain program resources, cause disruptions for staff, and translate into classroom instability for students. Thus, the findings also support ACLS’s ongoing efforts to understand the dynamics of staff turnover and to develop strategies to reduce it (one of the focuses of the 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan recommendations; See Appendix A).

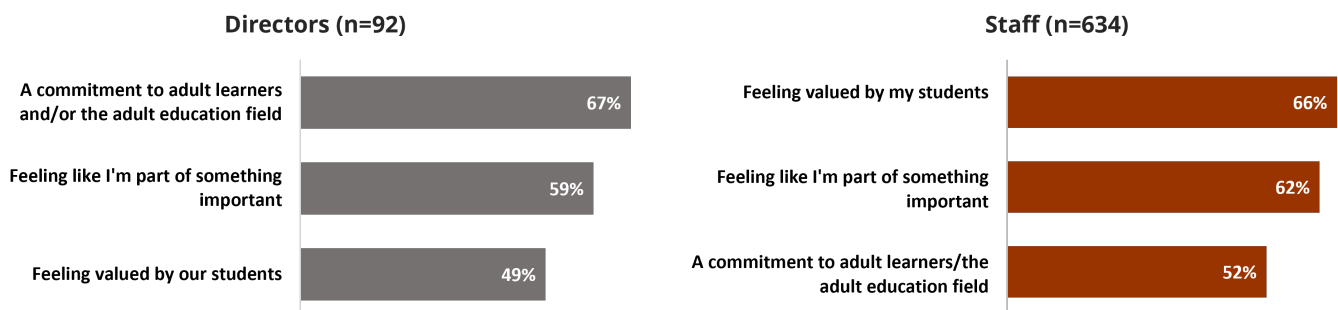
Reasons for Staying

The top reasons directors and staff said they stayed in their positions were that they felt valued and were committed to the field and to their students.

For both directors and staff, the leading reasons to stay in their positions tended to relate to intangible factors (e.g., feeling valued, having a commitment to the field) rather than to material or practical factors like pay. *Work schedule*, a practical factor, was also one of the leading reasons among staff (selected by 47% of respondents). Figure 9 shows the top three reasons to stay, selected by directors and staff (additional detail is available in Appendix E [directors] and Appendix F [staff]).

- For directors, *A commitment to adult learners and/or the adult education field* was the number one reason to stay (selected by 67% of respondents).
- For staff, *Feeling valued by my students* was the number one reason to stay (selected by 66% of respondents).

Figure 9. Director and Staff Top Reasons to Stay in Position



²⁹ For reasons to stay, respondents were asked to select up to four factors. For reasons they had considered leaving, respondents were asked to select all that applied. Please see Appendix I (directors) and Appendix J (staff), for survey instruments with all available response options and Appendix E (directors) and Appendix F (staff) for question-by-question response summaries.

Considering Leaving

Approximately one half of directors and one third of staff reported having seriously considered leaving their position.

- Among directors who indicated they had seriously considered leaving (52% of director respondents, n = 48), *Work demands are too high* was the number one reason (selected by 22, or 46%, of those who had seriously considered leaving).
- Among staff who indicated they had seriously considered leaving (33% of staff respondents, n = 207), *My hourly rate is too low* was the number one reason (selected by 84, or 41%, of those who had seriously considered leaving).

Of those directors and staff who reported seriously considering leaving, responses about their reasons for doing so were spread across many factors (even the top factors were selected by fewer than half the respondents, and many respondents selected *Other*). This suggests that many reasons are at play and may vary case by case.³⁰

Patterns by Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Program Setting

With a focus on equity analysis, we examined staff and director response patterns related to the three staying and leaving questions by respondent characteristics (age, gender, and race/ethnicity selected by respondents) and by program setting (based on the respondent's program affiliation). The following is a selected set of examples from that analysis. More extensive analysis can be found in Appendix M.

- **Pay and work schedule were more common reasons to stay in their job for younger directors** (aged 25 to 34) than for their older counterparts (aged 35 or older). Directors aged 25 to 34 selected pay as a top reason to stay at double the rate directors 35 or older did (50% vs. 24%).
- **Relating to students' experiences was a more common reason to stay in their job for staff of color than for White staff.** African, African American, or Black, and Latino/a/x, Hispanic, or Spanish Origin staff reported *Being able to relate to my students' experience* as a top reason to stay in their position at three times the rate that White staff did (about 35% vs. 11%).

Across program settings, there was notable variation in director and staff responses related to staying in and leaving their positions.

Differences by program setting were particularly notable and reinforce findings from the performance data analysis and from Phase II suggesting that staff in different program settings have different experiences and different compensation, and that students have different outcomes. ACLS's efforts to pursue equity might benefit from a clearer understanding of the factors that lead to these differences across program settings.

Some examples include:

- Directors from CORs and LEAs had higher rates of selecting *Pay* as a reason they *stayed* in their positions than respondents from HREs and CBOs (56% and 32% vs. 21% and 17%, respectively).
- Directors from CORs had the lowest rate of any program setting of selecting *Feeling valued by my staff and colleagues* as a reason for staying (11%); directors from CORs also had the lowest rate of indicating they had seriously considered leaving their position (33% Yes, 67% No).

³⁰ The survey included 18 response options for reasons to have seriously considered leaving, from which respondents could select as many options as applied. More analyses of "other" factors are in Appendix E (directors) and Appendix F (staff).

- Directors from CBOs had the highest rate of any program setting of selecting *Feeling valued by my staff and colleagues* (50%) as a reason for staying; directors from CBOs also had the highest rate of selecting *Salary/hourly rate is too low* (46%) as a factor that had made them seriously consider leaving.
- Concerns about pay were also prominent for staff from CBOs. These staff had the highest rates of any program setting of choosing pay-related factors as reasons they had considered leaving (54% chose *My hourly rate is too low*, and 45% chose *Pay increases are not commensurate with my contribution to the program*) and the lowest rate of any program setting of indicating *Pay* was a top reason they stayed in their positions (15% vs. 27%–37% for other program settings).
- COR staff had the highest rate (among staff groups) of having seriously considered leaving (46%) and the highest rate of indicating that *Being able to relate to my students' experience* was a top reason to stay in their position (29%).
- LEA staff had the lowest rate of having seriously considered leaving (22%).
- Staff in HREs reported that reasons to have considered leaving included work demands, pay, unclear or changing expectations, and lack of advancement opportunities (each selected by more than 25% of the 47 staff in this group who had seriously considered leaving). These staff also selected *I don't feel valued and/or included* and *Staff turnover* as reasons to have considered leaving at the highest rate of any program setting (21% each), five times the rate of staff from LEAs.

Staff: Feedback About Why Other Staff May Have Left

To capture information about the experiences of staff who had left adult education and therefore did not receive or have the opportunity to complete the survey, we asked staff, “If you know other staff who have left their position(s) in your program, why did they leave?” (n = 265 staff responses).

Responses generally fell into two categories: personal reasons and job-related reasons. Reasons provided for why other staff may have left reflected reasons staff gave for having considered leaving themselves.

- **Personal reasons** included retirement, health concerns, relocation, and family obligations.
- **Job-related reasons** included not being paid enough, being unhappy with benefits, feeling undervalued, burnout, issues with scheduling, wanting a full-time position, workload and demands being too high, limited opportunities for growth, and funding uncertainties and layoffs.

“Most left because they found a full-time position, or got to the point where they could no longer reasonably balance their day job/other obligations with part time adult education work. The best teachers I have worked with did the job because they cared about their learners, but it was never a sustainable job to support their families or receive benefits unless they had one of very few full-time positions available.”

Staff: Feedback About Remote Instruction/Services

A little more than half (58%) of staff respondents reported that they were involved with remote instruction and/or remote services.

- **Among staff involved with remote instruction/services, approximately 80% reported that their involvement was *The right level of involvement for my comfort and skill level*.** The remaining 20% was about evenly split between reporting *Too much involvement (I would like to do less distance education and/or remote services)* or *Too little involvement (I would like to do more distance education and/or remote services)*.
- By age group, there was a slight decrease in rates of involvement in remote instruction/services as age level increased, but the difference is too slight to draw solid conclusions. There was no notable variation by age in indications of satisfaction with the level of involvement.

All staff were asked to select up to three potential supports for remote instruction or remote services in which they were most interested.

- The highest interest was in *SABES trainings/professional development on remote instruction or remote services*, and *Access to more/better technology* (about half of respondents indicated interest in each).
- Staff also indicated interest in *Professional development opportunities on remote instruction or remote services other than those offered by SABES* (36%), and *A dedicated position in my organization to support technology use* (33%).

Directors: Feedback About Hiring and Retaining Staff

Directors were asked a series of questions related to hiring and retaining staff, staffing structure (full-time positions), and staff compensation. They were asked to reflect on what could improve hiring/retention and what negatively affects hiring/retention. They were also asked what limits their options related to staffing structure and compensation and what would enable them to improve staffing structure and compensation.³¹

Directors indicated that higher pay and benefits, increased funding (from ACLS and their host institutions), and more full-time positions would benefit their programs and have a positive impact on their ability to hire and retain desired staff. Opinions varied by program setting.

Director Opinions About Compensation

Directors indicated that salaries and benefits were key factors in their ability to hire and retain desired staff.

- **About three quarters of directors reported that higher salaries and better benefits are among the leading factors that have a potential positive impact on the ability to hire and retain desired staff.** The rate was lower among respondents from HREs.
- **More than half of directors felt pay rates in adult education are among the leading factors that have a negative effect on hiring/retention.** More directors from CORs and CBOs and fewer directors from HREs and LEAs gave this indication.

³¹ A synthesis of responses related to pay and benefits and full-time positions is included here. Please see Appendix E for responses to each question related to recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff, and increasing full-time positions and staff compensation.

The following quote from a staff survey respondent supports these findings from directors and illustrates staff desires for additional compensation.

“I want the emotional labor, relational labor, and administrative labor that is required in Adult Education to be paid, expected, fostered, and valued.”

Directors reported that their options for staff compensation were limited by ACLS and host-institution funding level and by host-institution and ACLS policies.

- **More than half of directors rated ACLS funding level as limiting their options for staff compensation to a great extent (59%);** just under half rated *Host institution funding level* as limiting compensation options *To a great extent* (46%). *Host institution/program policies* also limited options for staff compensation (44% of directors gave a rating of *To a great extent*), while a smaller number of directors felt significantly limited by *ACLS policies* (14%).

When asked an open-ended question about what would enable them to increase staff compensation, many directors mentioned increased funding generally or changes in funding policy. Responses that mentioned policy changes referenced specific policies—such as match ratio, pay rate minimums, and cost per student—and uncertainty caused by funding cycles. Other responses referenced staff compensation being dependent on union contracts (n = 68 responses; see Appendix E for the full analysis summary).

Director Opinions About Full-Time Positions

Most director respondents reported that their programs would benefit from creating additional full-time positions.

Directors were asked if their program would benefit from creating additional full-time positions and were given the option to respond *Yes*, *No*, or *Unsure*.³²

- **Two thirds of respondents indicated their program would benefit from creating additional full-time positions.** Three quarters of respondents from HREs and half of respondents from CORs indicated their programs would benefit from additional full-time positions.

Directors reported that their options for staff compensation were most limited by funding level, scheduling challenges, and policy constraints.

The 76 directors who selected *Yes* or *Unsure* were asked to rate the extent to which specific factors limited their options for creating additional full-time positions.

- *ACLS funding level* had the highest rate of receiving a selection of *Somewhat* or *To a great extent* (85%), followed by *Host institution funding level* (75%), *Host institution policies* (67%), *Scheduling challenges* (64%), and *ACLS policies* (47%).
- Just over half of directors indicated *lack* of full-time positions was among the leading factors having a *negative* effect on hiring/retention. (The rate was lower among respondents from CORs.)

³² Directors were given the option to respond *Yes*, *No*, or *Unsure*, and were asked to provide an explanation for their response. See Appendix E for analysis of the open response explanations for *Yes*, *No*, and *Unsure*.

When asked what would enable them to create more full-time positions, the majority of respondents said that increased funding or changes in funding policies are needed. References to policy changes included fringe rates, match ratios, and increasing cost per student (n = 58 responses; see Appendix E for the full analysis summary).

“When funding is tied to seat counts and enrollment, it creates an unstable funding structure that can result in the inability to offer sustainable full-time positions. An expectation that cost of living increases to funding are available each year might offer some assistance in maintaining these positions.”

Director Interest in Professional Development Related to Hiring and Retaining Staff

Directors indicated greatest interest in professional development from ACLS about *Evaluating staff and Pay and pay structure*.

- Thirty-two percent of respondents selected *Very interested* and 28% selected *Moderately interested* for *Evaluating staff*; 29% selected *Very interested* and 22% selected *Moderately interested* for *Pay and pay structure*.³³

Directors: Feedback About Collaboration

Directors expressed interest in additional opportunities to collaborate and/or share best practices with other program directors.

Directors were asked how interested they were in additional opportunities to collaborate and/or share best practices with other program directors.

- Overall, about three quarters of directors indicated they were *Very interested* or *Moderately interested*. Interest was higher among respondents from CBOs and LEAs than HREs or CORs.

When asked what more ACLS could do to facilitate collaboration, many respondents mentioned meetings as a way to facilitate communication across programs—some suggesting meetings that group similar programs together or regional meetings. Other suggestions included offering more trainings and networking events. Specific suggestions included making program information, such as class offerings and staff contact information, available across programs. A theme that surfaced from these responses is concern that the competitive funding process reduces the incentive to collaborate (n = 57 responses; see Appendix E for the full analysis summary).

“This topic is tricky for inter-program communication due to the competitive nature of the RFP process and hiring within the industry. The incentives don't line up well for programs to share too much information.”

³³ Directors were asked to rate their interest in eight options, including an open “other” category. See Appendix E for a full breakdown of responses.

Students

Student Respondent Characteristics

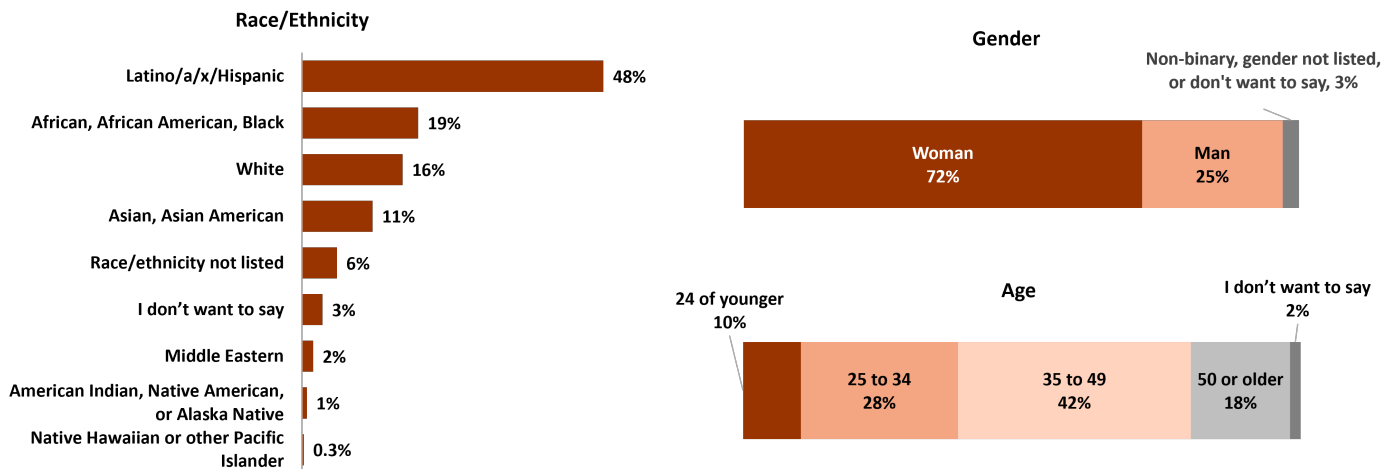
This section summarizes responses from 3,591 students, including 3,259 students in programs within community-based organizations (CBOs), school districts/local education agencies (LEAs), and higher education institutions (HREs) who took an online survey, and 332 students in programs within correctional institutions (CORs) who took a paper survey. These two surveys were different and were administered separately, so the results from each survey are presented separately.³⁴

Student Respondents in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs

The 3,259 students who participated in the online survey represented at least 70 different programs across CBOs, LEAs, and HREs (1–200 students per program). Figure 10 summarizes respondents’ race/ethnicity, gender, and age.

- The largest age group was 35 to 49 (42%), followed by 25 to 34 (28%).
- Most respondents selected *Woman* for gender (72%); 25% selected *Man*.
- Of respondents who completed the race/ethnicity question, 48% identified as Latino/a/x, Hispanic, or Spanish Origin, followed by 19% African, African American, or Black, 16% White, and 11% Asian or Asian American.³⁵

Figure 10. Student Respondents’ Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Age (CBO, LEA, HRE)



³⁴ Two versions of the student survey were developed, one for students from programs in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs, and one for students from programs in CORs. The version of the survey for students in CORs included response options that were modified to suit the setting (e.g., the options for “Why are you taking classes or tutoring?” included items such as *To get time off my unit/out of my cell*). Fourteen students at one site were unintentionally given one-sided copies of a two-sided document, resulting in partial responses.

³⁵ Small groups of students identified as Middle Eastern (< 2%); American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native (< 1%); and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (< 0.5%). Respondents could select more than one race/ethnicity.

Length and mode of participation; how students heard about program; language choice

- About half of student respondents had been participating in adult education for less than 6 months and half for more than 6 months (15% selected 2 years or more).
- There was a fairly even split between participation in in-person (43%) and online (45%) classes, and a small group who reported taking hybrid classes or tutoring (17%).
- The majority of respondents (66%) had heard about their program from a friend or family member.

Language choice: Students were able to choose to take the online survey in one of five language options.

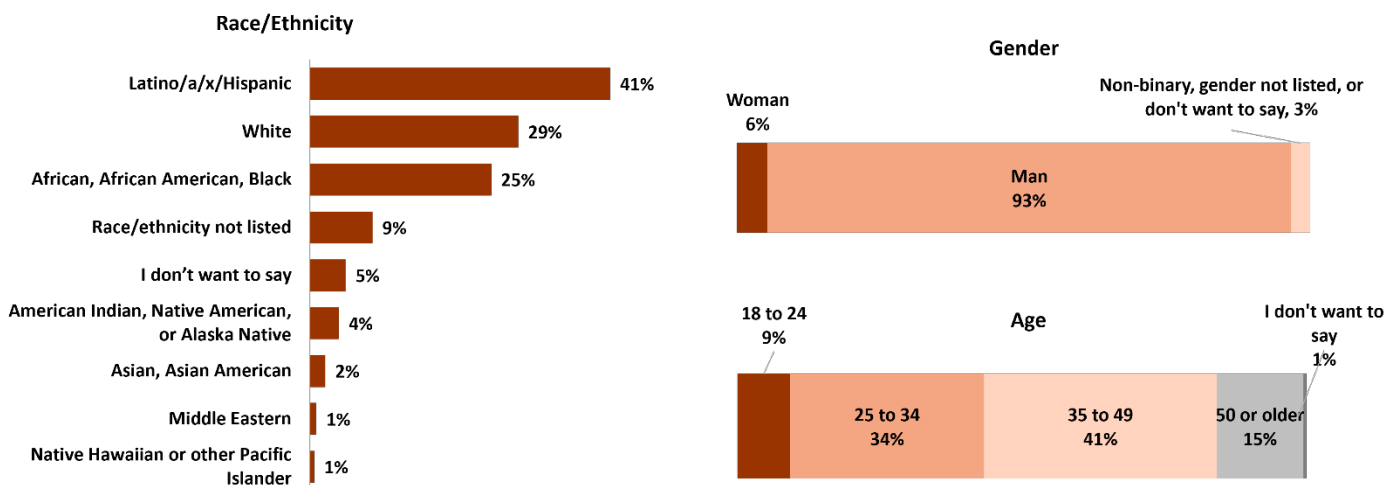
- 52% of respondents took the survey in English.
- 29% of respondents took the survey in Spanish.
- 9% of respondents took the survey in Portuguese.
- 5% of respondents took the survey in Haitian Creole.
- 5% of respondents took the survey in Chinese.

Student Respondents in CORs

Paper surveys in English and Spanish were provided to the seven ACLS-funded programs in county correctional institutions and four Massachusetts Department of Corrections sites (these are primarily men’s facilities). A total of 332 students from these 11 programs/sites completed the survey (323 in English, nine in Spanish). Figure 11 summarizes respondents’ race/ethnicity, gender, and age.

- The largest age group was 35 to 49 (41%), followed by 25 to 34 (34%).
- More than 90% of respondents selected *Man* for gender; 6% selected *Woman*.
- Of respondents who completed the race/ethnicity question, 41% identified as Latino/a/x, Hispanic, or Spanish Origin, followed by 29% who identified as White and 25% who identified as African, African American, or Black.³⁶

Figure 11. Student Respondents’ Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Age (CORs)



³⁶ Small groups of students identified as American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native (4%); Asian or Asian American (2%); Middle Eastern (<1%); and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (< 1%). Respondents could select more than one racial/ethnic group.

As among survey respondents from CBOs, LEAs, and HREs, about half of respondents from CORs had been in their adult education program for less than 6 months and half for more than 6 months (18% selected 2 years or more). The leading ways that students found out about their programs were, in nearly equal proportions, *My case manager*, *Someone in my housing unit*, *Orientation/intake session*, and *Someone from the Education Department*.

What Classes Do Students Take, and Why?

Across students in all settings (CBOs, LEAs, HREs, and CORs), 40%–50% took adult education classes to improve their employment options. (Students who selected *To improve my English language skill* or *To get my high school diploma or GED* may have been pursuing these goals for employment reasons as well.)

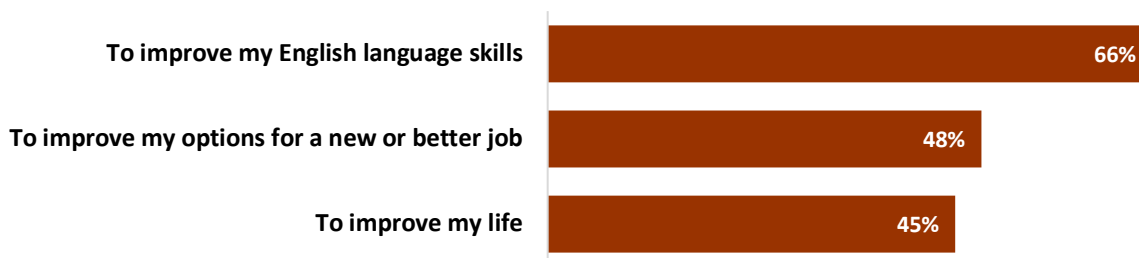
Student Respondents in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs

The majority (69%) of student survey respondents from programs within CBOs, LEAs, and HREs reported they were enrolled in an ESL, ESOL, or other class related to learning English, and *To improve my English language skills* was the number one reason students provided for taking classes (66%). Table 2 and Figure 12 summarize student responses about the classes they took and present the leading reasons students provided for taking classes.

Table 2: Class Type (Students in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs, n = 3,157)

	n	%
ESL, ESOL, or other class related to learning English if you speak another language	2,172	69%
GED, HSE or other class related to earning a high school equivalency	549	17%
ABE or basic education classes	395	13%
Something else	260	8%
Job training classes	106	3%
Transitioning to college classes	66	2%
Tutoring	52	2%

Figure 12. Top Three Reasons for Taking Classes or Tutoring (Students in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs, n = 3,100)



Student Respondents in CORs

The majority (57%) of student respondents from CORs indicated they were taking a GED, HSE, or other class related to earning a high school equivalency. *To get my high school diploma or GED* was the most commonly selected reason for taking classes (62%). Table 3 and Figure 13 present the predominant responses about classes students take and the reasons why.

Table 3: Class Type (Students in CORs, n = 314)

	n	%
GED, HSE or other class related to earning a high school equivalency	179	57.0%
ABE or basic education classes	113	36.0%
Job training classes	36	11.5%
Something else	36	11.5%
Transitioning to college classes	17	5.4%
Supplemental support classes	11	3.5%
Tutoring	11	3.5%
ESL, ESOL, or other class related to learning English if you speak another language	3	1.0%

Figure 13. Top Three Reasons for Taking Classes or Tutoring (Students in CORs, n = 330)



ESOL classes are not offered through ACLS-funded programs in CORs. Still, more than one in five respondents (22%) selected *To improve my English language skills* as a reason for taking classes. The rate was closer to one in three (31%) for respondents aged 50 or older.

Reasons for Taking Classes: Patterns by Age, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity

For each student survey (i.e., the survey for students in CORs and the survey for students in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs), we examined student response patterns in reasons for taking classes by respondent characteristics (age, gender, and race/ethnicity selected by respondents). We also examined student response patterns by class type (ESOL and non-ESOL) in the survey for students in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs.³⁷ (ACLS does not fund ESOL classes in CORs.)

There were no notable differences across gender groups in reasons for enrollment, but some distinctions emerged by age, race/ethnicity, and ESOL/non-ESOL status. Detailed findings can be found in Appendix N, and a few selected examples are included in the following sections.

Student reasons for taking classes differed by race/ethnicity.³⁸

- *To meet people/find community* was more of a priority for Asian or Asian American (33%) and Middle Eastern (37%) students than it was for other racial/ethnic groups (16%–22%).
- *To improve my English language skills* was the leading reason for all racial/ethnic groups except American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native students. For these students, *To get my high school diploma or GED* (56%) was the most common reason.

³⁷ For this analysis, we grouped class types into either (1) ESL, ESOL, or other class related to learning English or (2) non-ESOL (which included all other class types and tutoring listed in Tables 2 and 3).

³⁸ These findings are based on student respondents from CBOs, LEAs, and HREs. These conclusions are tentative given the small proportions of Middle Eastern (2%) and American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native students (1%) in the sample.

What Makes It Difficult for Students to Attend Classes?

All students were asked about factors that made it difficult for them to attend classes. For students from programs in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs, the question targeted in-person and online classes separately. For students in programs in CORs, one question was asked since online classes are not available.

Attendance Challenges: Students in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs

Students indicated similar reasons for difficulty attending online classes and in-person classes.³⁹

The leading challenges students faced attending in-person and online classes are external to the adult education system itself (e.g., work schedule, childcare). Online offerings seemed to lessen some of these challenges, though not dramatically. There were a few notable differences by race/ethnicity and gender, but no notable differences by ESOL/non-ESOL class type.

- 40% of students taking in-person classes or tutoring and 45% of students taking online classes or tutoring reported they did not have any difficulty attending classes.⁴⁰
- *Work schedule* was the most commonly selected reason for having difficulty attending in-person or online classes. The rate was slightly lower for online classes (25%) than for in-person classes (32%). The rate was lower still for White students (14%) and Middle Eastern students (15%) in online classes, and Middle Eastern students in in-person classes (8%).^{41 42}
- *Problems with childcare* was almost equally common among students attending in-person (15%) and online (13%) classes. This rate was 2.5–3 times higher for women than for men (women, 15% online and 19% in-person vs. men, 6% in-person and online). For both women and men, *Work schedule* (selected by 29% of women and 39% of men) was a more common challenge than childcare, but the difference between *childcare* and *Work schedule* was much greater for men than for women.
- For in-person classes, *Problems with transportation* and *Something else* were as common as *Problems with childcare* (15% of respondents selected each of these reasons).
- Emotional or mental health issues were more common attendance challenges among White students (13% compared with 5% overall) and were more common for online than for in-person classes.

Attendance Challenges: Students in CORs

In the survey for students in programs in CORs, two thirds (66%) of respondents reported they did not have any difficulty attending classes. Among those who did indicate challenges, many options were selected but none by

³⁹ Students who reported taking in-person or hybrid classes were asked, “Do any of these things make it difficult for you to attend IN-PERSON classes or tutoring?” and students who reported taking online or hybrid classes were asked, “Do any of these things make it difficult for you to attend ONLINE classes or tutoring?”

⁴⁰ We report the rate of selection for the response option *I don’t have any difficulty attending [in-person/online] classes*, but other indicators suggest that these percentages may be underestimates of the proportions of student respondents who did not experience difficulty. The response rates were lower for these questions about difficulty than for other questions (230, or 13%, of students who reported taking in-person or hybrid classes skipped the difficulty question, and 224, or 12%, of students who reported taking online or hybrid classes skipped the difficulty question). Some students may have interpreted the question as only to be answered if they *were* having difficulty attending classes. The *I don’t have any difficulty* option was at the bottom of a list of 12–14 response options. Also, many students who selected *Something else* (15%) used the open response field to indicate they did not have any problems.

⁴¹ These percentages are out of *all* students who responded to the difficulty questions, some of whom indicated they did not have any difficulty (as reported in the first bullet in this section). For example, 516 (32%) of all responding students indicated that *Work schedule* was a challenge to attending in-person classes, but those 516 respondents are 53% of the respondents who did not select the *I don’t have any difficulty* option.

⁴² Given the small number of Middle Eastern students in the sample (2% of respondents from CBOs, LEAs, and HREs), these conclusions are tentative.

more than 10% of students. Only one option, *Emotional or mental health issues*, was selected by 10% of students. Another seven options were selected by 5% to 9% of students. This suggests that difficulties depend on individual circumstances, and there are a number of barriers that at least some students face. No conclusions could be drawn about differences by age, gender, or race/ethnicity.

What Students Like Best About Their Adult Education Programs

Students were asked an open-ended question about what they liked best about their experience in their adult education program. We received 2,894 responses—2,616 from students in CBOs, HREs, and LEAs and 278 from students in CORs.

Students in CBOs, LEAs, and HREs

Student respondents spoke highly of their experience in their adult education program. Many comments referred to an overall positive experience, stating that they are happy with “everything.” Responses referenced the overall atmosphere of the program, mentioning a sense of inclusion, respect, professionalism, diversity, friendliness, and kindness. Three main themes from responses are summarized in the following, with representative quotes included for illustration.

- **Praise for teachers and staff:** being understanding, patient, and helpful; being available and supportive of students’ needs; and being attentive and dedicated.

“I have learned a lot of English but the teacher [name] is more than a teacher she is an emotional support she guides you in every way you really feel that you have a family here”

- **Appreciation for an opportunity to learn and improve:** career preparation and opportunities to improve their future; improved English skills and being able to communicate better with family, their communities, and generally; and increased confidence, fulfillment, and feeling as though they can achieve their goals.

“The Adult education program is the best and biggest opportunity that I have had. Since I started to participate in this classes It's helping me with my daily life and it is opening up more opportunities for me and for my future.”

- **Liking their classmates and the sense of community created within their program:** getting to learn about other cultures through classmates; being surrounded by other adults with similar learning goals; and building friendships and community.

“I have a better understanding of different cultures, I think the diversity allowed me to not feel strange or excluded, it felt like a second family.”

Other themes that surfaced included appreciating the courses and materials being offered for free, and the flexibility in schedule and modality of courses. Many spoke to the benefits of face-to-face learning, such as the connections formed, and the benefits of online options, such as reducing concerns about childcare.

Students in CORs

The most common themes among respondents in CORs were appreciation for teachers and staff and opportunities for learning and personal improvement. Respondents reported that teachers in their education programs are engaging, helpful, understanding, and caring, and that they explain and teach material clearly. Respondents frequently mentioned feeling grateful for an opportunity to learn new knowledge, refresh existing knowledge, meet educational achievements, and improve themselves for their future.

“My teacher is the first person who I feel that believed in me and it made me believe in myself more”

“That every class I’m one step towards achieving my GED, that I never took the time to get after falling out of High School. So it makes me feel good.”

Other themes included appreciation for the opportunities classes provide, such as getting to be in a different area, feeling more productive in their days, and having a sense of purpose. Other opportunities mentioned included a chance to connect with peers and interact with people they might not otherwise see. Respondents also mentioned enjoying specific aspects of their classes such as small class sizes, slower-paced material, and hands-on experiences.

“The fact that I no longer feel like I’m in prison.”

Survey Analysis Reflections and Recommendations

In this section, we offer some reflections and recommendations based on the findings from the survey data.

Directors and Staff

1. Survey findings suggest that a lack of resources is a core challenge to workforce stability.

Directors identified financial constraints as a primary barrier to improving workforce stability and pay equity. Meanwhile, among staff who considered leaving, the leading reason was low pay. These echo a key finding from Phase I (FY19–FY20) that a lack of resources was a primary challenge across the adult education system.

Given that ACLS is also limited by federal and state adult education budgets, a possible path forward is explicit acknowledgement of this barrier and leadership focused on working with programs to address policies that prevent them from making the most of their funding (see below). ACLS and adult education programs may also be able to use these survey results to advocate within funding arenas.

2. While budgetary concerns are primary, policies also constrain directors' ability to improve staff compensation and/or change staffing structures.

More than 40% of directors identified host institution/program policies as limiting their options for staff compensation *To a great extent*, and two-thirds of directors identified host institution/program policies as limiting their options for creating additional full-time positions *To a great extent*.

The potential for ACLS to play a role in negotiating policies that facilitate workforce stability and pay equity for adult education professionals at the host institutions that receive ACLS funding warrants further exploration.

3. Findings suggest that setting-specific circumstances contribute to disparities in pay.

Concerns about pay were particularly prominent for directors and staff from CBOs. Directors from CBOs were the only director group for whom low salary was the top reason to have considered leaving, and staff from CBOs had the highest rates of choosing pay-related factors as reasons they had considered leaving. These findings echo Phase II (FY22) findings that workforce pay disparities were most visible across types of host agencies, and that all types of staff in CBO-based settings had the lowest median hourly rate.⁴³

Deeper exploration of the factors that impact pay in CBOs is warranted. For example, focus group data from Phase II suggest that CBOs might be faced with greater non-personnel expenses (e.g., rent) that must come from cost-per-seat funding, lowering the amount of funding available to pay directors and staff, while host institutions in other settings might absorb these expenses.

4. Some survey findings suggest that beginning director pay rates are competitive, but pay increases are inadequate to retain these directors long-term.

For example, a higher percentage of younger directors than older directors reported staying in their position because of the pay. Meanwhile, among directors aged 45 to 54 who had seriously considered

⁴³ Notably, CBO settings also had the highest rate of staff budgeted for at least one benefit (see Phase II Secondary Data Analysis Report for more details).

leaving, *Salary/hourly rate is too low* was the top reason chosen. Younger directors reported that they had seriously considered leaving at a lower rate than did older directors.

Further investigation is recommended into (a) what stands in the way of programs instituting pay and benefit structures that incentivize longevity for educational leaders, and (b) which of those obstacles are actionable, by whom (e.g., ACLS, host institution), and how.

5. Several findings suggest that satisfaction with current staffing structures may vary by demographic group, with implications for retention of current staff and recruitment of new staff.

Work schedule was one of the leading reasons staff provided for staying in their position (selected by 47% of respondents). Meanwhile, most directors (67%) indicated that adding full-time positions would benefit their programs. Also, a higher proportion of younger staff than older staff had considered leaving their position because they wanted a full-time position. Because full-time positions are tied to the higher expense of employee benefits, there are significant budgetary implications to adding full-time positions.

These findings about staffing structure (e.g., full-time positions, work schedules) suggest the need for further exploration to understand (a) how satisfaction with current staffing structures varies by demographic group and (b) how changes in staffing structures would affect retention of current staff and recruitment of new staff. For example, future inquiry might pursue what it is about the work schedule that is appealing (nontraditional hours, part-time hours, flexibility, etc.) and to whom. With more information, work schedule may be elevated as a selling point in recruitment of qualified professionals into the field. Also, ACLS could assess whether the return on investment of increasing full-time positions (e.g., stability, professionalization of the field) would warrant the additional cost.

6. Less than 35% of staff indicated they have worked in adult education for more than 10 years.

This rate of turnover translates into a continuous demand for resources to recruit and train staff—resources that might be better invested elsewhere—and can create classroom instability that may have a negative impact on student achievement.

In addition to other actions recommended here related to workforce stability, guidance from ACLS to programs for administering exit interviews with departing personnel could lead to important insights about how to address turnover.

Students

1. Across all settings (CBOs, LEAs, HREs, and CORs), 40–50% of students said they are taking adult education classes to improve their employment options.

Further exploration is warranted into current and potential practices linking adult education directly to employer priorities and workforce expectations in Massachusetts, to ensure that students with the goal of improving employment options benefit from adult education in this way.

2. Survey results confirm the challenge of student persistence that is often referenced in the field.

Less than a third of students reported that they had been participating in their adult education program for more than one year. According to survey results, the leading challenges students faced to attending in-person and online classes were external to the adult education system itself (e.g., work schedule, childcare, transportation).

To make adult education more accessible to students, adult education providers could further consider how to offer additional supports—beyond those directly aligned with the mission and focus of adult education classes—to ensure that students have as many options as possible to receive instruction around their work hours. We understand that some of these efforts are underway and that resource constraints make these issues difficult to address.

- 3. Survey results indicated that among students in programs in corrections settings, difficulties attending classes vary by individual, with a diverse set of barriers afflicting different students.**

Further inquiry into the circumstances specific to corrections settings could help ACLS better understand how to remove barriers to participation for these students.

- 4. Most students (83%) in corrections settings indicated that correctional tablets (portable electronic devices now popular in corrections settings) are available at their facility.**

Future data collection efforts could explore the use of correctional tablets in adult education programs, assessing benefits, drawbacks, and options for maximizing student skill gains, including identifying the different challenges students experience when using tablets for educational activities, versus participating in teacher-led instruction.

Technical Assistance

The UMDI evaluation team collaborated with ACLS on three technical assistance activities in FY23:

1. Identify gaps in current ACLS data collections and recommend strategies for addressing high-priority gaps.
2. Draft recommendations for a 5-year plan for monitoring and evaluation.
3. Engage with the Adult Education Advisory Council.

This section includes a brief description of each of these technical assistance activities. Deliverables linked to the first two activities are included in Appendix B (data gaps) and Appendix A (5-year plan).

Technical Assistance Activity #1: Data Gaps

The UMDI team reviewed elements of ACLS system-level data and collections, identified priority areas to address, and developed recommendations for addressing data gaps in those areas. We also developed drafts of two preliminary tools related to data gaps: (1) a high-level summary of current data and submission processes and (2) a preliminary list of system-level data gaps, mapped onto the data system summary structure. These three deliverables (recommendations, system summary, data gaps list) can be found in Appendix B. The data gaps work informed the development of recommendations for the 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan.

Data review: UMDI gathered information about ACLS data and systems through conversations with ACLS leadership, review of previous UMDI work with ACLS data, and review of ACLS resources, including policies, LACES data, budget templates, the ACLS website, and publicly available reports to NRS.

Identification of priority areas: UMDI identified two data-gap areas for which we developed recommendations: data from student waitlists and data about ACLS-funded staff. These two areas were selected to meet three criteria: (1) they are linked to critical aspects of the adult education system, (2) they are linked to equity, and (3) preliminary steps to address them are possible with incremental changes to existing data collections that can be managed to minimize disruption to the field.

Filling a gap—communication with the field: In preparation for administering spring 2023 surveys to adult education staff and directors, UMDI helped ACLS build a contact list for staff and refine the existing contact list for directors. Data from the surveys contributed to filling a gap in knowledge about widespread staff, director, and student experiences, and compiling a list of staff contact information contributed to filling a gap in ACLS's ability to communicate more directly with those in the field.

Cross-cutting recommendations: In our review of ACLS data and systems, a few common and related challenges emerged across data gap areas, with a few related recommendations:

1. **Consider ways to develop coordinating capacity across grantees** – including capacity to coordinate and share student and staff data (while attending to privacy) and to coordinate assessment and course availability capacity.
2. **Consider examining processes for regular, timely, ongoing review of program data at the system level** and the alignment between system-level and program-level processes.
3. **Consider gathering data about programmatic capacity for data entry and data management** and ways to develop or build that capacity.

The following summarizes the recommendations shared as part of UMDI's technical assistance related to data gaps. Please see Appendix B for more detailed information.

Data Gaps Recommendation #1: Improve Quality of Waitlist Data

Waitlist data are a crucial way for ACLS to understand (and share) the patterns of demand for adult education services—including patterns related to equity. Currently, waitlist data are an unreliable source of information about unmet demand for services due to infrequent updating, missing information, and gaps in processes that would facilitate system-level assessment and matching needs to capacity.

Goals

1. **A robust waitlist data system** will ultimately enable ACLS programs to serve more students or serve students more efficiently.
2. **Updated waitlist data shared between grantees** and at the system level will help ACLS better match capacity to student need.
3. **Accurate and up-to-date waitlist data** can help ACLS report to the Governor’s Office, the Executive Office of Education, and DESE leadership about adult education services and to advocate for resources.

Recommendations

1. **Review waitlist procedures and fields.** Clarify processes, consider the utility of fields, and review data for completeness.
2. **Create coordinating capacity within LACES.** Help match students and programs with capacity by allowing limited data to be shared across programs.
3. **Link waitlist data to existing periodic reviews.** Support programs to better manage waitlist data.
4. **Consider other options for coordinating waitlists across programs** (e.g., Massachusetts Adult Literacy Hotline).

Data Gaps Recommendation #2: Improve Quality of Staff Data

Building equity and stability into the adult education workforce is a key goal of ACLS. Having accurate data about ACLS-funded staff is essential to understanding the current status of the workforce and to setting goals for the future. There are many challenges to having accurate data about ACLS-funded staff, including the diversity of ACLS grantee host institutions, the status of staff funded by but not employed by ACLS, the high turnover among staff, and limitations to programmatic capacity for data entry and management. Currently, data about ACLS-funded staff are not robust enough to paint a clear picture of staff stability or pay equity. Data are frequently missing or reported in ways that make staff-level analysis difficult and conclusions unreliable.

Goals

1. **A streamlined approach to collecting, reporting, and analyzing staff data** would both (a) make data entry and management simpler and (b) make staff data easier to interpret and analyze.
2. **Data collection that facilitates analysis** of (a) patterns of staff turnover and retention, including by characteristics of interest, and (b) equity in staff pay and benefits.

Recommendations

1. **Improve the tracking of staff turnover** (e.g., use pre-population and confirmation to update staff records with less data entry burden).
2. **Collect individual staff-level data about pay and benefits.** Use individual identifiers and restructure budget data collection to ease matching with LACES records.
3. **Consider requiring and refining demographic fields that are potentially relevant to pay equity.** Require demographic fields potentially relevant to pay equity and expand options for race/ethnicity and gender.

Technical Assistance Activity #2: 5-Year Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation

UMDI collaborated with ACLS leadership to develop a set of recommendations for a 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan. The plan outlines high-level goals for the next 5 years and recommends activities that build toward those goals. It was intended to serve as a framework that ACLS can flesh out and tailor with a potential evaluation thought partner or use to develop an RFR. The following summarizes the purpose and main goals outlined in the plan. The detailed recommendations, including a timeline, are in Appendix A.

Purpose

A 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan serves as a shared roadmap for system-level inquiry for the Massachusetts adult education community. It links evaluation and technical assistance activities to ACLS's goals of professionalizing the field and creating a more equitable, high-quality, and stable adult education system that improves student outcomes. It reflects ACLS's commitment to community, equity, diversity, and data-driven decision making for continuous improvement.

Goal Area: Workforce Stability and Professionalization

Outcomes

- Clear definitions and measurement metrics for key elements (e.g., stability, professionalization)
- Data that allow assessment of trends and changes in key elements of workforce experience
- Improved understanding of factors related to workforce recruitment, job satisfaction, and retention
- Data-driven insight to inform ACLS policy and practice

Activities

- Technical assistance to develop measurable definitions that can be used to assess progress over time
- Analysis of updated staff data from new data system (e.g., GEM\$) to develop baseline analyses and preliminary indicators/metrics to monitor and improve stability, professionalization, and equity in the workforce
- Revisit staff data to assess progress over time
- Surveys of the field to monitor for change and to improve understanding of workforce experiences

Goal Area: Student Participation and Outcomes

Outcomes

- Clear definitions and measurement metrics for key elements (e.g., retention, access, equity)
- Data that allow assessment of trends in student participation and outcomes around key elements
- Improved understanding of factors related to student retention, outcomes, and access
- Data-driven insight to inform ACLS policy and practice

Activities

- Technical assistance to develop measurable definitions that can be used to assess progress over time
- Analysis of student participation and performance data to assess changes since FY23 baseline analysis
- Surveys of the field to monitor for change and to improve understanding of student experiences

Goal Area: System-Level Data Quality

Outcomes

- Clear criteria and processes for measuring system-level data quality

- Improved consistency and accuracy of grantee data submissions

Activities

- Technical assistance to develop and refine processes, goals, and metrics for grantee data management and support to improve ACLS's ability to assess the equity of system-level student, staff, and program outcomes
- Assessment of grantee data management and support, including outreach to the field
- Technical assistance to assess progress over time, integrate learning, develop plans, and communicate insight with the field

Technical Assistance Activity #3: Engagement with the Adult Education Advisory Council

UMDI's engagement with the ACLS Evaluation Advisory Council was intended to support and enhance the design and implementation of the evaluation, as well as the reporting/dissemination of key findings/insights from the evaluation. UMDI met with the Advisory Council three times and provided resources for a fourth meeting:

10/21/22 The UMDI team presented an overview of the evaluation plan.

1/27/23 The UMDI team presented an update on the student performance data analysis.

3/17/23 The UMDI team shared an update on the response rate and analysis plan for surveys and facilitated a brainstorming conversation to gather ideas for measuring staff professionalization and for improving data management.

6/23/23 The UMDI team developed a PowerPoint presentation with sample findings from the Phase III work and shared it with ACLS as an optional tool for sharing findings with the Advisory Council at their 6/23/23 meeting (UMDI did not attend the meeting).

Reflections and Recommendations

Many recommendations emerged from our work this year and are included throughout the report. A few of these previously reported recommendations are synthesized here since they may have broader implications for the work being done by ACLS or the field. UMDI acknowledges the challenge ACLS faces between balancing the possible with the practical, and we make these recommendations understanding that additional work will need to be done to prioritize and assess what is most actionable in the current context and within existing constraints.

Based on evaluation and technical assistance activities completed during this phase of the work, UMDI recommends the following:

- 1. Develop a 5-year plan for system-level monitoring and evaluation.** System-level evaluation is a critical tool for decision making, program improvement, and advocacy. A 5-year monitoring and evaluation plan could serve as a shared roadmap for system-level inquiry for the Massachusetts public adult education community, creating an opportunity to build shared ownership of a vision for gathering and analyzing data that could inform improvements to the adult education system for students and providers. In our review of ACLS data and systems for the data gaps workstream, a few common and related challenges emerged. A lack of coordinating capacity or mechanisms across providers made it difficult for them to share information and resources. Alignment and clarity between program and system-level data was challenging both for ACLS staff and for grantee staff. Relatedly, program capacity for data entry and management was limited and strained, creating a burden for grantees while also resulting in poor data quality. We also understand that workforce stability and professionalization is a topic that ACLS has identified as a potential focus for future work. To begin to address the identified challenges, regardless of topic of interest, a 5-year plan would ideally (1) **link evaluation and technical assistance activities to ACLS's goals** around professionalizing the field and creating a more equitable, high-quality, and stable adult education system that improves student outcomes; (2) **examine processes for regular, timely, ongoing review of program data** at the system level and the alignment between system-level and program-level processes; and, (3) **consider programmatic capacity for data entry and data management**, and explore options for developing or building that capacity. UMDI's recommendations for such a plan are summarized in the Technical Assistance section of this report (page 35) and detailed in Appendix A.
- 2. Work with the field to further define equity in the context of adult education.** Advancing equity is a foundational value and goal of many in the adult education community. Regularly revisiting what equity means—acknowledging the experiences and expertise of those in the field—is essential to advancing that goal. This work could be advanced by, for example, (1) identifying specific metrics that reify and support equitable access, participation, and outcomes for students and staff, or (2) identifying and exploring potential inequities across students and staff by individual characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age) or by program setting. Findings from this phase of the work suggest that further exploration of disparities in pay by program setting and opportunities for refining data reporting practices (e.g., refining the race/ethnicity groupings considered for analyses) are viable topics for discussion.
- 3. Advance strategies for improving student persistence.** Student performance data and survey data suggest that persistence is a major challenge to student success. Further exploration of persistence rates—and student experiences—by program characteristics, such as setting (e.g., community-based organization, school district) and region, could provide greater insight into these challenges. Relatedly, student survey respondents named top challenges to attending class that are external to the adult education system itself (e.g., work schedule, childcare, transportation). ACLS may consider gathering

additional data about how course schedules and online offerings might help to address some of these challenges. In addition, ACLS may consider supporting adult education providers in promoting self-advocacy related to work schedules (e.g., role playing with students how to advocate with their employers for a schedule that accommodates their participation in adult education). ACLS could also explore whether there are employers of large numbers of affected students and, if so, consider supporting direct advocacy from adult education providers to those employers.

4. **Advance strategies for improving staff retention.** Survey findings confirm that staff turnover is a concern for the Massachusetts adult education system and validate ACLS's focus on workforce stability and professionalization of the adult education field. **Refining systems for tracking program staffing (including retention and turnover) is an important first step in addressing these concerns at a system level.** Additionally, survey data suggest that low pay and benefits are a key factor in staff turnover and that balancing costs related to compensation and other expenses, while challenging for all providers, is particularly challenging for providers in CBO-based settings. Further efforts to identify characteristics and practices of programs that have more stable staffing could provide ACLS with opportunities to distill and disseminate best practices for supporting retention. ACLS could explore (1) pay and benefit structures that incentivize retention, particularly retention of program leaders; (2) work schedules (e.g., nontraditional hours, part-time hours, flexibility) that are most appealing to staff; (3) the costs and benefits of increasing the number of full-time staff; and/or (4) opportunities to impact policies that facilitate workforce stability and pay equity for adult education professionals at various types of host institutions.
5. **Improve the collection and management of waitlist data.** Developing a greater understanding of unmet demand for services—both the number of students waiting for service and the type(s) of service being requested—could aid ACLS and programs in designing and aligning services with need, and with advocating for additional resources (see Data Gaps Recommendations in Appendix B). Ideally, waitlist data would be timely (updated on a continual basis), collected using systems and procedures that minimize burden on programs, and shared as appropriate.
6. **Support programs in collaboration and coalition building.** Adult education programs share several similar challenges (e.g., the recruitment and retention of students and staff, data collection and management, course design and implementation). Creating additional opportunities for programs—especially directors—to engage in creative problem solving with each other and with ACLS would improve the collective performance of the field. While some directors have noted that the competitive funding process inhibits collaboration among programs, about three quarters of directors who responded to the survey indicated strong interest in additional opportunities to collaborate and/or share best practices. ACLS could, for example, explore ways for programs to share student and staff data (while attending to privacy) and/or coordinate assessment and course capacity. Given overarching resource constraints, ACLS might also provide guidance and/or resources to support programs in coalition building with community and social services organizations and/or with employers to address challenges to student persistence like transportation and childcare. Efforts might be local, regional, or statewide.
7. **Continue to explore student needs and goals.** The students served by the adult education system are diverse and have varied needs and goals. For example, ESOL and ABE/ASE student populations vary in demographic composition, levels of prior education, and—importantly—their reasons for engaging with the adult education system. Nearly two thirds of ESOL participants enter adult education with existing secondary or postsecondary education credentials. This variation raises questions about how best to serve the needs of the populations currently receiving/requesting services and how best to recruit, retain, and support students who might benefit from adult education but are not accessing it. Understanding the various needs and goals of adult education students may also serve to surface

additional ideas for monitoring and improving student participation and performance that are mutually beneficial to programs, to students, and to system-level management. For example, employment is an important driver of adult education enrollment, according to the surveys, but there was also a range of other reasons students reported taking adult education classes. It may be beneficial to consider ways to support programs in determining and meeting the needs of students who are pursuing employment as well as other goals.

8. **Refine student outcome data and analysis to better reflect student experiences.** Analyses completed during this phase of the project suggest that there are meaningful differences in student performance and outcomes by program type (ABE/ASE vs. ESOL), program setting (e.g., higher education, corrections), and by student characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age). Continuing to explore patterns of student performance and refining the measures to do so may result in additional insight that could positively impact programs and the system. For example, future analyses could contextualize outcome metrics with data about students' entering educational functional level (EFL) or their level within the measured program year. This would allow for the development of metrics that account for students' entering skill level, uneven rates of progress from one EFL to another, and the relationship between a student's current EFL and their likelihood of HSE and PSE/T outcomes. Relatedly, measurement of student and program performance might be improved by finding ways to track student progress across program years. It might also be beneficial to explore different types of PSE/T entries to understand how they help students make progress toward and attain their goals.

Appendices

Appendix A: 5-Year Monitoring and Evaluation Plan Recommendations

Appendix B: Data Gaps Recommendations and Tools

Appendix C: Student Performance Data Methods

Appendix D: Student Performance Data Detail Tables

Appendix E: Directors Question by Question Response Summaries

Appendix F: Staff Question by Question Response Summaries

Appendix G: Student Question by Question Response Summaries (CBOs, LEAs, HREs)

Appendix H: Student Question by Question Response Summaries (CORs)

Appendix I: Director survey instrument

Appendix J: Staff survey instrument

Appendix K: Student survey instrument (CBOs, LEAs, HREs)

Appendix L: Student survey instrument (CORs)

Appendix M: Director and Staff Surveys – Selected Findings by Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Program Setting

Appendix N: Student Surveys – Selected Findings by Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Program Setting