

THE EFFECT OF  
EDUCATIONAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS  
ON LOW-INCOME DISADVANTAGED ADULTS

BY  
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**Title of Session:** The Effect of Educational Government Programs on Low-Income Disadvantaged Adults

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**Summary Conference:** This session will overview the descriptive study utilized to determine what specific components of the Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) workshop influence participants to enroll in postsecondary education. EOC is a federally funded, grant program that assist at-risk adults in enrolling in postsecondary education. The session will detail findings and recommendations for government programs that consider the sociological, economic, and psychological needs of the learner.

**Abstract:**

There is a national agenda to decrease the welfare rolls and create a society where everyone is employed. The federal government has aggressively reformed welfare programs and created new career assistance programs such as School-to-Work and Welfare-to-Work. In this effort, existing federal educational programs are mandated to collaborate with new welfare reform programs. Adult education is seen as crucial to this effort because it provides the necessary knowledge and employment training that results in an occupation with a salary above minimum wages. One such existing federal educational program is the Educational Opportunity Center. The Educational

Opportunity Center is a federally-funded grant program that assists low-income, at-risk individuals enroll in postsecondary education. Through 2-day workshops, participants receive information about financial aid, job availability, college programs, and career options. In addition, they take a basic skill inventory and a career assessment. From the information received from the career assessment, the basic skill inventory, and the college information, participants are assisted in setting educational and career goals.

Since 1965, the EOC has been placing at-risk adults into some type of postsecondary education. The national EOC postsecondary placement rate is 35%. However, there has been no attempt to identify the effect of services provided by the Educational Opportunity Center on postsecondary enrollment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe what specific components of the EOC workshop influence participants to enroll in postsecondary education.

This study utilized a descriptive study design to identify the effect of EOC services on postsecondary enrollment. Experimental design techniques were utilized to create a modified pretest-posttest arrangement for data analysis. A survey was given to EOC participants that asked them about how aware they were of the information presented during the workshop and how likely they were to use the information presented in the workshop. In addition, interviews were conducted with some of the workshop participants.

This study found that although the participants were “moderately aware” and “extremely aware” of financial aid and area college programs, 64% did not know how to complete a financial aid application and 49% did not know how to fill out a college

entrance application. The majority of EOC workshop participants were not aware of available personal or career counseling opportunities.

Participants were likely to use all of the information in the workshop except for the information about General Education Diploma (GED) classes. Only those that needed a GED stated that they would use this information. About one-third (31.3%) of the participants were “extremely likely” to allow finances to prevent them from enrolling in postsecondary education and several were “extremely likely” to allow work (13%) and family or daycare (15.8%) to prevent them from enrolling.

A  $t$  test was used to compare the means of the pre and post-survey scores of the participants. Seven of the items had significant differences. All of these items asked questions about the participants’ awareness of educational information. Participants significantly increased their awareness of (a) financial aid information, (b) how to fill out the financial aid form, (c) information on their basic skill levels, (d) information about their career interest, (e) information about GED classes, (f) information about personal counseling opportunities, and (g) information about career counseling opportunities.

Although the participants were reluctant to be interviewed, they stated that only the information that related to their needs was beneficial. Individuals that were interested in seeking immediate employment did not need the college information, and individuals seeking to enroll in postsecondary education did not need GED information or job availability information. In addition, they felt that the basic skill assessment and career inventories provided them with a unique portfolio of themselves. Those interviewed concluded that the workshop was a helpful experience, but the workshop was too lengthy and not specific enough for their needs.

Conclusions were drawn based upon the combination of the quantitative and qualitative data. These were in the areas of disseminated information, low-income and at-risk adult learners, adult education barriers, self-concept, and EOC workshop formation.

- Although participants begin the workshop ready to use the information, they do not know how to use the information.
- The workshop provides the clients with a plethora of information that results in a workshop that is not targeted to all of the participants' specific needs.
- Participants will use information that is relevant to them.  
education program.
- Low-income, at-risk adults are reluctant and uncomfortable discussing education and educational activities.
- The workshop reduced the barriers that prevent participation in adult education.
- Low-income, at-risk adults are less likely than adults that are not at-risk to allow work to prevent them from participating in adult education.
- The EOC workshop provides a positive educational experience that can enhance an individual's self-concept.
- The EOC workshop provides the participants with an opportunity for empowerment.

#### EOC Workshop Format

This study was designed to find out the components of the EOC that contributed to participants enrolling in postsecondary education. However, most of the findings were

related to the particular and distinct characteristics of the EOC client. EOC participants have been subjected to educational institutions that “reinforce the existing social class inequality and socialize students into values dictated by the powerful” (Schaefer, 2000, p. 337). The EOC workshop situation is both created and defined by federal government standards, run by the legal power establishment, and staffed by well-educated people. The majority of EOC staff have been successful in the traditional educational setting and have been able to negotiate the traditional education and political system. Although these programs are mandated to work with low-income, at-risk, marginalized populations, they are run in a bureaucratic system. The government has not solicited input from the participants in the development or implementation phase.

If welfare-reform programs and educational programs are to be effective, they must seek input from their clientele. Programs that have been successful start with the people and where they are (Adams, 1975). To be truly centered, programs need to avoid Trying to make the people start from where we were as teachers instead of us trying to start where they were. It was our obligation to find out where they were, and the only way was to ask them or observe them. It is their perception of where they are, not our perception of where they are that is important (Horton, 1989, p. 12).

A bureaucratic environment is not user-friendly for marginalized populations. Low-income, at-risk individuals are expected to manipulate a system that they have previously the they are unable to navigate (Willyard, 2000, p. 4). The findings showed that the participants were receptive to information, however they were unknowledgeable of how to use the information. Creating programs from an educated, governmental

reference and not from the participant's reference result in a blaming the victim syndrome. "Portraits of the underclass seem to 'blame the victims' for their plight while ignoring other factors that push people into poverty" (Schaefer, 2000, p. 198). Educators and administrators must broadly consider the social situations and psychological factors that have resulted in the present condition of the EOC participants.

The design of this research project was just as guilty of this failure to connect participant's needs and background as the creators and monitors of the EOC program. Participant input was not sought when outlining the research design or composing the survey. Interviews were imposed upon individuals that have very little control over their lives, which resulted in little or no information. This finding should have been anticipated.

Future research should solicit input from low-income individuals about the research design and survey implementation. Since low-income, at-risk individuals are more comfortable in larger group settings, a focus study group or group meeting may provide more information and input from the participants (Schaefer, 2000). This approach could allow the research study to receive more information about the workshop components and its effectiveness on postsecondary enrollment and could provide a more user-friendly environment for the participant.

#### Recommendations for Adult Educators

The effectiveness of the Educational Opportunity Center workshop could be increased with the application of adult education principles. There are several functions of an adult educator,

Helping the learners diagnose their needs for particular learning within the scope

of the given situation, planning with the learners a sequence of experience that will produce the desired learning, creating conditions that will cause the learners to want to learn, selecting the most effective methods and techniques for producing the desired learning, and providing the human material resources necessary to produce the desired learning. (Knowles, 1980, p. 26)

In order to assist the EOC clientele in diagnosing their needs for particular learning, a needs survey should be completed during initial contact with the client. Such an inquiry can generate a workshop that is both specific and targeted and can allow the participant to optimally benefit from the workshop information.

Not only do the EOC counselors neglect to seek information about the needs of the participants, they do not consult the clients in the planning of how to achieve their desired learning. Although the program is government funded and legislated, EOC counselors could still work within these parameters to allow participants input on workshop components, breaks, and the overall process. With the teacher serving as a procedural guide, the participants can outline objectives that are directly related to their needs. When participants are allowed to participate in this phase, they can take ownership of their learning, which becomes self-directed and increases knowledge (Knowles, 1980, p. 48).

Creating conditions that are conducive to learning is critical. EOC workshop participants have not been successful in the traditional educational system. Nevertheless, the workshop is conducted in a classroom with standard classroom procedures, and participants are seated in rows in hard, straight-back chairs. Individuals raise their hand to speak, ask questions, or use the restrooms and are only allowed breaks when

authorized. However, adults learning increases when participants are at ease in a setting with adult-sized, comfortable chairs that are arranged informally (Knowles, 1980, p. 46).

In addition, the psychological climate in an adult learning situation should be one of mutual respect and support (p. 47). People tend to feel more “adult” in an atmosphere that is friendly and informal, in which they are known by name and valued as unique individuals, than in the traditional school atmosphere of formality, semi anonymity, and status differentiation between the teacher and student. (Knowles, 1980, p. 47)

Implementing such changes which address the physical and psychological needs of the learner along with an attitude of interest from the counselors could produce a workshop that is more effective for the participants.

One aspect of adult learning principles that is not evident in the EOC workshop is the evaluation of learning. Some form of evaluation should be included in the workshop to validate the learning process. However, “nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult” (Knowles, 1980, p. 49). Therefore, self-evaluation is the recommended process. The most effective technique for self-diagnosis is a human-relations laboratory experience (p. 229). This laboratory could include the completion of both the financial aid application and college applications. In addition, the individuals could re-visit the objectives planned and conclude whether they have completed the objectives. Such an activity would also allow application of the information learned.

Applying these adult education principles could greatly increase the EOC workshop format and the participants’ learning. Numerous scholars have documented the necessity of operating adult education activities with these principles (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 1991). It is pertinent that this workshop provides the

participants with the optimal benefit because the workshop serves as a foundation for many of their future accomplishments and their quality of life.

### Recommendations for Future Research

In order to understand both the EOC participants needs and to increase effectiveness of the EOC workshop further research is needed. Additional study is needed to determine the effectiveness of recommended methods and techniques. Research that compares the difference in postsecondary enrollment with the following groups could possibly yield pertinent information: (a) a group that completes the financial aid application and entrance application during the workshop and (b) a group that does not complete the applications.

Since the workshop does not presently use an initial needs assessment, further research could institute a needs survey and analyze the benefits or non-benefits of this procedure. In addition, effect of changing the workshop climate and room set-up on the participants learning could be studied.

Present data could serve as a database for further inquiry. The demographic variables of the participant could be compared with the answers to the individual questions to determine trends. This may yield information about the clients that effect their postsecondary enrollment process. Focus study groups could be done with participants to actively inquire about their needs and concerns. Due to the nature of the EOC workshop participant, it is crucial that these focus groups be done away from both the educational and governmental setting if rich data is to be collected.