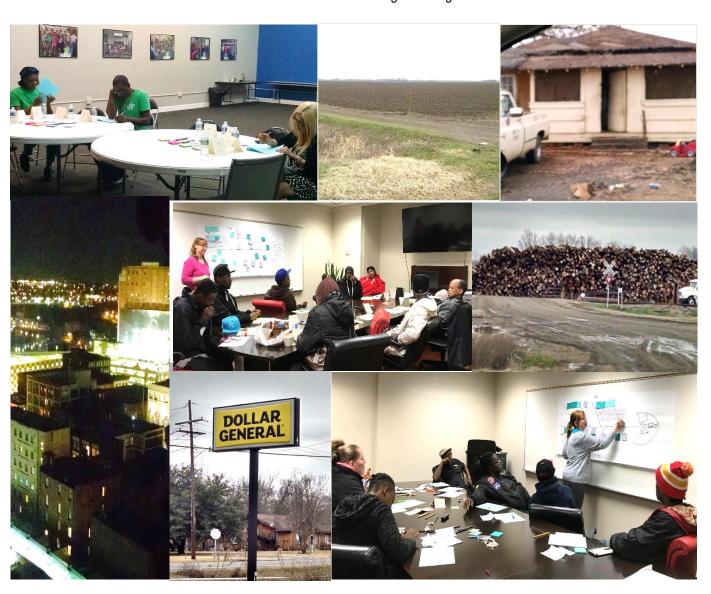# Critiquing Adult Participation in Education, Report 1: Deterrents and Solutions

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Critiquing Adult Participation in Education, Report 1: Deterrents and Solutions

Executive Summary

A recent report, *The Forgotten 90%,* revealed that only 10% of adults who need basic skills participate in the U.S. adult education system (Patterson, 2018). Educators and policymakers might ask the following important questions: What about the other 90%? Which deterrents do these nonparticipants face—and what might engage them to participate in adult education? VALUEUSA, a national non-profit organization committed to adult learner involvement and leadership, believed adults themselves could best answer questions on nonparticipation. VALUEUSA partnered with Research Allies for Lifelong Learning on the Critiquing Adult Participation in Education (CAPE) project to identify deterrents and seek solutions.

CAPE researchers conducted 25 group interviews with 125 adults in Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Ohio, and Virginia. Interview sites included employment agencies and workforce and community service non-profits. None of the interviewees were currently engaged in adult education and three-fourths had never been. Adults identified and prioritized deterrents and solutions with researchers[1]. The findings of this first in a series of CAPE reports are intended to inform policymakers and adult educators as they seek to engage more of the forgotten 90% in adult education.

Before interviews, adults took brief surveys. Survey and interviews yielded findings on value of education and access to technology by nonparticipants. Adults had high rates of agreement with positive survey statements on value of education. During interviews, however, adults expressed more nuanced opinions, with many valuing education positively and others neutral or unsure. Technology access is an indicator of whether adults can access solutions for learning when they cannot get to adult education in person. Surveys revealed most adults were currently online, and nearly all with access did so by smartphone[2].

Deterrents

Deterrents from the interviews were ranked in *situational, dispositional, and institutional* categories. *Situational* deterrents – transportation, family care needs, and money – were cited most often. Many adults in CAPE interviews were literally fighting to survive financially and seemed on the brink of losing their few resources from threats such as a car breakdown, a family emergency, or a job loss. Not having a support system was a fourth deterrent. Situations of early school leavers, anti-education pressures from the community, and unemployment, or (if employed) work-related pressures, rounded out the list of top situational deterrents.

> "We are expected to pay extra money for it to rain on us?" A researcher asked what he meant, and he replied, "It's raining *inside* the bus …You can sit there and get freezing wet…" – *A man, on a city bus system raising fares yet offering inadequate services*

Various *dispositional* deterrents dissuaded adults from education, including influences from the past, health concerns or disabilities, struggles with behavior, lack of motivation, and little time for themselves. Anxiety or

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[1] For more information on research sites, adult interviewee demographics, and methods of analysis, see the Methods Appendix at the end of this report.

[2] More detailed CAPE reports on the value of education and motivations for participating in adult education and on nonparticipant use of technology are planned.

fear, as well as loss of confidence in themselves, also deterred adults from adult education. *Institutional* deterrents included requirements of education policies and procedures and ways in which adults perceived helpfulness of adult educators. Some adults simply did not know adult education existed within reach.

Solutions

Changing systems – or, as one adult put it eloquently, creating "alternative systems and alternative classes for alternative people"– is far from easy. The deterrents (and corresponding solutions) nonparticipating adults describe do not occur in a vacuum. Rather they are components of and intertwined with complex social, political, and economic root causes that adults face daily: poverty, family dysfunction, social identity, missing infrastructure, and crimes and violence. Still, adults recommended a wealth of actionable solutions to individuals, adult education programs, and policymakers that would allow them to engage in adult education. To honor adults' efforts and contributions, this report focuses on their proposed solutions.

Most groups debated whether it costs money to participate in adult education. Some adults thought adult education was free while others pointed to costs of transportation, childcare, or testing. Though adults suspected "there was not enough money in the world" to resolve all deterrents, actionable solutions include finding sponsors or creating scholarships for adult learners and encouraging employers to offer education as an employee benefit. Adults suggested solutions related to public transportation and obtaining vehicles. For family needs, affordable, securely monitored childcare, including onsite childcare at adult education centers, was a popular recommendation. Adults addressing disability or health-related solutions to participation emphasized use of medication, accommodations, and mental health services.

Implementing and maintaining these solutions requires significant resources, both financial and human. Potential resources exist at national, state, and local levels, including government, corporate, foundation, community, and faith-based sources. So that adult educators can focus on providing educational services, policymakers could target resources for major supportive services that partners of adult education could provide onsite to incoming adult learners. Onsite partnerships of adult education programs with agencies for counseling resources – such as support groups, therapy, and classes in grief support or anger management – could assist adults in dealing with feelings of "no hope" or negativity as they considered and started adult education. Adults craved persistence, finding strength, and pushing forward past a "feeling of failure" that kept them from starting education they couldn't finish. Accessing these resources, adults could strengthen self-encouragement and cope with daily survival, community pressures, and family situations. An adult observed, "You don't give them confidence, you help them learn, so they can *get* more confidence. Help them make their own decisions."

An interviewee suggested that having "free education" for adults would mean "not needing welfare" and cost savings in other government services. A few interviewees recommended prevention measures, such as encouraging job growth in depressed areas or resourcing K-12 educators more to forestall dropout or catch behavioral problems in youth.

> "If we can save young people and they become productive citizens, they grow up to be taxpayers in our community, where they are giving back, instead of it costs us $55,000 a year to imprison one individual. So just key in on it." – *A woman on the cost savings of education*

Until significant resources are available, policymakers could work to bring about dialogue with local leaders about anti-education community pressure, missing infrastructure, and crime and violence and explore mutually beneficial solutions. Adult education programs

could implement low-cost solutions to get adults involved – such as ridesharing, customizing instruction, or employer collaboration – by re-allocating existing resources or identifying volunteers.

Various interviewees recommended optimal settings for adult education. They discussed technology solutions and outreach that would enable participation. The high rate of technology access among nonparticipating adults is positive news for adult education outreach and instruction. Nonparticipating adults asked adult education administrators to clarify and distribute outreach information on adult education services that relieve their doubts and meet their information needs. Interviewees asked for acknowledgement that adult education was a risk for them, connections to find adult education, and information on career options. Clarification on financial aid and accessible programs for formerly incarcerated individuals mattered to those

> "I show you what I know. We can work together. There's the skills. You know what you know, and I know what I know. Put it all in one pile and make gumbo." – *A man on sharing skills with other adults in collaborative learning*

planning postsecondary education. Once recruited to adult education, adults could discuss dispositional solutions – such as self-encouragement, dealing with emotions, faith and time management resources, and health recommendations – in new learner orientations. Adults recommended learning in small, customized groups – through collaboration around skills, supportive tutoring, and financial literacy workshops. In staff meetings adult educators could revisit center locations and scheduling, review policies on use of technology and testing, and brainstorm ways to customize instruction.

Interviewees expressed sincere hope that policymakers and adult educators would listen to deterrents and solutions and policymakers would employ recommendations to boost adult education resources. A woman remarked at the end of an interview, "You have a lot of good stuff up there [on the interview wall chart] that I hope they [policymakers] will just take and listen, and be like, 'Okay, these are the people. We hear these because we are of the people and for the people. We can get more people to be in better positions.'" In a separate interview a man addressed national policymakers, "Everybody needs an education. Provide the education for people who want one. Make sure you go all out for them. Because they [at the national level] are the ones saying it is very important to have education, so provide the way so people are able to get it."

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VALUEUSA plans to disseminate this first report and successive CAPE reports across the USA so that adult educators and policymakers will have detailed recommendations for mutual work in implementing solutions.

Overview: Nonparticipation and Deterrents

According to the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey (2012 and 2014), millions of US adults need basic skills. Current adult education resources serve at best 10% of these adults annually, leaving 36 million without participation (Patterson, 2018). The needle has moved little in the past 30 years; the rate of participation in 1988 was 8% (Beder, 1991). In the year before PIAAC, 90% of working-age adults beyond traditional age of postsecondary entry who are eligible for adult education services did not participate in education. The deterrents adults face and solutions to those deterrents are pressing issues for adult educators and policymakers.

Employing PIAAC data, Patterson (2018) found that adults who did not participate in adult education faced a range of deterrents. Deterrents were of three types: situational, dispositional, and institutional (Quigley, 2006). Beder (1991) observed about these deterrent types: "If any of these three conditions does not hold, the likelihood of participation is substantially reduced" (p. 67).

Situational deterrents occur as adults deal with situations outside their control or balance multiple roles in their lives (Reder, 1999; Ross-Gordon, 2011). For instance, a lack of transportation or not having childcare or eldercare can deter participation (McAnnaney, 2009; Patterson, 2014). Nonparticipants are middle-aged, on average (Patterson & Paulson, 2015). Low income is also associated with nonparticipation. Those in poverty have the least access to learning (Patterson & Paulson, 2015). Autor (2014) notes the earnings "inequality" between U.S. postsecondary graduates and high school graduates has more than doubled in 30 years. This inequality leads to "literacy classism," in which least educated adults having the most "need to know" tend to be marginalized (Quigley, 2017).

Dispositional deterrents refer to deterrents involving learners' self-perceptions and attitudes. Negative past schooling experiences, fear of math, or low confidence are examples (Quigley, 1997; Zhang et al., 2011). They also include adult characteristics that may deter participation, such as health or disability status. Nonparticipants sometimes face deterrents associated with visual or hearing difficulties and tend to report a high rate of learning disabilities (Patterson & Paulson, 2015).

Institutional deterrents occur when educational, employment, or criminal justice procedures, policies, or practices prevent participation. Examples include lack of information on education, inconvenient class times, and inaccessible locations (Patterson, 2018). Adults in the criminal justice system face institutional requirements that can deter participation in adult education as well.

In PIAAC, situational deterrents of increasing age, parental education, low income, and work and family responsibilities contributed to nonparticipation. Dispositional deterrents included health and disability challenges, low social trust, and difficulties relating new ideas to real life. Institutional deterrents were education costs and little work schedule flexibility (Patterson, 2018).

The Forgotten 90% report concluded with recommendations for research. It recommended inclusion of nonparticipants in research (Quigley, 2006). Citing "the overrepresentation of nonparticipants in the South and in rural areas of the Midwest and South" (p. 60), it recommended investigating qualitatively "how nonparticipant experiences differ and what reasons residents in these areas give for not participating." Based on its PIAAC findings, the 2018 report recommended questions on adult age, workforce participation, family role models, and the value of education. The CAPE project was developed in response to these recommendations.

Deterrents

Situational Deterrents

CAPE researchers surveyed and conducted 25 group interviews; a photo of an interview session is in Figure 1. Deterrents from the interviews were ranked into situational, dispositional, and institutional categories (see Figure 2). Even as rankings are informative, they may not necessarily convey higher importance, rather that these reasons were more noticeable to interviewees. Situational deterrents generally ranked higher than dispositional or institutional deterrents.

Figure 1. A CAPE interview session

Situational needs for transportation, family, and money ranked highest. Under transportation adults talked about buses most often. Other transportation concerns were costs of vehicles (especially gas for the vehicle) and relying on others for rides. Many who had no vehicle or couldn't catch a bus or a ride had to walk, bike, or skate to their destinations, sometimes for miles.

Family needs, such as lack of safe, trustworthy, and affordable childcare and eldercare, were also highly ranked in interviews. Adults describing family needs also talked about lack of a support system, need for money, work or job deterrents, and needing time for themselves at high rates. A third highly ranked deterrent, money, overlapped frequently in interviewee comments with cost of vehicles and unemployment. For many, going to adult education would cost money they cannot spare.

Not having a support system – reliable help and emotional support from family or friends that would enable the adult to begin and complete adult education – was ranked fourth as a deterrent among interviewed adults. Need for a support system overlapped with community pressure, the fifth ranked deterrent. Community pressure was reported when the adult perceived anti-education pressure on him or her, whether from friends, neighbors, or acquaintances. A man explained, "[They say,] 'We don't go back to school.

Top Situational Deterrents	Times Mentioned
Transportation	248
Family Needs	199
Money	139
Support System	104
Community Pressure	79
Work or Job	75
Early Leaver Situations	63
Unemployment	45
Top Dispositional Deterrents	**Times Mentioned**
Influence of the Past	80
Health	45
Accountability for Behavior / Habits	44
Time for Self	43
Anxiety or Fear	42
Disabilities	41
Lack of Energy or Motivation	33
Loss of Confidence	30
Top Institutional Deterrents	**Times Mentioned**
Institutional Requirements	43
Adult Educators Providing Help	43
Authority Challenge	15
Existence of Adult Education	14

Figure 2. Ranked Deterrents by Category

School is for riders. And you ain't supposed to do *nothing*.' That's how I'm looking at it. And trust goes out the door."

Many adults also talked about the pressures of work or their job as a situational deterrent. Interviewees often work rotating shifts throughout a week. One woman, who works at a convenience store, was working "graveyard", 11 PM to 7 AM, but her shifts regularly change from 3 to 11 PM or 6 AM to 1 PM. These work-related pressures often overlapped with family needs and having little time for themselves in descriptions. A man called himself a workaholic. He works at a chicken farm, hanging live chickens all day. "That's a lot of chickens," he emphasized. After work he wants to "try to rest up for the next day."

Adults described an extensive array of situations that led to them leaving secondary school early, such as a need to work, adverse administrative decisions, repeating multiple grades, family requirements, or pregnancy. For those experiencing negative early leaver situations, getting beyond whatever occurred to make them leave school made getting to adult education difficult. A final high-ranking situational deterrent was unemployment. When adults weren't working, money could not be spared for anything beyond basic survival needs. Several adults reported they had gone without food so that their children could eat and that they closely rationed how gas was spent.

Dispositional Deterrents

A top-ranked dispositional deterrent was influence of the past. Past influences impacted decisions adults made about education in the present, how they perceived struggles with education or their personal fit with education, and whether they pursued high school equivalency (HSE) testing. Other past influences were family upbringing, needing a job or work, and the safety of the adult education center's neighborhood. One interviewee, for example, described how family role models influenced her education decisions: "We listened to those voices [of family telling you you won't succeed]. My Mama was like 'you ain't going to do this' and 'you ain't going to do that' and that's what I became."

Health was another highly ranked deterrent and represented illness or injury that prevented the adult from participation in education. Adults talked about mental and physical health concerns that deterred them. A third dispositional deterrent was accountability. Interviewees frankly discussed making excuses or holding themselves accountable for poor habits that deterred them from education. Some referred to habits like smoking or substance use, others to pride or procrastination.

Some interviewees thought they had little or no time for themselves, often because of requirements of work or family. Females overwhelmingly reported a need to take care of young children or grandchildren. Adults described grueling schedules that lasted from pre-dawn hours to late at night. Some adults lacked energy to pursue education because they were tired or overwhelmed from work or job hunting and caring for family. Other adults experienced feelings of fear, anxiety, or worry which prevented them from participating in adult education. As some adults considered getting involved in adult education, they experienced a loss of confidence which deterred them from continuing with their plans. Adults with disabilities described coping with the effects of physical disabilities, ADHD, memory loss, or learning disabilities. A man left school in ninth grade with a third-grade reading level. He only stayed in school to play sports. He thought he "got all the rest [of the subjects in school] right except for reading problems." When he was in school in the 1970's, "there was no ADHD or learning disabilities. They didn't know about that then."

Institutional Deterrents

Requirements of educational institutions, such as policies on locations, scheduling, or cost of instructional services, deterred some adults from participating. Getting to a distant adult education center was overwhelming to adults who rode buses for two hours one way, made numerous phone calls to get a ride, or skateboarded 30 miles from a rural town. Policies on HSE testing or transitioning to postsecondary education often confused adults. Decisions that authorities made deterred several adults from adult education. Some adults did not realize adult education programs even existed. Others had heard of them but perceived them as out of reach. Interviewees who had participated in adult education before described how adult educators helped – or did not help – them meet their education goals.

Solutions

A vital component of interviews with nonparticipating adults was identifying and explaining solutions to deterrents they face. Solutions were organized in situational, dispositional, and institutional categories.

Solutions to Situational Deterrents

Not surprisingly, interviewees' top solutions to situational deterrents closely paralleled the deterrents themselves, as displayed in Figure 3. They added recommendations on community agencies and resources as well as on navigation knowledge that could get them into adult education.

Transportation. Getting to adult education is a major concern for many adults. Adults suggested solutions for missing infrastructure for public transportation, obtaining vehicles, and ridesharing. Public transportation solutions include aligning bus schedules and routes to enable bus riders to get to adult education and clarifying eligibility criteria for subsidizing bus passes. Adults saw a need for van or shuttle transportation from neighborhoods to adult education centers. They suggested holding community

> *An adult suggested a* "free adult school with… a van that would come pick you up, to show that they really care about you trying to get your education."

meetings to raise awareness of transportation concerns and violence on buses. Another suggestion was a "car pool to class," where adults would share a vehicle among multiple adult learners from the same area.

> "People could get grants through churches [for buying cars]. It would help car dealers that have lots of quality used cars that they can't sell because people cannot afford to buy them." – *An adult on helping those without cars get to adult education*

Interviewees also recommended starting used car programs through employers or churches, in which adult learners could get reduced pricing on reliable used vehicles or make monthly payments from their wages on major car repairs. For car repairs, "Have an employer car repair program, taking funds out of an employee's paycheck, up to $1000. Why not help them out [employees who want to learn]? It will benefit the company in the long term."

Top Situational Solutions	Times Mentioned
Transportation	95
Support System	71
Family	63
Money	40
Community Agencies and Resources	36
Community Pressure	25
Navigation Knowledge	22
Work or Job	20

Top Dispositional Solutions	Times Mentioned
Self-Encouragement	50
Dealing with Emotions	42
Faith or Spirituality	30
Time for Self	25
Health	23
Accountability for Behavior/Habits	22
Motivation	22

Top Institutional Solutions	Times Mentioned
Adult Education Settings (S)	84
Technology (S)	32
Outreach (S)	26

Figure 3. Ranked Solutions by Category

Support systems. Adults offered many ideas on solutions related to support systems, to help them with "family, work, money – balancing it all well enough" to get to adult education. They suggested adult education creating support groups. "Working in a group… you get to know other people and see their struggles. And then if it is the same thing you are struggling with and they got a different way of doing things, you all can share your different ideas and maybe that way will be better for you." An adult shared, "It will help me by being the help. Because I know how it is to struggle and what it takes to learn from struggling."

What does a support system look like? An adult saw it as "keeping people around me that just want to learn." Support also means "transporting you if you have no vehicle, help you get time to study by watching the children." A woman recommended mentors to "explain why a person needs to do things and to help the student hang in there." It is also "people who went through the same thing you did, and they can advocate for you to deal with the system." In addition to supports they could find themselves, interviewees recommended that adult education provide supports such as tutoring, mentoring, and specialized study groups (see Adult Education Settings section).

> *On setting an example of a parent's education boosting their career:* "It makes kids want to grow. It makes them want to be something more in life than a kid…Just working on yourself and focusing on making a better life for you and your children."

> "It feels good to know that you have somebody in your life or in your corner to root you on every step of the way. That would definitely help me…" – *An adult describing a support system*

Family needs. In dealing with family needs, adults offered solutions to help them care for family and inspire children to pursue their own education. Affordable, securely monitored childcare was a popular recommendation to inspire parent trust. Adults thought childcare staff needed professional development on how to treat children, especially those with special needs. Other family needs were for reliable and compassionate eldercare, for care of adult children with severe disabilities, and new parent support groups. Some thought online instruction would help. A woman summed up, "There's a lot of possibilities … There's some adult education centers that if you have kids, you can bring the kids and they have services. You can look into online programs, so you can be learning online and be there to take care of your kids."

> Parents talked about having "live camera feeds for our smartphone. I want to know what's going on." – *A mother talking about onsite childcare*

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Interviewees also needed support in making the connection between their own future and a child's future. One woman who grew up in 20 foster care homes observed, "Being a Mom, it's not something I want to think about walking away from or giving up on, because now somebody really do need me." She does not want her son to ever need foster care and is "definitely going to give it my all instead of just giving up."

Money. A deterrent for nearly all adults in CAPE interviews was money. Most groups debated whether it cost money to participate in adult education. Some adults thought adult education was free while others pointed to costs of transportation, childcare, testing, or books. Although one adult acknowledged "there was not enough money in the world" to resolve all deterrents, many offered actionable solutions. Recommended ideas were finding sponsors or creating scholarships for adult learners who couldn't afford adult education and encouraging employers to offer education as an employee benefit. A man suggested, "Give the ones a chance that ain't never had a chance."

> "If I am in charge, I will make sure that people with the potential and desire and drive, they get their chance." – *An adult on creating scholarships for adult education*

Other recommendations included reducing costs of HSE tests, referring homeless adults to housing and food services, and raising the minimum wage. Interviewees asked for financial literacy instruction on "how to save and spend the proper ways." One man hid his savings from himself by giving it to his grandmother, who would not let him have it except for a "dire emergency," which he had to "prove" to her. A woman suggested the community seeding micro businesses, such as a teenage snow-shoveling endeavor for people who were too ill or elderly to shovel. Small amounts of support for new businesses would "give people something [constructive] to do."

Community agencies and resources. A potential source for resources to bring adult education in reach is among community agencies, according to interviewees. Many gave high praise to agencies that were already supporting their needs, such as food, health, community service, and employment agencies. Adults recommended

> "Thank God for [Local Agency Name]. It's the only way we can eat." – *A man on a community service agency*

further partnering with employment agencies and community service providers, referring adults to federal and state resources, and offering accessible resources for formerly incarcerated individuals. Several adults suggested working with agencies with counseling resources, particularly to assist adults in dealing with feelings of "no hope" or negativity. The goal of counseling, thought one man, would be to "keep people from downing themselves."

Community pressure. The effects of community pressure and judgment against adult education were very real to many interviewees. Adults suggested creating opportunities for two-way dialogue with judgmental people in the community. "Talk to people not agreeing with you and listen to them," suggested one man. While some talked about dialogue with others who judged them for their educational choices, most interviewees emphasized giving negative people a wide berth and changing the environment.

Making changes in environments might need to occur all at once or gradually. "I would change my environment right away," advised one woman. A man explained, "Haters are going to hate… Just ignore them." Another group member agreed, "Don't let them get to you." A later interviewee recommended, "Surround yourself around positive people." A woman added, "Find trustworthy people." One group discussed the importance of avoiding incarceration. "Stay away from the stuff and people that got you in there [in prison]". Another group discussed community pressure as a "speed bump" that could throw an

adult off track. "If you hit that speed bump and don't get out of the way, you might be going down with it," explained a man in the group. "Slow down and take your time."

"Take a leap," said a man. "You are [either] going to fall or get up." – *On the risk of starting adult education*

Navigational knowledge. A last situational solution centers on navigational knowledge. Interviewees asked for clearer communication, acknowledgement that adult education was a risk for them, connections to find adult education, and information on career options. Clarification on financial aid mattered to those planning postsecondary education. Services formerly incarcerated individuals could – and could not – access needed clarification.

Solutions to Dispositional Deterrents

Top solutions to dispositional deterrents focused on self-encouragement, dealing with emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, or worry), and faith or spiritual supports. Secondary dispositional solutions addressed finding time for self, health concerns, personal accountability, and motivations to participate. In discussing solutions to dispositional deterrents, interviewees talked about self-encouragement and ways of dealing with emotions. They explained how faith or spirituality could support them and ways to get time for self. They identified solutions for health concerns. They discussed ways to hold themselves accountable or develop positive habits and identified sources of motivation. Many of their solutions are oriented toward the individual, but adult education can do much to encourage adults and to refer them to resources to deal with emotions, manage time, and address health concerns.

Self-encouragement. The most cited dispositional solution was self-encouragement. Self-encouragement meant persistence, finding strength, and pushing forward. It went hand in hand with making education happen, self-support, and achieving independently. A man stated outright, "I am my own support system." Persistence in education was a theme many interviewees discussed. "Just keep going and going. Like the Energizer bunny." Persistence implies focus on an educational goal. "Keep trying to learn" and "Tell yourself, 'I'm not going to give up.'" Finding strength for education "is about inside of you and you motivating you to do something." It means: "Tell yourself you *can* do it."

"The bottom line, men, [is] it's all about personal determination. If I want to do it, ain't nothing going to stop me... I ain't going to listen to all that hating. Once I make my mind up, I am going to get it." - *A man on making education happen*

Self-encouragement in education also involves pushing forward to make accomplishments independently. A woman described how she would need to "push through" on math and science by taking her mind off her personal situation. "I'm pushing for my own self," stated a man. Another man broke in, "Ain't nobody going to support you but you." A woman advised, "You can't let it [negativity] take over. You gotta be strong enough to push forward." When a person completes an educational goal, "Pat yourself on the back. Because you did that on your own. Without no help."

Dealing with emotions. In coping with daily survival, community pressures, and family situations, adult interviewees talked about dealing with emotions. They spoke about getting past the past and times of failure. One group talked about a "feeling of failure" that made them avoid starting education they couldn't finish.

Some dealt with feelings of hopelessness; others moved past it. "You don't see these tears on my face? I'm not sad. I'm happy, for real. I'm happy because I can see past all the things we wrote down [during the interview]. What really matters, that is what you put up there. And that is what helps me…" Some adults coped with emotions by taking classes in anger management and grief support or getting therapy.

Those who claimed confidence or hope wanted to instill it in others. One interviewee observed, "You don't give them confidence, you help them learn, so they can *get* more confidence. Help them make their own decisions." A woman summarized, "But when you go through those things, knowing that there are tools that get you to overcome them, some people just don't have the hope …[so] you instill it in people… Even when it's rough, when you have a bad patch, tell yourself, 'wait, wait, wait a minute, okay, I'm happy again.'"

Faith and spirituality. Another set of solutions to dispositional deterrents was faith in God or spiritual beliefs. One woman believed God saw and heard her personal struggles. Having faith and praying got her to "be free to have an education". Several adults pursued adult education through Bible study and church classes. Adults read the Bible for strength and to cope with challenges. Others meditated daily.

Faith was a source of support and hope. A woman interviewee relied on a "church home" which helps her feel closer to God. She considered fellow parishioners "like a family." A woman found hope through faith: "If you ain't got you, and nobody's got you, God's got you." A young man who lost his family at 12 years old shared, "With this whole ball, you gotta pray. You gotta pray about everything… You got to pray in order to live. If you want to succeed." A group of interviewees proposed an "overarching solution" to education deterrents. They asked the researcher to write, "Walk by faith and not by sight."

Time for self. Making the most of time was an important support for education to multiple interviewees. One man stated, "Time is one thing we can lose that can never be found again." Having time for themselves while struggling to survive was critical. Additional time would also support adults with health concerns. A chronically ill woman asked for flexibility in completing assignments. "I might not be able to focus that day" because of pain. "Today is not my day, … but I still want to succeed. But maybe tomorrow." An interview group discussed how online learning could save time. An interviewee recommended "online tutoring: So that if you have questions, you will be able to talk to them [tutors] by text or something to get help." An interviewee added, "I can do it anytime, day or night. That is why I do it online."

Health. Adults addressing health-related solutions that would enable participation in adult education primarily emphasized use of medication, accommodations, and the support of mental health services. Adults noted the helpfulness of medication in coping with depression, ADHD, and other conditions. One interviewee advised adults to take advantage of free healthcare and government agencies providing care but noted that she (and others) would "need gas to get to the doctor". An issue in rural areas was lack of available medicine from the local pharmacy or their physician.

Solutions to Institutional Deterrents

To resolve institutional deterrents, interviewees made recommendations about optimal settings for adult education. They also discussed technology solutions and outreach that would enable them to participate in adult education. The small proportion of interviewed adults who had been in adult education generally spoke positively about their experiences but acknowledged needs for improvements. They described

teachers as "very supportive" and thought they would "have help" in an adult education program. A woman thought adult education teachers "have more time to help one-on-one."

Adult education settings. Recommendations on settings for adult education was not only the highest-ranked solution for institutional deterrents but was second only to transportation among all solution types. Interviewees asked for customized services to meet their needs. In a final group interview, an adult offered a profound yet disquieting insight on customizing instruction for individuals who did not fare well in traditional education settings. "Too many people have failed in the whole [education] system," he stated. They need "alternative systems and alternative classes for alternative people." This interviewee was not alone in recommending customized services for adults. What might these "alternative systems and classes" look like? Adults recommended many ways.

> *According to a former adult learner,* "In my class, the aide … didn't have time to work with us. Other students… were just sitting there because they got issue[s] and they can't go any further [in their assignments]. And then if they have an aide who can go and help until the teacher is available, that will be [a] very good idea …"

- **Solicit community input on locations for adult education programming.** Interviewees required adult education to be "close by" so they could get there. Centers must be in a location perceived as "neutral territory" in communities rife with violence, or "nobody would attend"
- **Explore ways to provide adult secondary instruction along with employer job training.** An interviewee in a rural community with few jobs thought employers could offer opportunities for employees to train for work and get an HSE credential simultaneously. "Sometimes they [employers] have education programs. If they pay for it, they work around your classes. If the employer pays for it, they invest in you"
- **Offer a variety of start times for instruction.** Some adults asked for multiple class sections, so they can get there safely and attend at various times on different days. Several adults with hectic schedules suggested early morning classes, starting at 6 or 6:30 AM. One interviewee compared it to getting up early to exercise as a positive start to the day
- **Offer tutoring in customized study groups for adults struggling with low skills in math, reading, or writing.** "[It's] like a study group where you can have different students around with different ideas," led by a teacher or tutor. In study groups they would "work on their self-esteem" and focus on learning challenges, like "having a hard time learning math"

> "I show you what I know. We can work together. There's the skills. You know what you know, and I know what I know. Put it all in one pile and make gumbo." – *A man on sharing skills in collaborative learning*

- **Build collaborative learning opportunities and sharing skills into instruction.** Multiple adults wanted to offer their skills in exchange for skills other adult learners had, especially those which could lead to jobs
- **Allow adults – especially older ones or those with disabilities – to learn at their own pace**. Allowing more time would help learners avoid stress and frustration. A group of older interviewees compared their skill levels to "being in Headstart" and needed "step-by-step help" from teachers who offer "more compassion" and patience. "Teachers have to be patient enough to work with" adult learners "so that you can comprehend what the teacher is telling you." An

adult with disabilities explained, "I'm made up different. So maybe they need a class for people like me... who need more time… Or else I'm not going to get there"

- **When giving instruction via technology, provide one-on-one guidance.** Adults worried about "not enough guidance" on technology. A woman asked, "Don't put me on the computer alone."

- **Consider adjusting policies on HSE testing.** An adult who had a "bad experience" with HSE testing recommended, "People can take the HiSET… when they are ready" without waiting a lengthy period to test. "If they let me retake only the tests that I failed, that would be cool… If I don't have to pay for it again that will help, too."

> "When I was trying the GED classes, most of the students were young kids and you feel very self-conscious going there when you are 45, and they are like, 'Oh, my God, she is in a GED class!'" she related. "They need to maybe adjust the classes to more age appropriate. It is easy to talk to somebody that is in your age group... " – *A woman on feeling unwelcome*

- **Offer in-house childcare and invite adult learners to check on their children regularly.** A woman explained, "It's easier on you. You can take the kids with you." A former adult learner liked that children were "right next door" and she could check on them.

Technology. Group interview conversations touched on many aspects of technology that offered potential solutions to deterrents. These solutions focused on childcare (as described above) and instruction. Interviewees expressed interest in learning more about computers, the internet, and social media. For those in remote areas without programs or with childcare or eldercare needs, online instruction may be one of very few options for learning. One man recommended using "You-tube to learn how to fix something – a pipe, a car, etc." A woman shared, "Anything you want to know, you are going to find it on the internet. All you have to do is to know how to read." One called Google "the new adult education." It is important to note that not all communities have access to technology. Several adults in rural areas had to go to a friend's home or a grocery store to get a connection. Some areas do not have smartphone connections or high-speed internet connections at all. "That is not everybody's solution," said a woman in a small rural town.

Outreach. Interviewees offered numerous recommendations for adult education to recruit them. One interviewee suggested, "Go everywhere." Another added, "In any setting we are going to be in." Others asked adult educators to recruit through adult learners who can serve as role models. An interviewee proposed, "You have to have somebody who have been through hard knocks…so they know it is real, it's coming from the heart. Get somebody that's been down that road, who went from a downfall to a success."

Other recommendations on outreach included inviting a celebrity or national leader to support outreach and emphasizing how adult education benefits employees. One adult recommended promoting adult education as offering skills to "make you better off" and "better prepared for other situations that happen to arise." Examples include how to handle questions, perform better at work, and have overall knowledge for work purposes. An interviewee suggested that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and Score would "get the word out" about adult education "so it's going to spread like wildfire."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Changing systems – or, in the words of an interviewee, creating "alternative systems and alternative classes for alternative people"– is far from easy. The deterrents (and corresponding solutions) nonparticipating adults describe do not occur in a vacuum. Rather they are components of and intertwined with complex social, political, and economic root causes which adults face daily: poverty, family dysfunction, social identity, missing infrastructure, and crime and violence.

Even where deterrents have viable solutions, not all solutions will meet the needs of all adults, and some adults will continue to live productive and happy lives without further education. Still, even with mixed interviewee opinions of the value of education, most surveyed adults value education. This finding has promising implications for moving the needle on reaching more of the forgotten 90%.

Situational deterrents were generally cited more frequently than dispositional or institutional deterrents. While rankings are useful to interpreting deterrent themes and represent highly noticeable challenges, it is important to keep in mind they don't necessarily convey higher importance to interviewees. Adults also made useful recommendations about community agencies and resources and for gaining navigation knowledge.

Top solutions to dispositional deterrents focused on self-encouragement, dealing with emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, or worry), and faith-related supports. Recommendations on finding time for self, health-related concerns, personal accountability, and motivation were also shared. For institutional deterrents, adult interviewees recommended optimal settings for adult education. They also discussed technology solutions and outreach that would enable them to participate. The high rate of technology use among nonparticipating adults is positive news for adult education outreach and instruction and could be a support.

Others suggested that government – local, state, and federal – could enhance resources for adult education. A few interviewees also recommended prevention measures, such as encouraging job growth in depressed areas or resourcing K-12 educators more to forestall dropout or catch behavioral problems in youth. An interviewee suggested that having "free education" for adults would mean "not needing welfare" and cost savings in other government services. A woman advised, "If we can save young people and they become productive citizens, they grow up to be taxpayers in our community, where they are giving back, instead of it costs us $55,000 a year to imprison one individual. So just key in on it."

Providing transportation to adult education, developing support systems, and offering safe, trustworthy, and affordable childcare comes with a high price tag. Implementing and maintaining these solutions requires significant resources, both financial and human. Where do the resources come from? Adult education advocates need to continue searching for and cultivating potential resources at national, state, and local levels, including government, corporate, foundation, community, and faith-based sources. So that adult educators can keep their focus on providing educational services, policymakers need to target resources for major supportive services that partners of adult education could provide onsite to adult learners. Policymakers could also bring about dialogue between adult educators and local leaders about community pressure, missing infrastructure, and crime and violence and explore mutually beneficial solutions.

In the meantime, implementing some of the low-cost solutions that adults recommend to get them involved in adult education – such as ridesharing, support groups, employer collaboration, or financial literacy workshops – could begin with existing resources. Volunteer organizations, such as senior centers,

timebanks, and community groups, may offer potentially useful resources as well. Nonparticipating adults asked adult education administrators to clarify and distribute outreach information on adult education services that relieve their doubts and meet their information needs. Once recruited to adult education, adults could discuss dispositional solutions – such as self-encouragement, dealing with emotions, faith and time management resources, and health recommendations – in new learner orientations. Adults recommended learning in small, customized groups – through collaboration around skills, supportive tutoring, and financial literacy workshops. In staff meetings adult educators could revisit center locations and scheduling, review policies on use of technology and testing, and brainstorm ways to customize instruction.

Implementing even low-cost solutions is not simple. One interviewee spoke frankly about implementing solutions that might work with nonparticipating adults. He advised adult educator openness to trying new ways of reaching and serving adults. "Make it happen [adult education] and then see who wants it. That's the thing. They don't make it happen. Present it first, and then if you present it, and then people see it, don't just judge it [for them], let people see it in their face for themselves. Don't you be the mistake, present it and see how many people are going to participate. Don't say, 'They ain't going to do it.' How do you know what they are going to do? They might do it… Don't vote it out before you give people a chance."

Interviewees offered recommendations to policymakers as well. They expressed sincere hope that policymakers would listen to their deterrents and solutions and employ the latter to boost adult education resources. A woman remarked at the end of an interview, "You have a lot of good stuff up there [on the interview wall chart] that I hope they [policymakers] will just take and listen, and be like, 'Okay, these are the people. We hear these because we are of the people and for the people. We can get more people to be in better positions.'" In a separate interview a man addressed national policymakers, "Everybody needs an education. Provide the education for people who want one. Make sure you go all out for them. Because they [at the national level] are the ones saying it is very important to have education, so provide the way so people are able to get it."

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Interview Sites

In keeping with recommendations from *The Forgotten 90%*, a total of 17 interview sites were selected in Southern states (Florida, Louisiana, and Virginia) and in Midwestern states (Kansas and Ohio). The authors express deep gratitude to the many adult educators, employment officials, and non-profit administrators who recognized the importance of CAPE and recruited and hosted adults for the research[3]. In all they recruited 135 adults. In addition to administering individual surveys, researchers[4] conducted 25 group interviews and 4 individual interviews. Six interview sites, with 75 adults, were in urban areas. Eleven sites, with 50 adults, were in rural areas.

CAPE Participants

In all, 135 adults were recruited for CAPE research[5]; final sample size was 125 adults. All adults left school early or indicated education outside USA; median education level was between grade 10 and 11 and ranged from "finished grade 6" to "went beyond high school". Although 1 in 4 had some prior experience with adult education programming, three-fourths (75%) had never participated in adult education. Of those in adult education previously, most (63%) participated less than a year, with 1 in 4 (27%) participating one to two years and 10% two to five years.

The median age was 35 years, with a range from 18 to 75 years. By gender, 43% were male and 57% female. Ethnically, 75% were African-American, 22% European-American, and 3% Latino-American. Nearly all (97%) grew up speaking English in the USA. Adults experienced median "good" health, yet 23% reported fair or poor health. Interviewees included parents, seniors, homeless adults, formerly incarcerated adults, recovering addicts, adults with disabilities, and elder caregivers.

Annual personal income was at poverty levels, with 84% earning $0 to $18,000 annually and another 10% earning $18,001 to $36,000 annually. Three percent earned more than $36,000 and 3% did not know their income. A small proportion of adults was employed (27%), with two-thirds (66%) unemployed and 7% out of the workforce. Those who were employed most often worked part time, up to 30 hours weekly (44%), or fulltime (31 to 40 hours; 42%), with only 14% working more than 40 hours weekly.

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[4] In addition to the authors, the CAPE project research team included: Cynthia Campbell, Mary Ann Kleintop, Wyatt Patterson, Usha Paulson, and Laura Weisel.

[5] Under CAPE's design, 10 adults were ineligible because of current adult education participation.

Interview Research

Interview site visits lasted approximately 90 minutes. During site visits, researchers welcomed adults and introduced the CAPE project. They distributed, explained, and collected informed consent forms. Adults were offered $25 gift cards as incentives. Researchers then administered a 22-item survey that took adults 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey collected information on adult education background, motivations, technology use, and demographics.

After all adults completed surveys, a group "fishbone" activity (root cause analysis; McComb, 2015) occurred, in which adults identified deterrents to participating in adult education and prioritized the top three. The top three reasons were transferred to sticky notes and then to wallcharts with a fishbone structure. Similar reasons were organized together, and those posting reasons to the wallchart were encouraged to explain the circumstances and why they selected deterrents. A researcher probed on reasons and took notes on the wallchart until saturation was reached. For example, if an adult wrote "childcare" on a sticky note, the researcher asked him or her to explain why childcare was a deterrent. The surface reason might be that the adult could not afford childcare. When the researcher probed further, the adult might explain that even if childcare were affordable, he or she would not trust either a professional childcare provider or a family member to watch the child, from fears for the child's safety which were rooted in the adult's life experience, such as neglect or abuse.

Researchers continued asking about all the sticky notes on the fishbone wallchart until all deterrents had been identified and explained. Then a researcher briefly recapped each reason given and asked for solutions. Adults were asked, "if you were King or Queen of [Town Name] or could wave a magic wand, what would you do?" to remove the deterrent. They offered an array of actionable solutions to deterrents, both to issues they themselves faced and to issues other group members described. While many proposed solutions would require additional resources, because most interviewees were used to living with very little money, many of the solutions they recommended require relatively little cost. They also recommended systemic changes and comprehensive services that would enable them to participate. When all solutions were identified, the interview concluded and adults received incentives. Fishbone wallcharts were photographed and (when permitted) audio recordings were collected from which summaries of each group interview were later developed.

Data Analyses

Qualitative interview data were organized and coded in Dedoose 8.0 online software. The first author summarized interview data from transcribed audio recordings and fishbone wallchart notes. The authors coded and reviewed all interview data, employing 84 distinct codes. Interview data consisted of 1,917 excerpts and 3,245 code applications. Inter-rater agreement for excerpts was high (90%), and the agreement rate for code applications was also high (93%). Quantitative survey data were double entered into Excel from paper surveys and reconciled. Data were transferred to SPSS 24 for descriptive analyses.