

Declining Enrollment in Federally-Funded Adult Education: Critical Questions for the Field

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Abstract

This essay describes the decline in the number of participants enrolled in federally-funded adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and adult English Language (EL) programs. Enrollment data since 1965 indicate a steep and consistent downward trend in the number of adults enrolling in these programs since the 1990s. Importantly, since program year 2000-2001, the first year reflecting standardized reporting, there has been a 65.8% reduction in the number of ABE/ASE students enrolling in federally-funded programs and a 49.2% reduction in the number of EL students. The purpose of this article is to highlight the long-term nature of these trends, ask critical questions, and promote further engagement with the topic.

Keywords: adult basic education, adult secondary education, adult English Language, adult education, enrollment

This essay describes the contours and implications of an important issue for the field: the consistent decline in the number of participants enrolled in federally-funded adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English Language (EL) programs. For the purposes of this essay, these programs will be referred to as *federally-funded adult education (AE) programs*.

Program enrollment data is considered in two chunks: 1965-2000, the years during which enrollment and reporting procedures across programs and states were likely less consistent; and 2001-2020, the years which reflect more standardized enrollment and reporting

procedures. Both sets of data show a similar downward trend in the number of adults enrolling in federally-funded AE programs. Importantly, since program year 2000-2001, the first year reflecting standardized reporting procedures, there has been a 65.8% reduction in the number of ABE/ASE students enrolled in federally-funded programs and a 49.2% reduction in the number of EL students. These trends have important implications for the field in terms of funding, instruction, and national policy priorities. The purpose of this article is to highlight the long-term nature of these trends, ask critical questions, and promote further engagement with the topic.

Data Sources and Limitations

The enrollment data in this essay come from two sources: the 2013 U.S. Department of Education (ED) publication, *Federal Adult Education, A Legislative History 1964-2013*, and reports from the National Reporting System (NRS). Records of enrollment in federally-funded AE programs are available beginning in the program year 1965 (ED, 2013). However, many factors limit the analysis possible for the data from years 1965-2000, including changes in legislation and identification of instructional categories, as well as variation in state- and program-level enrollment and reporting procedures. For example, separate enrollment data for ASE was not available until 1972, and EL services were not consistently recorded as a separate instructional category until 1985 (ED, 2013). Additionally, before 1998, criteria for defining enrollment may not have been consistent across states, or even across programs within a single state. For example, a student attending an orientation session but never returning may have been counted as enrolled by some programs but not by others. Because of these limitations, reports of the numbers of learners enrolled in federally-funded AE programs from 1965 to 2000 may be inexact.

With the passage of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) came new expectations for accountability and consistency across reporting procedures. With the advent of the NRS, the definition of enrollment became standardized to mean a student who participates in a minimum of twelve contact hours (National Reporting System Support Project, n.d.). Programs receiving federal funding were mandated to enter attendance information, along with evidence of performance outcomes, into the NRS, which is compiled into a public and searchable database (see <https://nrs.ed.gov/>). The earliest data available in this system

is program year 2000-2001.

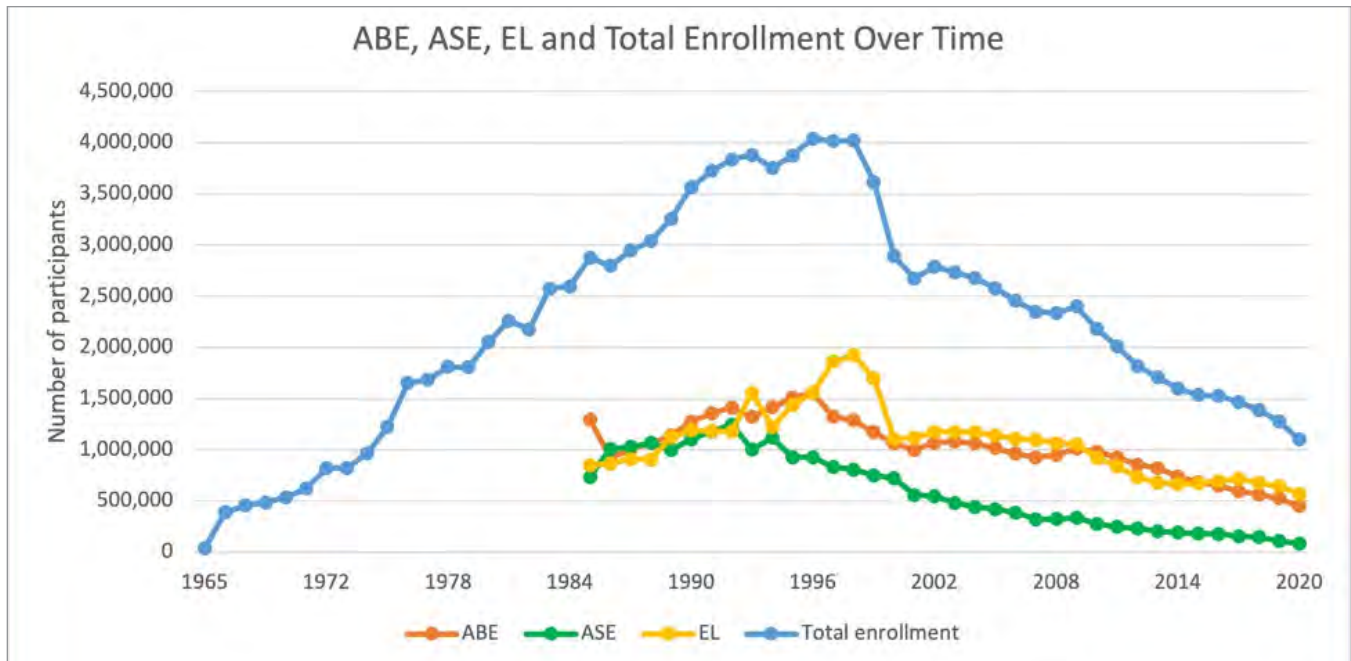
During the writing of this article, the NRS database reporting these numbers was offline for an extended period while the system was being upgraded. Therefore, the most current versions of national enrollment numbers for program years 2000-2001 to 2017-2018 were received via email from NRS personnel (Tucker, personal communication, 2020). However, while this article was in press, the NRS website was re-activated, and enrollment numbers for 2018-2020 were downloaded and included in the analysis.

A few times, the numbers present in the ED report conflicted with the numbers in NRS. When that happened, the numbers from NRS were used, with the assumption that these reports were more accurate. The discrepancies were few and small in scale: only four years showed a discrepancy, and the largest difference in the total number of ABE/ASE/EL students enrolled was 1,487 people.

Enrollment from 1965-2020

In 1965 there were 37,991 recorded participants in adult education programs funded by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (ED, 2013). Two years later, when the Adult Education Act became part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the number of recorded participants increased to 388,935. In general, federal records indicate that overall enrollment in programs gradually and consistently increased until the 1990s and then began to decline and continued to decline until 2020. The line graph below illustrates this trend.

Although a few years show small increases in the student population, an overall downward trend is apparent. Table 1 highlights a few key specifics from the line graph: the peak enrollment year for each category of instruction and the overall student population, as well as the enrollment numbers for



Note: 1985 is the first year for which separate information for ABE, ASE, and EL are consistently available.

2000-2001, the first year of available NRS data, and enrollment numbers for 2019-2020, the most recent

year available at the time of writing.

TABLE 1: ABE/ASE/EL Enrollments Highlights

	ABE	ASE	EL	Overall
Peak year/ #participants	1996/ 1,555,709	1992/ 1,247,709	1998/ 1,927,210	1996/ 4,042,172
2000-2001 participants	998,474	556,008	1,119,946	2,674,428
2019-2020 participants	450,708	80,764	568,738	1,100,210

It is clear from the data that the general trend is a substantial reduction in the number of participants in every instructional category, as well as in overall enrollment. The scale of this decline is fairly extreme: overall enrollment in 2020 had not been so low since 1975.

Questions and Implications

Why are fewer people enrolling in federally-funded AE programs? This question likely has a number of complicated answers. Recent trends, such

as the increase in gig-economy jobs that do not require a high school degree, may help explain current enrollment rates, but do not account for longer-term decline. Similarly, inconsistencies in reporting prior to NRS may have inflated the number of participants considered enrolled, but the decline in participation began before this change and has continued well past: since program year 2000-2001, the number of ABE/ASE students enrolling in federally-funded programs has declined by 65.8%, and the number of EL students has declined by 49.2%.¹

¹ Some practitioners have reported anecdotally that the number of ABE/ASE students in their programs has gone down because the number of EL students has gone up. However, the data show that both student populations have experienced a substantial decline.

Despite the reduction in the number of participants, national assessments of adult competencies suggest that the percent of the adult population without the skills to complete certain kinds of school- and test-related learning tasks has, if anything, increased slightly in the last 30 years (ED, n.d.-a; ED, n.d.-b). Why are these adults no longer coming to federally-funded AE programs?

After we recover from the COVID-19 crisis, the inclination may be to single out the pandemic as an explanatory factor in enrollment and participation trends. However, it is important to acknowledge the longer-term nature of the decline and to consider the complex forces influencing participation in federally-funded AE programs. Below, I will briefly address the roles of policy, funding, learner interest, and technology, with suggestions for possible directions for future research that could help shed light on this issue.

Policy

The major policy initiatives in federally-funded AE are the 1998 WIA and its update, the 2014 Workforce Innovations and Opportunities Act (WIOA). Roumell et al. (2019) report substantially increased policy activity pertaining to adult and workforce education since the 1990s, but the impact of these efforts on participation is unknown. However, participation in AE is influenced by other types of policy. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) resulted in substantially increased K-12 graduation rates (Harris, 2020) and likely reduced the number of adults seeking ABE/ASE programs. Increasing restrictions in immigration policy that began in the mid-1990s (Cohn, 2015) may have limited the number of adults seeking EL services. Finally, while much research has articulated barriers to AE participation, these barriers are heavily influenced

by social welfare policies that shape access to housing, healthcare, employment, food, and supplemental basic income. Shaw et al. (2006) demonstrate that the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Workforce Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) negatively influenced the number of African-American and Latinx welfare recipients who enrolled in college. Although no such systematic analysis has been conducted regarding federally-funded AE participation, it is likely that this and many other policies have worked in concert to influence these rates. Understanding the broader policy landscape could help advocates shape future policies to better support program participation.

Funding and Access

Federal funding for AE programs has declined since 2001 and substantial additional cuts continue to be proposed (National Skills Coalition, 2018; ProLiteracy, 2020). Although historical information about the total number of federally-funded programs is not readily accessible, in some locations funding cuts after the 2008 financial crisis drastically reduced the number of these programs, creating barriers to access (Pickard, 2021). Furthermore, in recent years most states showed waitlists for federally-funded AE programs (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, 2017). This suggests that although enrollment has declined, in many settings there are more students who wish to enroll than are capable of being served.

To what degree limits to program access account for the decline in federally-funded AE enrollment is unclear, but it is likely at least a partial factor. Understanding whether non-federally funded programs have experienced a similar decline in enrollment might help clarify whether the trend is specific to federally-funded AE.

Learner Interest

Given that graduation rates have gone up, it seems reasonable to suggest there may be a growing lack of interest in AE programs that are structured to lead to a high school equivalency degree. Although assessed skill levels have remained more or less the same, it is likely that the credential itself - rather than an interest in skills improvement - drove the participation of large numbers of learners. Simultaneously, there is some evidence that a top-down approach to adult education, such as the one created by the present federal accountability system, might discourage enrollment from a broader range of participants. International development literature and adult learning theory suggest that involvement from adults in the direction and nature of their learning is essential for engagement (Walters, 2014). It seems possible that the increasing narrowness of the field (Belzer, 2017) might serve as a disincentive for some adults interested in other things. Programming that allows for more variety and student input, such as adult diploma programs and online learning opportunities, may be more popular than “traditional” ABE/ASE programs (Gopalakrishnan, 2008), as might the increasingly available vocationally-focused programs. An exploration of participation rates in alternatives to traditional ABE/ASE programs could help shed light on whether other models of instruction might be more attractive to students.

Technology

Although many aspects of infrastructure, economics, and individual skill may constrain how adult learners use technology, many are likely using it in ways that support their engagement with learning. The level of independence facilitated by technology and the availability of online learning opportunities may contribute to the reduction of participants in traditional classrooms. Much more

research is needed in this area to understand how adults are engaging with opportunities tailored to ABE, ASE, and EL learners in the digital world. Data from online program experiences during COVID could add much to our understanding.

Conclusion

So many factors potentially influence the decline in enrollment in federally-funded AE programs that pinpointing a single explanation is likely impossible. Nonetheless, taking clear stock of this decline and its potential causes is imperative. For many years, federally-funded AE programs have served large numbers of adults seeking literacy and English language support, academic skill development, high school equivalency credential attainment, and workforce preparation. For these adults, and for our collective communities, the continued decline of these programs is potentially devastating.

Without further information, it is impossible to know to what degree declining enrollment can be attributed to policy, funding, or other factors. In addition to the directions for further investigation suggested above, there remain many specifics of the trend itself that are not known, such as: Is the distribution of enrollment decline consistent across the country, or are there pockets of substantial concentration? Is the distribution of enrollment decline consistent across gender, race/ethnicity, age, and urban/rural populations? Research addressing these and other questions could add much to our understanding.

My hope is that this essay will encourage others in the field to consider this decline in enrollment, its causes, and its potential implications. Perhaps most importantly, I wish to ask: What steps - if any - should we, as practitioners, researchers, and advocates, take to reverse the trend?

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