FOLLOW-UP: TRACKING STUDENTS OVER TIME

Adult education programs serve their students for a finite amount of time. Nevertheless, by helping students to develop the academic and workplace skills they need to succeed, the impact these programs have on their students' lives extends well beyond the classroom. To measure this impact, it is critical that programs follow up with their students after they exit and track their successes. This *NRS Tips* reviews the importance of tracking students, the guidelines for whom to track and when to track, and the primary methods for tracking students' outcomes.

WHY TRACK STUDENT OUTCOMES?

Tracking student outcomes can take time and effort, and it can be difficult to do, especially because students do not always stay in touch with the adult education program after they exit. However, it is important for local programs to obtain this information to support program management and improvement efforts. Tracking student outcomes to report post-exit indicators of performance is also required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to monitor the effectiveness of the services.

WIOA Indicators

Under WIOA, programs are required to report data for primary indicators of performance. These indicators are the employment rate in the second quarter after exit, employment rate in the fourth quarter after exit, median earnings in the second quarter after exit, credential attainment, measurable skill gains, and effectiveness in serving employers.

- The **employment rate in the second quarter after exit** measures the percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.
- The **employment rate in the fourth quarter after exit** measures the percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program.
- The **median earnings in the second quarter after exit** measures the median earnings of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.
- **Credential attainment** includes attainment of a postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent during participation in or within 1 year after exit from the program. To count the receipt of a secondary diploma as a successful outcome, participants must enter postsecondary education or training, or employment within 1 year after exit.
- **Measurable skill gains** (MSG) is used to demonstrate participants' progress toward achieving a credential or employment. One way that participants can demonstrate MSG for adult education programs is through an educational functioning level (EFL) gain. Other ways are entry into postsecondary education or training after exit and obtaining a secondary credential.

- The **Effectiveness in Serving Employers** indicator requires the Department of Education and the Department of Labor to jointly establish one or more primary indicators of performance that indicate the effectiveness of the core programs in serving employers. Since this indicator is a new approach for measuring performance under WIOA's six core programs, the Departments have implemented a pilot program during which states must select two of three approaches to report data that the Departments will use to assess a permanent indicator. States may also voluntarily develop an additional State-specific approach. The Departments will identify a standardized indicator, after state data for the various approaches have been evaluated.

Success of adult education services over time

Although the information gained by tracking student outcomes is needed for compliance with WIOA requirements, it also is important information for local program management and improvement. With WIOA's focus on employment and college and career readiness, these data can help programs determine how successful they are preparing learners for postsecondary education and the workforce. The results can have instructional and administrative implications.

WHOM DO WE TRACK AND WHEN DO WE TRACK THEM?

For each indicator described above, there are different guidelines about which students need to be tracked and when they need to be tracked. These guidelines apply regardless of the method used to collect the data. Table 1 summarizes these guidelines.

Table 1. Guidelines for Tracking Students

Indicator	Who Is Tracked?[1]	When Are They Tracked?
Employment rate in the second quarter after exit	All participants who exit[2]	Second quarter after exit
Employment rate in the fourth quarter after exit	All participants who exit[2]	Fourth quarter after exit
Median earnings in the second quarter after exit	Participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit[2]	Second quarter after exit
Credential attainment	Participants who exit and were enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program, and participants who entered without a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent and were receiving instruction at the secondary level[2]	Within 1 year after exit

[1] Indicators do not apply to participants with specific exclusion criteria specified by WIOA. See Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) Program Memorandum 17-2: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/octae-program-memo-17-2.pdf
[2] Second and fourth quarter employment, median earnings and credential indicators do not apply to participants in correctional education programs (WIOA Section 225), who remain incarcerated at program exit.

Indicator	Who Is Tracked?[1]	When Are They Tracked?
Measurable skill gains • Educational functioning level gain: ○ Entry into postsecondary education after exit • Attainment of a secondary credential	All participants	End of the program year

Note on Periods of Participation

A participant may exit a program more than once during a single program year and re-enter after this exit for additional periods of participation (PoPs). Additional PoPs require separate follow-up upon exit for all post-exit indicators.

HOW DO WE TRACK STUDENT OUTCOMES?

There are several ways to track students. Each method has its benefits and challenges. Which method a state selects will depend largely on ease of access to the necessary data for a method.

Data Matching

When two or more state agencies serve a common group of participants, data matching allows the agencies to pool or share data to provide a more complete picture of how the participants are being supported to meet their academic and career goals, as determined by specific indicators. Most often, matching is done using Social Security numbers, but other unique identifiers can be used.

The data-matching method is especially beneficial for tracking outcomes that must be measured after the participant exits a program, such as employment rate, but it is advantageous for tracking all outcomes. It requires significantly fewer resources—specifically, in terms of local program staff time and effort—than other methods because local programs need to collect only demographic, participation, and EFL information. The state can do the rest. This method also tends to be the most valid and reliable, because it does not depend on self-reporting and fewer participants are missed.

Before deciding to use data matching to track students, there are several things a state should consider. First, it is important to think about which data are available within your database system. Do you have access to the data necessary to do data matching? Are there common identifiers and data definitions across agencies? Are these applied with fidelity during local data collection and reporting? Are data sharing agreements in place? How will the costs for data matching be addressed? Another consideration is students' privacy. How will you ensure data confidentiality? Are there barriers to interagency sharing of personally identifiable information? You will also want to keep in mind that program staff may need training and technical assistance before implementing this method. Will you encounter resistance from program staff? Will they intuitively be able to implement data tracking or will technical assistance be needed?

Supplemental Data Collection

When it is not possible to conduct a data match, state agencies must identify an alternative method for collecting the necessary data. One way to do this is to have local programs survey students.[3] Although conducting a survey can be challenging, especially given the transient nature of many adult education participants, states can ensure that the survey they use results in the valid and reliable reporting of student outcomes.

1. ***Develop a method for identifying participants to contact for follow-up.*** To start, it is important to know who will need to be surveyed. Table 1 provides guidance on how to determine this for each measure. You will also need to have access to the following:
    - Participant contact information
    - The follow-up outcomes that apply to the participant
    - The date that the participant exited for each period of participation
2. ***Conduct the survey at the appropriate time.*** Ideally, the survey is started during the first month after the follow-up quarter and completed within no more than 3 months. However, every effort should be made to contact participants as soon as possible, after they have exited the program, to maximize the likelihood that they will respond.
3. ***Use a uniform survey instrument for all programs.*** To be able to compare data between programs, it is important that all participants are asked the same questions in the same way. For this reason, states should provide all programs with a standard survey questionnaire[4] that enables the programs to collect the information in a valid and reliable way, providing translated versions in the most common languages spoken.
4. ***Train staff to conduct the survey.*** Just as it is important to have a uniform instrument, it is important that the survey be conducted uniformly. To ensure this, the staff who will conduct the survey need to be trained in survey procedures, including how to introduce the survey and obtain consent, ways to avoid refusals, how to ask the survey questions, how to record responses, and how to answer participant questions about the survey.
5. ***Identify local resources available to conduct the survey.*** Because conducting surveys is resource intensive, states should ensure that local programs have sufficient staff and time to conduct the survey before they begin. Alternatively, the state can decide to take on the responsibility for conducting the surveys and have state staff do them, or they can contract with a third party.

[3] OCTAE Program Memorandum 17-6 provides guidance on the use of supplemental wage information: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/octae-program-memo-17-6.pdf

[4] Appendix D of the NRS *Technical Assistance Guide for Performance Accountability* provides a sample instrument.

6. ***Alternatives to survey phone calls.*** Although phone calls are often used to conduct surveys, there are several other methods that states and local program might want to consider implementing:
   - ***Text Messaging via a Mobile Device.*** Text messaging allows programs to reach participants immediately and quickly, because people often check their text messages more frequently and are more likely to respond right away. Text messaging may have some limitations. Among these are restrictions on the number or types of characters allowed by certain text messaging applications, difficulty in maintaining a permanent record of the conversations if older messages are deleted, and the possibility that a text message may not be received, if a student does not have text messaging capability or exceeds the number of text messages allowed by his or her plan.
   - ***E-mail.*** Sending e-mails is convenient, because it can be done from a computer or mobile device. It does not have restrictions on number of characters and allows the user to attach a file (like a survey document) if needed. However, not everyone checks e-mail consistently and e-mails can get lost or buried in inboxes.
   - ***Mailings.*** Sending questionnaires out by mail can help programs to reach students who use technology less often. Mailings also give surveys a sense of importance that may increase response rates. The primary drawbacks of using mailings to conduct surveys is that they tend to be slower and more costly than other methods.
7. ***Implement procedures to improve response rates.*** Letting participants know at program entry that they may be contacted later and asked about their outcomes greatly helps to improve the response rate. Program entry is also the best time to collect detailed contact information and ask participants to provide updates as applicable. However, contacting adult education students after they leave the program remains a challenge, because their contact information may change frequently. Local programs may consider using social media to keep in touch with students after they leave the program. States should provide technical assistance to local programs to improve response rates.
8. ***Ensure that the state has a database and procedures for survey reporting.*** The state is ultimately responsible for reporting the aggregate data for each primary indicator of performance. By providing local programs with a database and standard procedures to follow, the state can ensure that local programs have the information they need about whom to survey and when to conduct the survey. Also, having a database helps the state receive the information it needs to accurately compute and report the information in a timely fashion.

As with data matching, the survey method has advantages. Surveys do not require unique identifiers. Surveys also provide a personal touch, helping students continue to feel connected to the program even after they leave. However, surveys rely on self-reporting, which is not always reliable, and they tend to yield a lower response rate, which can affect validity.

Regardless of the method selected, tracking student outcomes plays a critical role in ensuring that states and local programs are meeting the needs of adult learners. By collecting data about the outcomes that students achieve after exiting the program, state staff and local programs are better able to understand the long-term impact of the work they do. Equipped with that knowledge, adult education programs are in a better position to adjust programmatic practices and improve instructional services.