Evidence-Based Program Retention and Student Persistence Strategies for Adult Educators

REL Southeast, in partnership with the Institute for the Professional Development of Adult Educators, and the Florida Department of Education

Acknowledgement and disclaimer

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Session Goals

1. Review the current literature on adult education retention and student persistence practices

2. Consider and discuss retention strategies in adult education

3. Consider and discuss barriers to increasing retention rates in adult education

4. Consider retention/persistence strategies to implement in Florida institutions

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Decision Making and Coaching in Adult Education

Researchers in the adult education field have noted that adult literacy practitioners often make important decisions about program design and practice based on opinion, prior experience, and trial and error (Beder & Medina, 2001). Advisors and researchers in Adult Education suggest that practitioners need coaching to become better consumers of research and active partners, "in the process of connecting research and practice" (Comings & Soricone, 2007). Making evidence-based decisions is viewed as both relevant and important in supporting improvements in the field.

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

"Persistence can be seen as being comprised of two parts: intensity (the hours of instruction per month) and duration (the months of engagement in instruction). Persistence rates are reported as hours of instruction during a specific period of months, usually in increments of 1 year. Adult education programs often refer to persistence as retention and measure it by recording participation in formal classes or tutoring sessions," (Comings, 2009; p. 24).

Comings defines persistence as, "adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services, and returning to program services as soon as the demands of their lives allow," (2009; p. 25).

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Why Care About Retention?

- It is estimated that 100-150 hours of instruction and practice are necessary for adult learners to make a one-year educational gain (Comings et al., 1999); yet, approximately, 58% of adult learns enroll in adult education programs for 6 months or less.

- Retention, motivation, persistence, attendance, success (GED attainment, learning gains, TABE/CASAS growth) often lumped together.

- More recent quantitative studies on retention broadly were prompted by a JREE special issue (4 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs): Alamprese et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2011; Hock & Mellard, 2011; Sabatini et al., 2011)
    - Studies report attrition rates between 38-54%
    - Minimal to no literacy gains across studies

Site/Program Factors

- Research has emphasized the need for program quality improvement to increase enrollment and retention (Belzer, 2007; Comings et al., 1999)
  - Programs should offer student orientation to set and outline realistic goals and expectations
  - Frequent progress monitoring (e.g., TABE testing)
  - Student access to counseling and life coach services
  - Tailoring instruction to student needs by doing hybrid instruction (in-person and online; Windisch, 2016)
  - Figuring out how to translate acquiring basic skills to the workplace environment (Windisch, 2016)
  - 52% spend less than 1 hour per week on writing instruction in adult education (Fernandez et al., 2017); 61% of students produce a paragraph or less each week

- Florida Department of Education Adult Education Program Survey (2020)
  - 43% of programs do not have a structured college plan/path to employment for students
  - 33.5% do not offer flexible scheduling
  - 63.6% do not conduct exit interviews – these would really help understand barriers to retention
  - However on a positive note: 76% regularly call students who are absent
  - Many cited positive and collaborative teacher/student interactions, student goal setting, engagement and motivation, multiple instructional approaches as paramount to retaining students (consistent with Tighe et al., 2013 in quantifying success)

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A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Research points toward a few markers of success in Adult Education programs that may help increase retention, program directed activities focused on keeping adult education students engaged toward educational advancement and success:

- teacher knowledge and implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies,
- strong teacher-student interactions,
- views on standardized assessments,
- and the ability of the program to tap into student motivational factors.

(Tighe, Barnes, Connor, & Steadman, 2013)

Mixed Methods Approach Specific to Florida (Tighe et al., 2013)

- Understanding success from the perspective of different stakeholders (state, teacher, student) in two Florida counties
- State (Quantified success using classroom value-added scores to identify more and less effective classrooms [based on initial TABE Reading scores and number of literacy completion points earned])
- Teacher/Student (Observed 11 classrooms identified as more or less effective; Interviewed 14 teachers and 28 students)

Instructional Strategies/Teacher-Student Interactions	Views on Standardized Testing	Student Motivational Factors

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What Characterizes More Effective Classrooms? Tighe et al., (2013)

- Two counties varied in implementation of programs
  - One county had a central ABE facility that developed a specific interactive instructional approach adopted by all teachers whereas in the other county teachers were entirely responsible for instruction, materials, learning.

- Multiple instructional approaches
  - Rotating in groups to different content areas
  - Whole-group instruction (lessons, reading newspaper)
  - Individualized (worksheets, on computer)
  - Peer editing

- Positive and collaborative teacher-student interactions
  - Celebrating birthdays and GED attainment
  - Attendance certificates
  - Colorful inspirational posters with students names on bulletin boards
  - Life skills (computer literacy, health literacy, financial literacy, anger management)
  - Students as integral to classroom culture

What Characterizes More Effective Classrooms? Tighe et al., (2013)

- Students engaging in goal setting
  - Field trips to look at different career options
  - Long-term goals of earning a diploma and specific career paths

- Students citing motivational factors such as family and personal fulfillment
  - Serving as role models for children
  - Need to validate their lives
  - Learning English
  - Pursue higher education or specific career path

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Student Factors

- Across multiple studies, common reasons cited for dropping out include transportation and childcare barriers, unsupportive relationships, family demands, busy work schedules, health-related issues, inconvenient class times, inattentive instructors, financial constraints, self-esteem and self-efficacy issues (Comings & Soricone, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2013; Lesgold & Welch-Ross, 2012, Quigley, 1995)

Who Persists in Adult Education? (Comings et al., 1999)

- First large-scale study on persistence ($N = 150$ interviewed)
- Employment status, gender, race/ethnicity not related to persistence.
- Older adults (over age 30)
- Non-native speakers
- Learners with clearly defined goals
- Learners with children (in particular grown children)
- Prior exposure to adult education
- Engagement in self-study
- Previous experience with schooling (students who rated past experience more positively as opposed to negative or neutral) but only for second language learners
- Researchers emphasize that is crucial for programs and teachers to build positive support systems and environments to help counteract student dispositional barriers

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Who Persists in Adult Education? (Reading & Writing Special Issue)

- Understanding persisters from 4 reading RCTs

- Greenberg et al. (2013) – second language learners and older learners more likely to persist. Also, previous educational history, avoidance of reading, economic hardship, and phonemic skills, rapid automatized naming skills, and comprehension predict persistence. Completers of the intervention tended to be second language learning females with lower component skills.

- Similarly, Sabatini et al. (2011) and Mellard et al., (2013) noted an inverse relation between reading abilities and persistence (lower skills = higher persistence).

- Mellard et al., (2013) also noted greater life satisfaction and students' reporting more help and fewer obstacles.

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Adult Education persistence research suggests that practices aligned with the following key findings may support Adult Education program retention (Comings, 2009):

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Quigley (2000)	Literature review
Addressing negative attitudes toward education	
Starting intake, orientation, and instruction with student goal setting and matching students to classes and classwork based on their needs	

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A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Adult Education persistence research suggests that practices aligned with the following key findings may support Adult Education program retention (Comings, 2009):

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Quigley (1997)	Literature review and qualitative study
Providing evidence for the link between adult learner persistence and previous schooling experiences	
Underscoring the importance of the first three weeks of student participation in the program	

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A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

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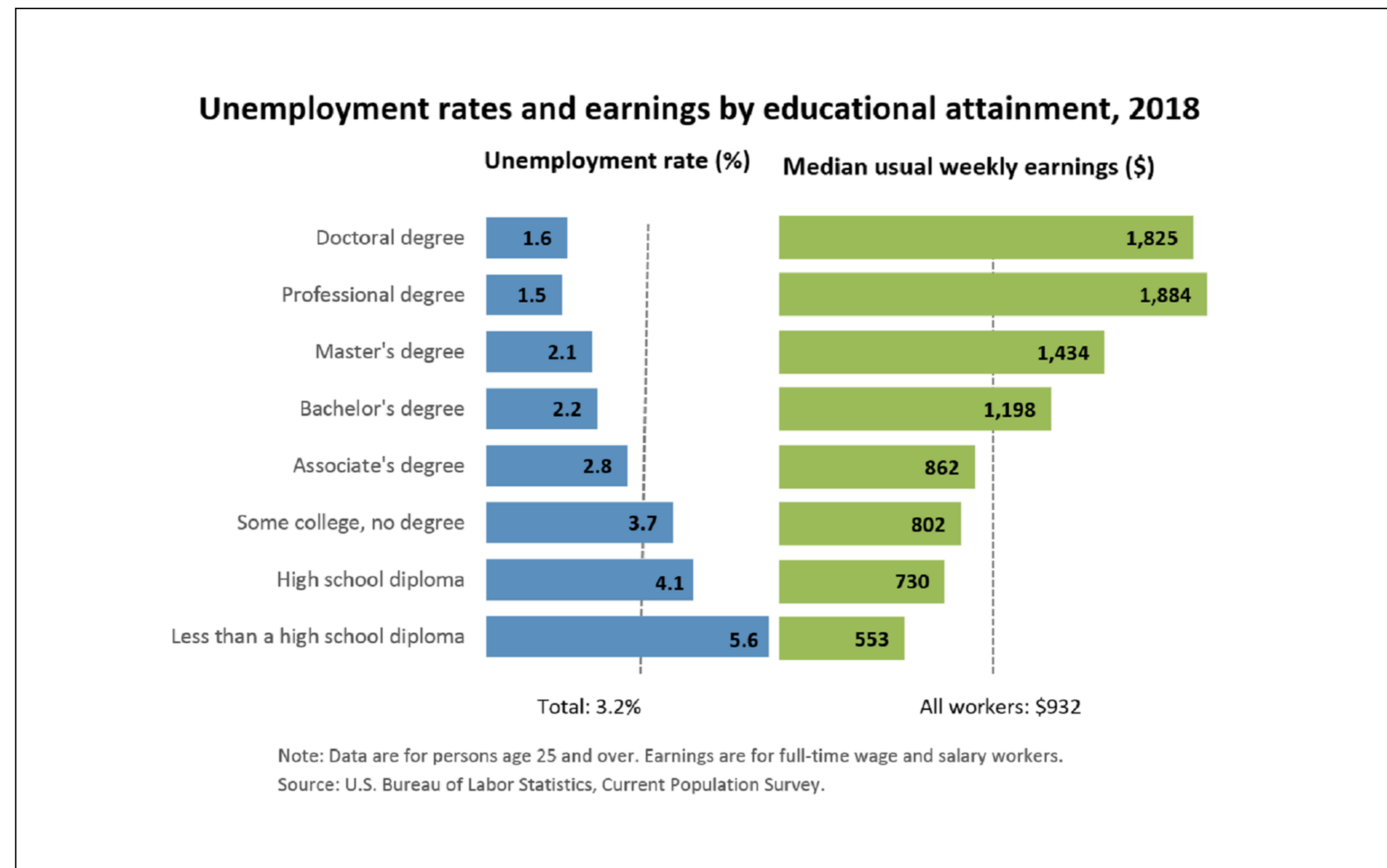
Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Beder (1991)	Literature review
Assisting students to understand the cost-benefit analysis of program participation and persistence	
Aligning program services with learner motivations and life contexts	

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Assisting students to understand the cost-benefit analysis of program participation and persistence (Beder, 1991)

Discussion: How can educators ensure that students understand the cost-benefit of program participation?

Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment

Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment, 2018

Educational attainment	Unemployment rate (%)	Median usual weekly earnings ($)
Doctoral degree	1.6	1,825
Professional degree	1.5	1,884
Master's degree	2.1	1,434
Bachelor's degree	2.2	1,198
Associate's degree	2.8	862
Some college, no degree	3.7	802
High school diploma	4.1	730
Less than a high school diploma	5.6	553

Total: 3.2%   All workers: $932

Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Adult Education persistence research suggests that practices aligned with the following key findings may support Adult Education program retention (Comings, 2009):

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Meder (2000)	Quasi-experimental study
Engaging learners in discussion of motivational issues	

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Adult Education persistence research suggests that practices aligned with the following key findings may support Adult Education program retention (Comings, 2009):

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Cuban (2003)	Case studies
Adapting program curriculum and schedules to the needs and interests of students	

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Adapting program curriculum to the needs and interests of students (Cuban, 2003)

It may be helpful to focus on integrating instruction with job-related tasks and highlighting the learner's role as a worker (Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010).
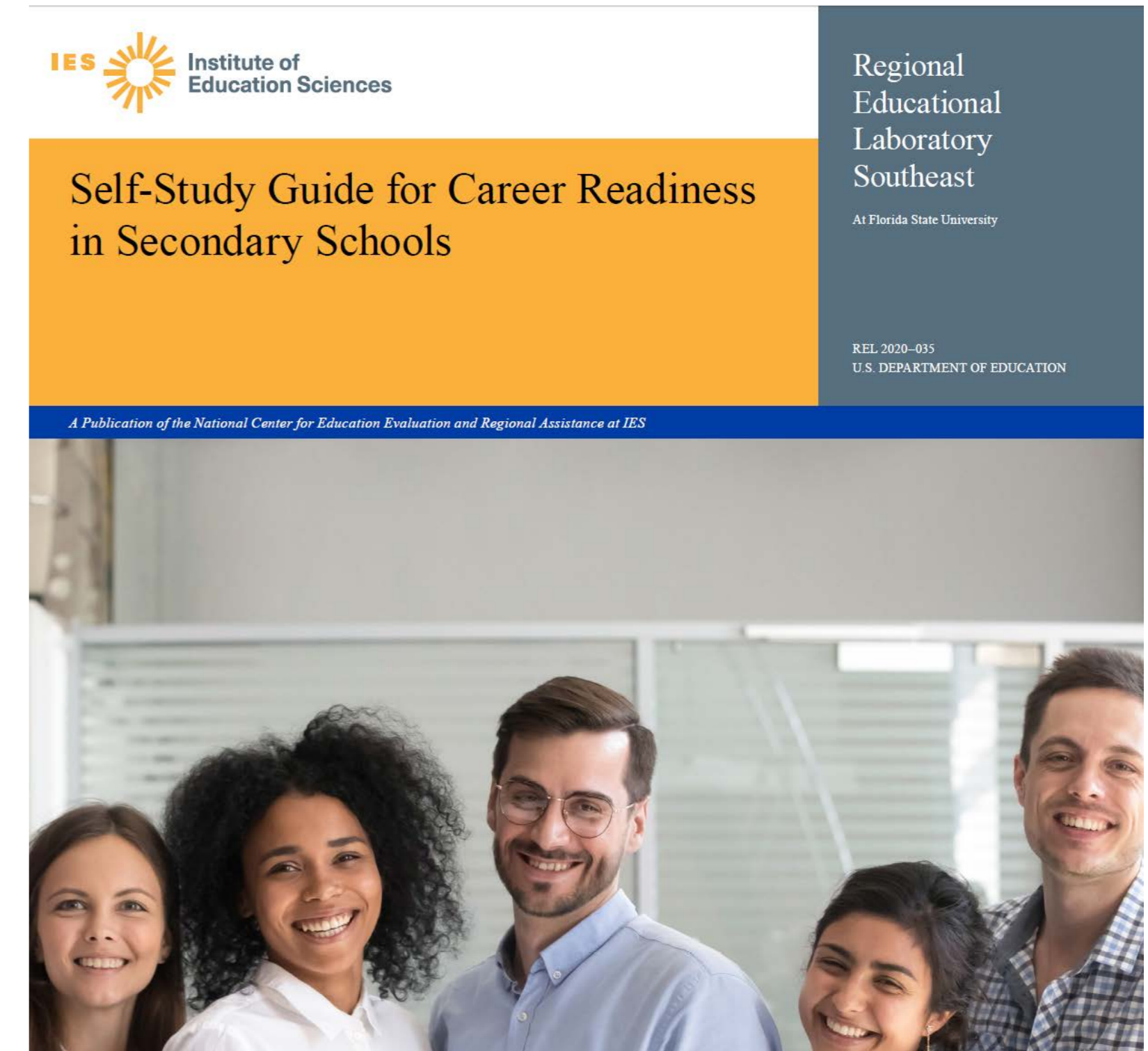
A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

It may be helpful to consider ways to increase career counseling and readiness efforts in adult education programs aligned with student persistence goals.

This self-study guide provides state and local education agencies and schools with a tool to assess implementation of career readiness practices across a district or school and to plan improvements. It is arranged by implementation areas that have been found to be important to career readiness efforts based on a review of the literature and discussions with stakeholders. Each area includes guiding questions for discussion, potential sources of evidence, and a rating scale for self-assessment of implementation. This process of ongoing discussion, evidence use, and self-assessment can help states, districts, and secondary schools improve the effectiveness of career readiness practices.

(Smith, Lee, Carr, Weatherill, Lancashire, 2020)

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Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast
At Florida State University

Self-Study Guide for Career Readiness in Secondary Schools

REL 2020–035
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at IES

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Adult Education persistence research suggests that practices aligned with the following key findings may support Adult Education program retention (Comings, 2009):

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Tracy-Mumford (1994)	Literature review
Outlining key characteristics of persistence plan that supports students and informs instruction	

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

Research points toward a few markers of success in Adult Education programs that may help increase retention:

Researcher	Nature of Inquiry
Tighe et al. (2013)	Mixed methods
Teacher knowledge and implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies	

A Literature Review of Retention and Persistence in Adult Education

It may be helpful to consider ways to increase evidence-based practices in adult literacy.

This self-study guide was designed to help adult literacy education providers collect, organize, and analyze evidence that they can use to improve program performance. It was designed to help educators consider which types of evidence to collect and which components of adult education instruction may be important for evaluating implementation. Sources of evidence for this review include records and data such as lesson plans, rosters, and student results confirming that processes are in place to monitor teacher and student success.
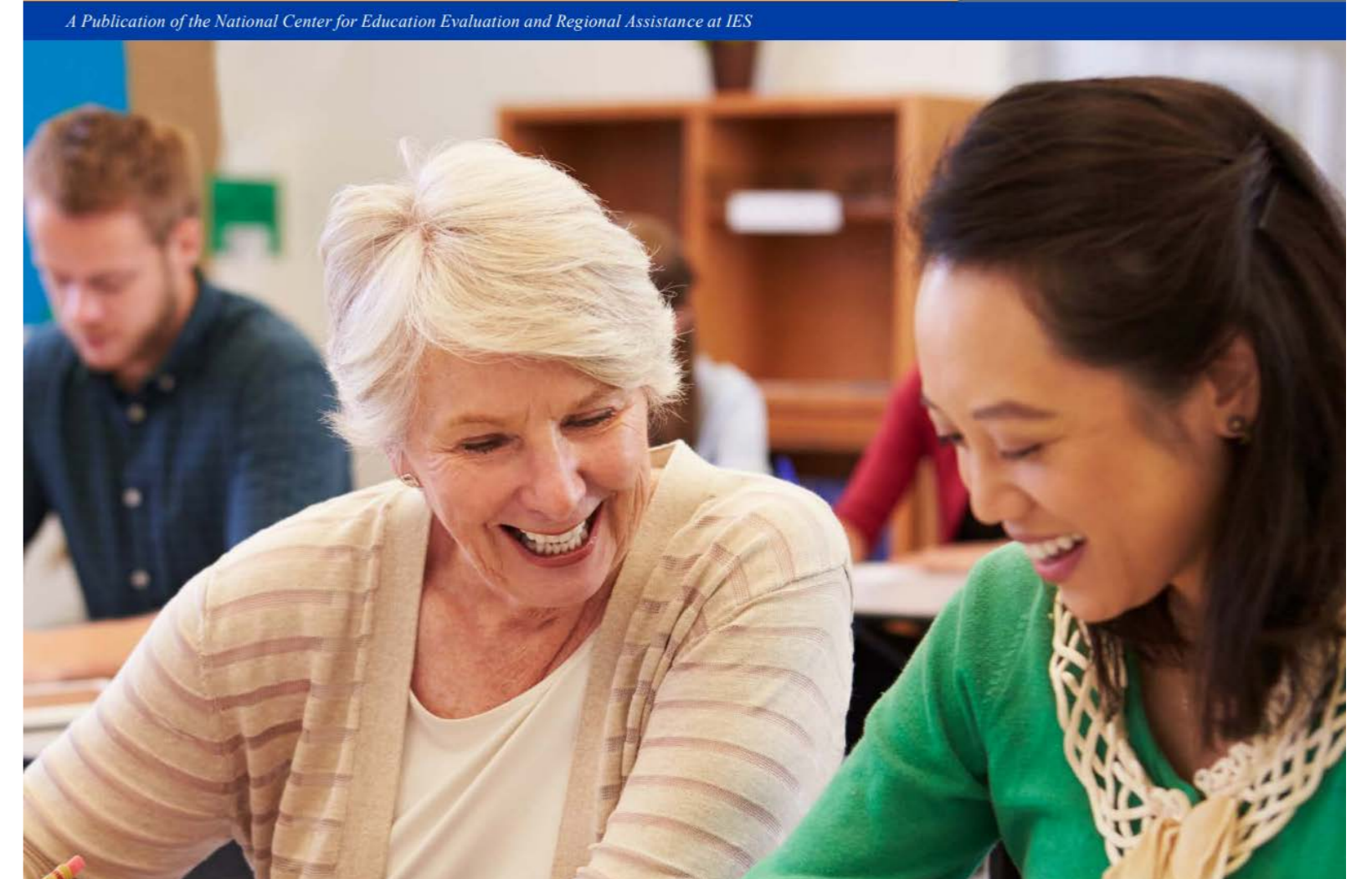(Smith, Lee, Osborne-Lampkin, & Rall, 2020)

Selecting evidence-based strategies to address challenges/needs

Discussion/sharing:

1. Which strategies might be most useful in Florida institutions?

2. What barriers might exist in using the strategies to address challenges/needs?

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Recap of Session Goals

1. Review the current literature on adult education retention and student persistence practices

2. Consider and discuss retention strategies in adult education

3. Consider and discuss barriers to increasing retention rates in adult education

4. Discuss strategies to implement in Florida institutions

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