

Update on Adult Education Podcast
Episode 3: Voices from the Field
with Barbara Gibson, Danielle Robinson, and Mike Jenkins
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Barbara Gibson: This is Barbara Gibson, and I want to welcome you to Voices from the Field, part of our podcast series on workforce development. In this podcast, we'll explore the role of adult education in the regional workforce development system and learn about how one regional adult education program and workforce board are working together. Today we welcome Danielle Robinson, Regional Program Manager for Region 18 Middle Peninsula Adult Education, and Mike Jenkins, Executive Director of the Bay Consortium Workforce Development Board. Thank you both for being with us to share ways your organizations are collaborating to build a stronger regional workforce system. Danielle, I'd like to start with you and ask you to describe the work that you are currently doing in workforce education.

Danielle Robinson: All right, as a member of the Workforce Development Board, I represent four rural regional adult education programs within the workforce region. Having a seat at the decision-making table has given adult education a voice and the opportunity to be a more effective partner in workforce development.

Together, we have provided integrated education and training through PluggedIn Virginia. Middle Peninsula students have completed two sessions of dental assisting with x-ray certification and one session of cybersecurity with CompTIA certification. We are currently working with the newly-formed Middle Peninsula Alliance, the Planning District Commission, and the Workforce Development Board to identify in-demand career strands in the Middle Peninsula for future PluggedIn Virginia cohorts. Business-identified soft skills included in the Bay Consortium Workforce Development Plan have been integrated into curricula at every level in the adult education classroom.

Barbara Gibson: Thank you, Danielle. Now I'd like Mike to tell us how he sees the role of adult education programs in the regional workforce system and also describe some of the opportunities for future collaborative work.

Mike Jenkins: Okay, literacy, numeracy and English language skills are fundamental components for workforce development. The adult education program bridges the skills gap needed to transition the workforce into the community college system and career certification training. I see the adult education system as a key partner in building a strong workforce. In rural areas, partnerships are essential to levy both the resources and intellectual capital needed to reach our common goals. In the future I see the adult education program as a key partner to help the community college and local business increase recruitment among a specific demographic: adults needing to ramp up their skills so they can access training and be successful toward earning a degree or career certification can build those skills through the adult education program. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Bay Consortium Workforce Development Area has several providers of services that provides access to physical services of

the core WIOA programs, including Title II, which is adult education, and other required partners. In addition, our workforce area has established a Memorandum of Understanding with each of at One-stop partners, of which adult education is one. Both requirements provide opportunities for adult educators to collaborate with workforce system partners to establish effective referral, co-enrollment, and handoff processes for participants who need both Title I and Title II, adult education, services.

Adult education is closely involved in the development of career pathways in the Bay Consortium Workforce Development Area, both to facilitate strong institutional connections among career pathways stakeholders in the workforce and education field and to ensure that pathways provide meaningful access for individuals who are still acquiring basic skills. Adult educators seek out appropriate partners to ensure that their integrated education and training programs can meet the needs of local participants. The partners may include One-stop Centers and postsecondary career and technical education program. I personally serve on two career and technical education programs in the Peninsula public school systems, down at West Point schools in Matthews County.

Adult education programs in our area served by the WIOA Title II are active partners with all members in our workforce development community. They work diligently to provide services when they're within their scopes of expertise and to refer adults to other resources as additional needs are identified to avoid duplication of services.

We also have signed Memorandums of Understanding with all of our adult education providers, not just in Danielle's region, but there are three other adult education regions in their workforce area. We have MOUs in place with all of those. Danielle currently, as she mentioned, sits on our workforce board. The four workforce regional programs in our workforce area kind of get together and choose one of their folks to be the adult education representative on the board. Danielle has just come on the board due to the retirement of Betsy Mathias, who's a long time adult education proponent from the Fredericksburg area. So I feel our workforce area in particular has a very meaningful and strong working relationship with their adult education.

Barbara Gibson: Thank you, Mike. That was very encouraging for all of us who are interested in working productively with our workforce boards. Also, for sharing your vision of how that should work and how it is already working in your region. It is good to see what you all are doing and how you're putting those ideas into action. Mike, you mentioned the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, and I wondered, for both of you, how have WIOA requirements changed the way the workforce board and adult education programs work together, and what future changes do you envision?

Danielle Robinson: As partners, WIOA has brought us closer together, has strengthened our relationships, and made us more actively involved with one another. With the state combined plan as a guide, our goals mesh together so there is less conflict, and it has made us more purposeful in our service delivery. We are more output-driven, and each partner contributes to the overall success. Without being equitably funded, though, there is a danger of minimizing the value and effectiveness of adult education as a partner in the future. Mike?

Mike Jenkins: Okay, another area that I think helps strengthen our relationships is the development of common performance measures that the United States Department of Labor has developed and is being passed down the line. We're just in the very beginning stages of working with the new performance measures; however, they are more in line with an integrated system compared to the performance measures that we adhered to before. The old measures were specifically designed for workforce training programs and not so much our partner programs, whereas the common measures kind of take into consideration all partner programs and all activities that are offered through our WIOA-funded programs as well as our other partner programs, of which adult education is one.

Another area, that I think we can look to the future to make some changes, is: adult education providers can become a part of what we call our eligible training provider list. They could be a vendor, and if Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act participants are eligible for services, we could pay those services to the adult education system. It's a very simple process. An application needs to be completed and filed with our office. WIOA requires that any vendors or service providers that we have be on this approved list, and we have not done that in the past but are encouraging that moving forward. And as I had spoken earlier, adult education programs are mandated partners in our WIOA program, and just with common measures and the combined local plan—I've been in the workforce field for 42 years, and I've never written a plan like we wrote last year when we collaborated with many partners to develop this plan. It is a blueprint for us all to follow as far as workforce development activities are concerned. So I think those meshing together and coordination and collaboration of all our various programs into one common goal is the way of the future.

Barbara Gibson: Thank you. Those are very interesting perspectives on how WIOA has influenced both of your organizations.

Integrated Education and Training, IET, and co-enrollment have been major focus areas for adult education under WIOA. IET has been defined as “adult education and literacy, workforce preparation, and workforce training ‘each of sufficient intensity and quality, and based on the most rigorous research available, especially with respect to improving reading, writing, mathematics, and English proficiency of eligible individuals’ that ‘occur simultaneously’ and ‘use occupationally relevant instructional materials’ and ‘are organized to function cooperatively’ with a ‘single set of learning outcomes.’ ... IET represents a wide spectrum of services to build foundational, employability, and occupational skills.” This definition is from the Center for Law and Social Policy or CLASP. How will IET and co-enrollment programs improve workforce development in your region?

Danielle Robinson: Well, clients at the Workforce Services Center in the Middle Peninsula are actually given the Test of Adult Basic Education at intake, with enrollment and adult education as needed to address skill deficiencies that cause barriers to getting a job. Class is housed on-site at the center. Learners dual-enrolled in certification programs and GED® prep courses also engage in improving resumé skills, conduct mock interviews, and complete online job applications as part of technology skills acquisition strategies. All of our program's PluggedIn Virginia cohorts have gone through that integrated section of our program. It is also a part of

integrating education and training in the service area. This has had a positive effect on client retention, success rate, and job placement.

Mike Jenkins: Danielle, I would like to just speak a little bit about co-enrollment. When I speak of co-enrollment, I mean participants who are simultaneously enrolled in WIOA and adult education. And this is a very good mix because, and I'll back up a little bit, under WIOA and in our workforce system, we have a business services team that goes out and checks in the employer community so that we can kind of take the temperature out there to see what the employers' needs are and then bring them back to our partners and talk about what skills the employers are looking for and try to match that with their clients. This gives us an opportunity to take basic education and merge it with workforce training by having that, that input from the business community, we know what the needs are out there and, you know, we're not running around in confused circles trying to figure out what to do with our clients. We know that there are businesses out there hiring widget makers, for example; if we know that fact, then we can have those people ready to go into those jobs when they become open in our community.

Co-enrollment can also assist clients in other ways; there could be services, for example, that adult education can offer a client that we can't offer that client in WIOA and vice versa. So, by co-enrolling those folks, we can maximize the assistance we can give them; because if adult ed couldn't help with transportation, for example, then WIOA could help that client get transported from home to training or work and in return. So, we try to best match who can do what for our clients so that we can get the best end result for those folks and get them into situations where they're self-sufficient and can become productive members of our community. So those different types of services being able to mix and match and merge are very important; it allows us to maximize our resources to help these individuals to the fullest extent

Barbara Gibson: As I was listening to both of your responses to that last question, I was thinking that integration means more than just combining education and training, but it also includes an integration of a wide range of services with partner agencies so there is a more seamless provision of services and a more effective provision of services to all clients and students. From your experience, what advice can you give adult education programs and workforce boards and centers in other regions as they work together?

Danielle Robinson: Well, what we've learned is that legislation is just a start to building relationships. The key to sustaining partnerships is the people in a clear vision toward common goals. My advice to adult education program is to get involved with local businesses, to remain an advocate for the adult learner, and to remember always that lack of infrastructure in a rural area may mean that the relationships must start over with every new hire, which may cause gaps in service delivery. Retirement, or lack of funding can also interrupt partnerships. So the key, that I would advise any adult education program, is to remain active, remain engaged, and remain involved.

Mike Jenkins: Thank you, Danielle. I think from my experience and having worked with several other workforce programs down through the years, WIOA seems to have reached a peak of, as I mentioned earlier, coordination and collaboration and blending of services and resources, which leads us to form a seamless integration of services. So, when individuals walk into our centers,

the staff in those centers may represent three or four different entities, but that individual that has just walked in the door doesn't know who the adult ed person is; they don't know who the, say, the Virginia Employment Commission person is; they just know that there's somebody there to help them, and these individuals are cross-trained so that they can help folks whether it's a service that is from the agency that signs their paycheck or whether it's from their partner agency that's in the next desk. I think that's key.

Another key area is the Workforce Development Board; you know, within our combined planning process that both Danielle and I have spoken about today, we were required to develop career pathways, and currently we're in the process of developing career pathways in the areas of healthcare and IT. Those were two of the top occupations in demand that came as a result of the combined plan that we that we worked on last year. So, we've held two sessions in the Fredericksburg area one for each—one for healthcare one for IT. We've held one in the Northern Neck for healthcare scheduling, one for IT, and then we're going to move to the Middle Peninsula and have half-day sessions and get folks together in those two general employment areas to find out what it is that people need to be successful. And just to give you an example, the career pathway document itself will be something that career seekers, job seekers, can look at. And if they wanted to become a registered nurse, this resource, they can look at it and say: okay, this is the education level that I'm going to need to complete to become a registered nurse. Then there will also be labor market information on there about the availability of those jobs, what the salaries in those jobs are going to be. So we think this is going to be a great tool to have in all of our centers to share with all of our partners, so that they can inform clients when they come in that this is where you're going to need to be at this point in your life if you want to become a registered nurse (just to use that as an example).

The other thing, and Danielle kind of touched on it, but I would think moving forward, I think communication and education is key. The more we communicate with our partners, the more we educate one another on what we do and what everyone else does and just get together and share successes, share needs, share clients. I think the more sharing, communicating, and educating of one another that we do, the better we can provide services to the folks out there that, whether they need to get their GED® [credential] and move on from there, or whether they want to become that registered nurse. So I just think a true partnership amongst agencies that are in the general workforce field is only a good thing and it can help us all do a better job to help the folks that we're intended to help.

Barbara Gibson: It certainly sounds as if your organizations are working very well together and that each of you as individuals, as leaders in your organizations are also collaborating effectively to realize some of the goals of the plans that you've developed in your region. Thank you so much for sharing your goals, achievements, and vision for workforce development in your region. I really appreciate your being with us today!

Danielle Robinson: Thank you!

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