

Update on Adult Education Podcast
Episode 8: Voices from the Field
with Barbara Gibson, Marty Finsterbusch, and Dr. Margaret Patterson
July 2019

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Barbara Gibson: This afternoon we have with us Marty Finsterbusch from VALUEUSA and Dr. Margaret Patterson who has been working on a very important research project with VALUEUSA. Marty and Margaret, I'd like you to tell us a little bit about yourself, introduce yourselves, and let us know what you're doing, what your work is, and a little bit about your background.

Marty Finsterbusch: As you said, my name is Mary Finsterbush. I was a student in an adult education program. Over the years, I've worked in local programs, state levels, through the student voice in that capacity and now I'm the Executive Director of VALUE. So, I run the day-to-day operation of VALUEUSA, which we'll be talking more about later on.

Dr. Margaret Patterson: Thanks Marty. My name is Margaret Patterson. I am founding partner and senior researcher with Research Allies for Lifelong Learning. We are based in the D.C. metro area and we have a connection with Virginia, in that we're actually in Vienna, Virginia and Blacksburg, Virginia as well. And, we've been partnering with Marty and VALUEUSA since 2014 so about five years.

Barbara Gibson: I think the CAPE studies where you have actually interviewed students and non-students about their involvement with adult education programs, barriers that they might have had, and for those who have never taken that step, to sign up or enroll in adult education to find out what some of those reasons are and some of the barriers that those folks have had that have not enabled them to sign up and participate in adult education; it's something that I think we've long needed in adult education - that kind of research and quantifying some of the issues that we've all known. We've known them anecdotally, but we've never actually quantified some of these issues and concerns that our students have. And, I think the opportunity to learn from them in this way is, is really important. I think that's one of the things that we know VALUEUSA has brought to adult education and literacy is the student voice. And, of course, that's part of what VALUE stands for is voices of students.

Can you tell us about the mission of VALUEUSA and a little bit about the history and projects that you're working on?

Marty Finsterbusch: Yes. VALUE's mission is improving adult education through the students' voice and students' involvement. VALUE came about because adult learners started to get more involved in our field, but we didn't really communicate. We didn't work together. And so, when we looked at the field we said, "Hey, we need our voice and we need to be part of this." Because you're not going to solve adult education problems in United States without us. And so, VALUE started to develop.

And so, when research came around, we're like there's very little research for adult education but specifically from the students' viewpoint. And so, that's why VALUE supports this research because it's one of your unique research that actually talks to us, the students.

And so, VALUE's mission really is to improve adult basic education programs through adult learner involvement and leadership. And there's a lot of things we'll do which we can talk about a little bit later, what VALUE does. But, that's the main thrust is to improve adult ed.

Barbara Gibson: Maybe you could speak to the leadership programs that you have for adult learners so that they can become more involved and become advocates for adult ed and for other students in adult ed?

Marty Finsterbusch: Sure. So, right now one of the things that VALUE has developed is a leadership training program. It's not just for the adult learners. What we've learned is that even if an adult learner is a leader and wants to get more involved, they can't if their program doesn't believe in student involvement, or even know how to do it. A lot of people in our field, administrators or tutors or teachers, whatever, but they're not community builders. They're not the skilled builders. They're teaching academics. And so, one of the things VALUE has developed is a two-day, eight-[hour] training where we take administrators. We take staff. And we take adult learners from our program and we bring them together and we teach them critical thinking skills, organizing skills. But, it's really about program improvement.

And, we also have research, if you go to our website, that proves that this research, this project, will improve your program. And so, that's one of the biggest things we're doing and we're trying to now create the train-the-trainer manual so we can actually market it across the United States instead of me as the director running around doing these trainings and programs, programs will be able to do their own evaluation improving their own programs in the near future.

We also have our own national conference which we call the Leadership Institute. We do it every other year. We just had one in this past June in Orlando. Every four years, we're in Washington D.C. And what we do is then, we actually go meet with senators and House of Representatives, the adult learners, and they get to meet us directly. So, it's not other people saying, "Well, my students will we benefit from this?" We were able to speak for ourselves and give our viewpoint of what is going on in adult education. It's totally different and when the politicians hear that it's us, the adult learners in there, they come. They actually come.

So, there are two of the biggest things that we do. But basically, what we are is a resource center. So, what I mean by that is if you're an adult learner leader and you want to get more involved, how do you do it? Who do you talk to? And so, VALUE is that collecting rod. So, if you're a director and you want to get students more active in your program, how do you do it? It's constantly reinventing the wheel. If you call VALUE, we can help you and say, "Well, what are you planning? Well, you know what, that worked here. Don't do that because this is why. Try this." And so, we are the only group collecting student involvement and how do you do it in the United States and helping programs to do that.

Barbara Gibson: How many members do you have?

Marty Finsterbusch: Well, it varies because a membership could be just one adult learner or, for example, OASIS is a statewide student organization in Delaware which you have lots of members. Well, that's one membership. Florida Coalition is a member of VALUE. That's one membership, but it gives us access to all the programs in there. So, we're a vast network not necessarily a high number. Does that make sense?

Barbara Gibson: It certainly does. Because they reach hundreds if not thousands of students and others.

Marty Finsterbusch: Right. So, if we do an e-blast, it goes out to about, over 2,000 people get it and programs get across the United States. But, they're not necessarily all members, but our network ability is clear across the United States at all levels. So, we're operating on a national level, but we can be asked by a local program to help us or we could be asked by a state level to, "Hey, can you help us think this out?" So, VALUE is actually helping a lot of national initiatives that are going on right now like the XPRIZE. VALUE's on the advisory board for that. We have, oh my God, my brain is burning out of long days. Help me out with Miami, next week.

Dr. Margaret Patterson: Career Pathways

Marty Finsterbusch: Career Pathways Festival. So, VALUE's been behind the scenes talking with them and helping them also behind. So, we do a lot of things that people don't see. We're behind the scenes. The other organizations come and talk to VALUE and we help them out. But we're not, most people don't know we exist.

Barbara Gibson: So, VALUE has been an organization for a little over 20 years now?

Marty Finsterbusch: Yes, so we got our 501 C 3 in March of 2020. There was another little organization right before VALUE of adult learners, but that's how we learned how to run our own organization. Like, we didn't, it didn't succeed, but it taught us. But actually, the federal government created VALUEUSA. Most people did not know that, that NIFL, the National Institute for Literacy. They looked at their field of adult ed and said, "What is missing in adult ed?" And they realized what was missing was the adult learner voice. So, the federal government gave a \$25,000 grant to create a national student organization and what came out of that was VALUE. And so, very few people don't realize that the federal government created this organization.

Barbara Gibson: But it is a non-profit?

Marty Finsterbusch: Oh yeah. We're a 501 C 3. They gave seed money. They have a first meeting, And so, we brought 50 adult learners from around the United States to a place called Highlander. I don't know if you ever heard of Highlander in the mountains of Tennessee. Martin Luther King went there. Rosa Parks went there two days or two weeks before she gave, refused to give up her seat on the bus. So, you had fifty adult learners sitting in rocking chairs

in a circle creating VALUEUSA. So, that's where we started with them - grassroots. And so, we have an amazing history that, yeah, we don't share that enough.

Barbara Gibson: I've never heard that before. That's a wonderful story. Do you have any film or video from that first meeting?

Marty Finsterbusch: I don't have film or videos. I'm sure there's pictures out there. We try to collect some of that stuff. So, I haven't been good at that, but we have an amazing history. If you ever get to Highlander, the students got together and we donated a rocking chair. And on that rocking chair is a plaque with our name on it, since we started there. So, if you ever get to Highlander, there's a rocking chair with our plaque on it.

Barbara Gibson: That's wonderful. That's a very exciting story because Highlander has really been an organization and kind of an idea that has informed southern public education for adults for many years. So, that is a wonderful thing that VALUE had that opportunity to be born there basically.

Marty Finsterbusch: Yep, we were.

Barbara Gibson: So that's wonderful. Well, I know there are many other things that you're involved in but we particularly want to hear about the CAPE study today and maybe you could just tell us a little bit about why you decided to get funding for that study and what the purpose of it is.

Marty Finsterbusch: I'll share a little bit of that and then I'll turn it over to Margaret because she can give her perspective on why. But for VALUE, the point was, again I mentioned earlier, is that there is very little research for adult ed. We don't have a national research database organization. We don't have collecting. So, and now the federal government, they always say, well, where's your research? Where's your research? And so, I've always wanted to research student involvement because we know it works. We can prove it but we don't have research. And so, when an opportunity came out with Margaret, we would like to be able to research from the student perspective. What do the students think? What is, because I think that's what we should be generating, the way we should operate? So, when a grant chance came up to write a grant to Dollar General to do this, we jumped on it because we've always been wanting research from the student perspective. The field just needs research. We don't have research proving what we're doing and specifically, the students. And so, it felt like, not a marriage, but it felt like that this needs to be done. And so, when Margaret came up with the suggestions, we were all for this. We want to do this. Now, she may have a different view on that so I'll turn the mic over to her to see what she has to say on that.

Dr. Margaret Patterson: Thanks Marty. So, how did this come about and why? Approximately ten years ago I was sitting in my office one evening at GED Testing Service® and I was just looking at some data on the target population and who we were serving. I kept seeing percentages like "Oh, in the state it's 4% and that state it's 5% or 2%" and I'm like what? Really? That's all we're serving? And, I said, "That can't be right". And so, I started looking in census data and other federal sources to try to get a handle on what was going on and I realized,

yeah, that was right. Those small percentages were definitely accurate. And so, if we put together all the funded adult education programs that are serving adults, the literacy programs, and pretty much everything that's out there, we might be touching maybe 10% of who we should be. And so, I had the opportunity later on, much later on – the paper came out in 2018 - to look at PEOC data which is a large-scale data set and look at the U.S. data and figure out that we are not serving 90% of the adults that we could be serving. I called that paper "The Forgotten 90%" because I really feel that those people have not been researched for many many years, decades if you will. There was a little activity back in the 1980s, but as Marty just said, there's very little research in adult education anyway - and virtually nothing in this area.

And so, we determined that that was something that we should take a look at. What's going on with this 90%? What do we need to learn? I was particularly interested in the barriers and the reasons that they gave for not participating. What was holding them back? Beyond that we wanted to get at what I would call the root causes. And so, we used a technique in our interviews when we went out and talked with these adults to find out. They would say, "Well, I have this reason." And then I would say, "Well, tell me about that. Why is it that way?" And then they would explain it. And then I would say, "Alright, well why is it that way?" And just kind of peel back the layers until you get to the ultimate cause behind it. The catch is we collected more than 1,900 excerpts of data of reasons that people gave and so we managed to write three reports from that really great stuff.

But, there's so much more to tap into that we would like to. The other piece about this that I think is really, really important is we didn't just find the barriers. Many people have found barriers. We know barriers like transportation and childcare, people feeling stigmatized, things like that. We've known about those for years. But, in addition to getting to the root causes, we also asked those adults to identify for us, "What do you think the solutions are?" So, most of these people were middle aged, unemployed, earning less than \$18,000 a year. They're not people with million-dollar solutions. They're people that come up with solutions that may cost a hundred dollars or a thousand dollars or nothing at all. We found a number of low-cost solutions that they recommended. And I think that's really a strength of, of what came out of this.

The last thing I want to mention that we found in doing the research is we asked them, we gave them surveys before the interviews and we asked them, "How are you using technology?" because we knew that that was an important piece of maybe how we could reach more people to move the needle on that 90 percent. We asked them how they value education? Is it important to them? Is it something they want? And then we asked them how they prefer to learn because we thought that would give us good insights into reaching them and it's not just about reaching them and getting them in, it's keeping them there so that they finish the program and meet their educational goals.

Barbara Gibson: You had mentioned the PEOC study and perhaps you could tell our listeners a little bit about that just a very short definition what it is and what it includes because not all of us are aware of that.

Dr. Margaret Patterson: Sure. So as I said, we looked at the U.S. data. It's a multinational data set. It was commissioned by OECD, which is an organization based in Belgium that captures world economic indicators. And every ten years or so, they decide to do a look internationally to see what's happening in terms of workforce participation and adult education. It deals primarily with adults age 16 to 65, so those who are working age.

Barbara Gibson: Thank you. That's very helpful. Marty, we'll go back to you. When we in adult education have student-centered programming as one of our stated kind of core principles of the work that we do, why has it been so hard for most of us to actually be student-centered in our work?

Marty Finsterbusch: Funding, funding, funding, funding, funding, and perspective. We have a lot of requirements on administrators and a lot of times student-centered, it's different thinking and it's different requirements. And so, I find it's a mindset to make it happen more and it's the little things, inviting adult learners into your program, to move from not just student-centered "here's your student sitting in a classroom". It's students as the intake. Students doing some of the tutor training. It's adult learners now moving on helping, becoming on your board. It's adult learners, so it's the center, is not just sitting in the classroom. Student-centered is your whole entire everything.

Let's put it this way. Everything your program is doing, there's no reason why a former or a present adult learner could not do that job. And so, it is changing a mindset. If you truly want student-centered, you need to change that mindset. And so, there's the problem. If you're only looking at student-centered in teaching, reading, and writing but nothing else, it's not going to happen in that program. And that's why it hasn't happened in the field because you need to change the way you're thinking. You need to look at the adult learners in your program or getting ready to leave your program as a vast asset to improve your program and to change it.

That's why, and so that's why our field has been struggling when they keep on saying student-centered. Student-centered what? Just in teaching reading and writing? Or, what about all the other critical thinking skills, organizing skills, and diversity? And that's, I think, the catch for our field. They haven't gone beyond that.

Barbara Gibson: So, hopefully the CAPE study will help us as adult educators to change our perspectives. I think many of us have over the years in small ways for community-based organizations maybe having a student or two on our boards or on a program committee or something like that, but you're really talking about reorganizing adult education and literacy programs so that students are involved in every part of the operation and the management.

Marty Finsterbusch: So, is the field only here to teach reading and writing in English? Or, is it to give the people the basic skills that they need to survive in and flash, fly, I can't say that word.

Barbara Gibson: Flourish?

Marty Finsterbusch: Flourish, in our society. And so, if we're only about saying if we just give someone a reading skill, we just teach them English, their life will be better. It's more than that. It's the whole person. It's community. So, who's teaching the community? How do you operate? So, teaching structures by inviting the adult learners into our programs to be part of the program. The program becomes part of the community and the community becomes part of the program. But, look at all the skills setting that you're teaching, which is transferable to the workforce. So, you're inviting adult learners in to help different pieces of your program. It will enrich your program. The students that come in will see other donors, but they're getting critical skills that will make them adjust to our society more, make them adjust to the workplace more. Because who's teaching that? You're waiting till we get to reading levels up to whatever level and then all minds are going to have all these social skills and all the communication skills and how to work with others?

And so, really, it behooves our field to think globally in education. It's not just reading and writing. It's the whole nine yards and workplace literacy is more becoming an effort in adult ed. What do you need? You need to be able to critical think. You need to be able to work with other people. Need to be able to work on your things. So, why aren't we teaching that while we're teaching reading and writing? Why is it just reading and writing first and then we'll get to these other things that the person needs to survive in our society. Why is it not blended together? At the same time, the programs realized that the students is that resource that will help you do more things in your program. And so, it is all, all together.

Barbara Gibson: So, it really does. You really are advocating for most of us in adult ed. Those would be sweeping changes. How would you advise programs to use these results to advocate for improvement in their programs and also for additional funding?

Marty Finsterbusch: For example, for this research. That's more of the intake. Why are people are not coming into your programs? Before someone came into a program and they dropped out before the first 12 hours or whatever. Well, they weren't interested. They weren't ready to learn. Guess what? The truth is programs are being evaluated by the adult learners and saying, "This is not going to work for me." And that's why they're leaving. It's not that they're not interested. The program didn't fit their needs and whatever.

So, wouldn't it behoove the field to do this kind of research and ask the adult learners, "Well, why aren't you coming in?" What's things so we can then eliminate some of the barriers to keeping them from staying. Um, you know, just giving adult learner a survey of your program and say, "Here's a survey. Fill it out." The teacher's good. The students are not going to tell you verbally because there's all the power structure, class structure, all the other structure. But if you train a couple of adult learners in your program to do evaluation or collect data. You will find out really what the students think about your program and what it really needs to improve to meet the needs of the clients. Isn't that what we're supposed to be here? To meet the needs of the students? Not the students filling seats to meet the needs of their programs. So, it's really this research and another is flipping their turn about. If the programs are for adult learners, shouldn't we be talking to them?

Barbara Gibson: How would you suggest, and Margaret you can chime in on this too, that adult education programs, program managers, teachers, board members, and community-based organizations and others who would be involved in overseeing and directing programs, not only use the CAPE study (because I think that's a good beginning), but also use the resource that are the students that you've been describing to inform their program improvement plans, their general planning, and also their advocacy?

Marty Finsterbusch: I'll let Margaret go first before I keep on going because yes there's ways of doing that.

Dr. Margaret Patterson: So, I think the power behind the CAPE Study is, is really the solutions that are offered. And, if programs can take a deep look at that. We have three reports that are available on VALUEUSA's website and on researchallies.org website as well. If people take a look at those.

In Virginia, they've been doing study circles for the last six months or so looking specifically in a very deep dive on the CAPE findings. What does that mean for recruitment? What does that mean for retention? Because you can get somebody in the door but as Marty said, if they don't stay, they're evaluating something and that's something maybe something that the program isn't even aware of. So, taking the time to, to look at the findings and to really say, "Alright, how does this apply to our program? How can we take what these adults are saying they need and make sure it gets in our program?" And that all of our messaging gives them that sense that "Yeah, if I go there I'll get what I need. I won't have to walk." And, that's the power, but the key is going to be getting that into practice. Having programs and even States make the commitment to do that.

We did the research in Virginia. It was one of our states. But, we also went to Kansas and Florida and Louisiana and Ohio. So, it's not just one state. I think the results speak to what's happening in, in many of the states in the USA. And so, to the extent that state directors and program directors can look at those results, I think it will give them a lot of powerful insights to make a change.

Marty Finsterbusch: The CAPE study is just the beginning. We need a lot more of this research. We need to find more funders and to do more of this. Because don't forget, our field, we've been doing the work for years. But, it's again, to solve this we need to bring in the player and the player is the adult learner. We need to get what they see in their view and create the programs that way. So, this research is just the beginning, in my mind, that we need to do.

I'm hoping that other funders and other groups will look at this and say, "Wow! Just look at the small work. We should be doing a bigger thing on this. More research on it." Because it will really then drive the way it goes because everything you hear out of Washington D.C.'s is, "Where's your research?" And so, I'm hoping this is just the beginning. Because that will drive the way that adult ed should be moving in the future.

Barbara Gibson: Well, I know that you've already had several reports that have been out and they're on the website as you mentioned. What further reports will be released and when do you expect that?

Dr. Margaret Patterson: So right now, this summer, I managed to scrape together a few pennies from the last grant that we had and I have two interns working with me over the summer. They're both doctoral students and neither one of them is from an adult ed background, but they're pretty well convinced that it's definitely worth our while doing.

And so, we've been working this summer on support systems. That was one of the recommendations from adults because many of them come from communities that don't value education or they come from families where the family doesn't support them in education or maybe doesn't support them in anything. There were some very sad even angry stories that people had to share. And so, because they lack those support systems, one of their recommendations was, "Could we have elements of support in adult education?" That that would make the difference for them. It could be peer-to-peer support. It could be support groups such as, like, grief support. Things like that. It could even be support with issues that they have financially or with their children. So, we're working on a paper on support systems this summer. I expect that to be out probably fall or winter. It always depends on the publication process. It takes time.

Going back to those 1900 excerpts that I mentioned. We have so much more that we know of in root causes that we can talk about and the solutions that go with it. So, it's just a matter of I don't have enough hours in my day. But we will continue to analyze those data and put out reports because as Marty said, the governments need to know that this has been researched and that they've followed proper scientific procedures which we have. And so, we need to take the time to do that and research does take an incredible amount of time. So, we're going keep chipping away at it as time permits. And, not sure. I don't have a schedule. I don't have a number of reports that ultimately will come out of it, but we'll continue to keep spreading the word on it.

Barbara Gibson: Well, I think that sounds good. What I have read so far has been very helpful and I think you're right Marty when you say that we've, and Margaret too. You both said, "We've known these things for a while but they've all been anecdotal for the most part". And to be able to actually quantify some things and to do really solid research is certainly innovative in our field. I think that more and more, I know, that more and more donors are asking for that kind of back up information when any organization asks for funding or applies for a grant.

So, this not only helps VALUE in furthering your research and your projects, but I would think that if all of our directors, community-based and adult ed directors, use these materials in their grant applications, it will really strengthen the approaches that they take to ask for funding for various projects because we have not had this kind of information before. We certainly could all talk about most of these things.

But, we haven't had directly from students in a scientifically-based research approach and I really commend you for this and I think it's a huge step for the field of adult education and

literacy to have this beginning study because you're right. There are many more questions, I think, as all of us read this. We're probably going to be sending you other questions that we have. And that might help to spur some other grant applications and from some future research projects. I'm hoping that that will be the case because I think this is something that's important for our field.

Thank you so much Marty and Margaret for being with us today and sharing this wonderful project and also the great work that you're doing and just in general with VALUEUSA. It's, you know, I know you talk about when the organization was formally created, but I know you were working really hard probably for at least ten years before that. So Marty, you should be very proud of where you've come today. So, thank you. very much and we look forward to more from the CAPE study and more from VALUE USA.

Thank you.

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This transcript has been edited for clarity and may not reflect the audio-recording verbatim.