

Swanson, R. A., & Mosier, N.R. (1983). Adult education in America. Training, 20(10), 54-55, 58-60, 64, 66, 68.

# ADULT EDUCATION IN AMERICA

By Richard A. Swanson and Nancy R. Mosier

**(Editor's note: TRAINING's 1983 survey of human resources development activity in the United States, presented in the first section of this special issue, draws a comprehensive picture of the training provided by and/or paid for by employers for their employees. TRAINING's surveys, like the magazine itself, focus on training and HRD as they relate to the work place.**

We asked organizations about the types and amounts of training they sponsor. In 1981, the U.S. Bureau of the Census attacked the broader issue of adult education, in all its forms, by asking adults about the types and amounts of training and education they receive. Until recently, the resulting data went largely unnoticed. Among the number-crunchers who have put their computers to work on this enormous data base are Anthony P. Carnevale and Harold Goldstein. Their report, "Employee Training: Its Changing Role and an Analysis of New Data," was released in June of this year and is available from the American Society for Training and Development.

Several months ago, TRAINING asked Richard A. Swanson and Nancy R. Mosier to delve into the government's data base independently and to outline the "big picture" of adult education into which organizational-training activities fit.

Swanson and Mosier were well suited to the task. He is a professor of industrial education at the University of Minnesota and currently is serving as editor of the Performance & Instruction Journal, the publication of the National Society for Performance and Instruction (NSPI). She is a curriculum designer for Control Data Corp. and a doctoral student at the same university. The authors wish to acknowledge a debt to the Carnevale-Goldstein report for some information on employer-provided training and to the Northern States Power Co. for financial support they received for conducting their own research.

Their analysis not only sheds new light on the government's census data, it provides a backdrop against which to view TRAINING's findings about HRD activities in U.S. organizations.)

In May 1981 the U.S. Bureau of the Census conducted a Current Population Survey (CPS) of approximately 77,000 households. The survey obtained information on 171,000 United States residents 14 years of age or older. A number of questions asked in the census focused on adult education.

For the purpose of the CPS, adult education was defined as "organized learning to meet the unique needs of persons beyond the compulsory school age who have terminated or interrupted their formal schooling." Interviewers for the CPS visited a scientifically chosen sample of households throughout 461 geographic areas of the country.

We obtained a copy of the resulting data tape from the Bureau of the Census and, using University of Minnesota computers, reanalyzed the data for a smaller sample of individuals.

The adult education portion of the CPS was limited to individuals who were not full-time students and who did take part in at least one "organized" adult education course or activity between May 1, 1980 and April 30, 1981. To make this report more interesting and applicable to American industry and business, we further limited the sample to individuals who were over the age of 17 and not retired. Our final sample included 11,488 individuals who provided information on 28,170 courses.

As the reader examines the following data, therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the "universe" we're talking about represents only about 6.7% of all Americans over the age of 14; that is, 6.7% of all respondents were over 17, not retired, and had participated in at least one adult education activity. Clearly, the vast majority of adults took no courses at all.

Survey respondents were asked to provide information about the most recent courses or activities (up to four) in which they were involved during the past year. Among the questions asked were:

1. In what general subject-matter area was this course?
2. What was your main reason for taking this course?
3. Did you take this course to meet a requirement for obtaining a certificate, diploma or degree? If so, what type?
4. Who provided the instruction for this course?
5. Was the instruction provided by your employer for employees in your organization?
6. Who paid for this course?
7. How much did you and your family pay for tuition and required fees?

The answers to these questions provided by our restricted sample form the basis for the following sections of this report.

The data provide some new insights into adult education and confirm many widely held generalizations that previously could not be validated.

It will not surprise TRAINING readers to learn that:

- Employed people participate in adult education more than do unemployed people.
  - More white-collar workers enroll in adult education courses than do blue-collar workers.
  - Most participants took courses to advance in their current jobs.
  - Business and government mostly train their own employees.
- On the other hand, you may be surprised that:
- A higher percentage of females than males participate in adult education.
  - People with associate degrees participate more than those with baccalaureate degrees.
  - Farm workers took more courses than blue-collar workers.
  - Finance industry workers participate less than those in the construction industry.

Employer-sponsored training is only one piece of the adult-education pie. What does the whole pie look like? We asked two researchers to examine U.S. government census data and find out.

• Individuals contribute more frequently to the costs of adult education than do employers.

At the composite level, the person most likely to participate in adult education is a full-time, employed female with two years of college education. She holds a white-collar job in a manufacturing industry. During 1980-81 she took two courses from a four-year college or university. She did not take those courses for credit toward certification. She paid less than \$50 in tuition and fees for each course. And she lives on the West Coast.

At a more detailed level, the following sections of this report on "Adult Education in America" are focused on the classic questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how as they apply to adult learning.

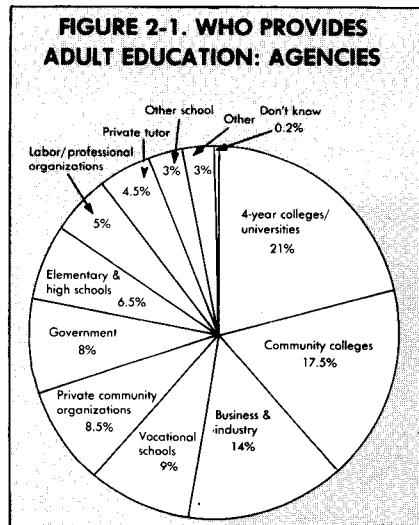
## WHO PROVIDES IT?

**B**usinesses, industries, labor groups and professional organizations provide a substantial number of adult education courses. The 1981 U.S. Census data suggest that about 19% of all courses taken were offered by these organizations.

But employers and trade groups are not the only organizations that provide adult education. In fact, the most likely provider is a four-year college or university that offers job-related training.

Participants in the Current Population Survey (CPS) were asked several questions about the most recent courses they had taken. Among those questions was: "Who provided the instruction for this course?" Participants chose from the list of categories shown in Figure 2-1.

According to the CPS data, most adult education courses are provided by formal educational institutions such as universities, vocational colleges, and elementary and high schools. As Figure 2-1 shows, the largest proportion (21%) of adult education courses was provided by four-year colleges



and universities. Community colleges were next, providing about 17.5% of all courses, and businesses were third with 14%.

Several of the CPS agencies can be grouped into larger units for comparison.

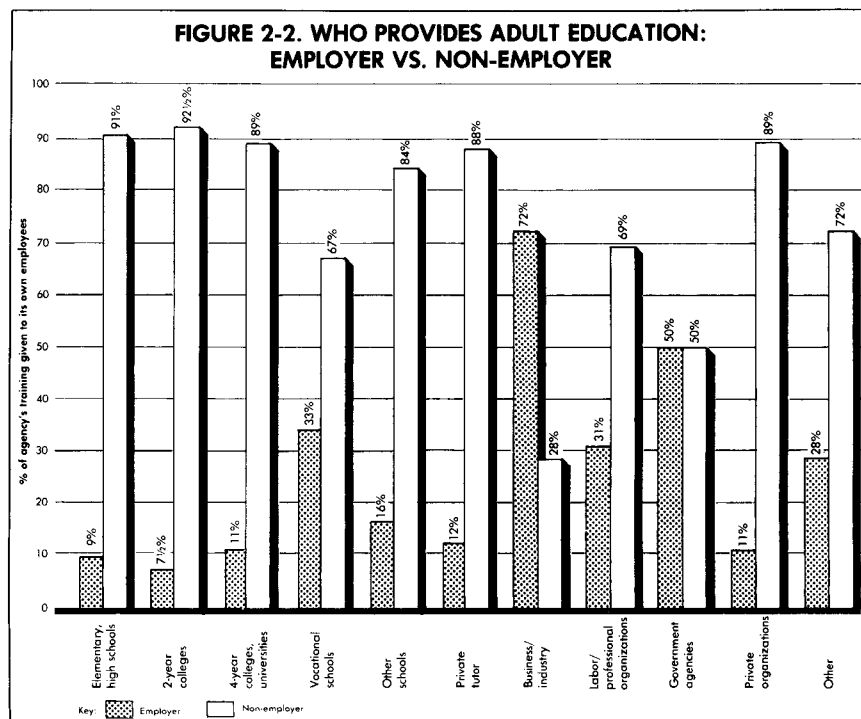
son. When all formal educational institutions are lumped together, for example, they provide 57% of all adult education courses. Similarly, 27% of all courses were provided by business and industry, labor/professional organizations and government agencies. The remaining courses were provided by private tutors, community organizations and other sources.

### Employer-provided Training

How does employer-sponsored training fit into the picture? Figure 2-2 indicates that in most instances, adult education courses were provided by a nonemployer. And not surprisingly, only two providers, businesses and government agencies, conducted a majority of their training programs for their own employees. Perhaps the most interesting finding here is that business and industry conduct more than a fourth of their training programs for *nonemployees*.

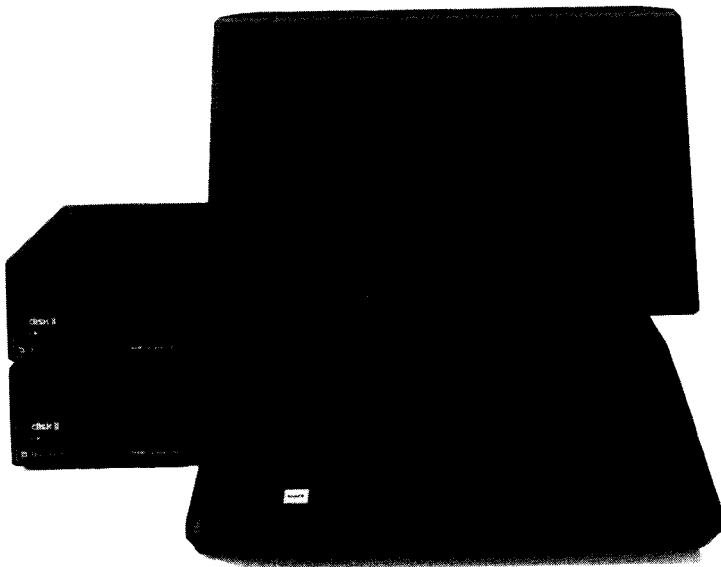
### Job-related Training

About 61% of the courses taken



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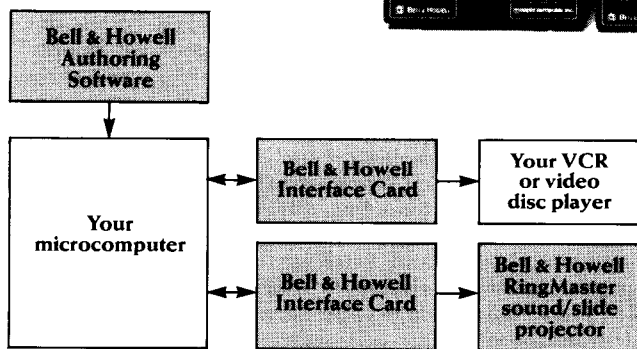
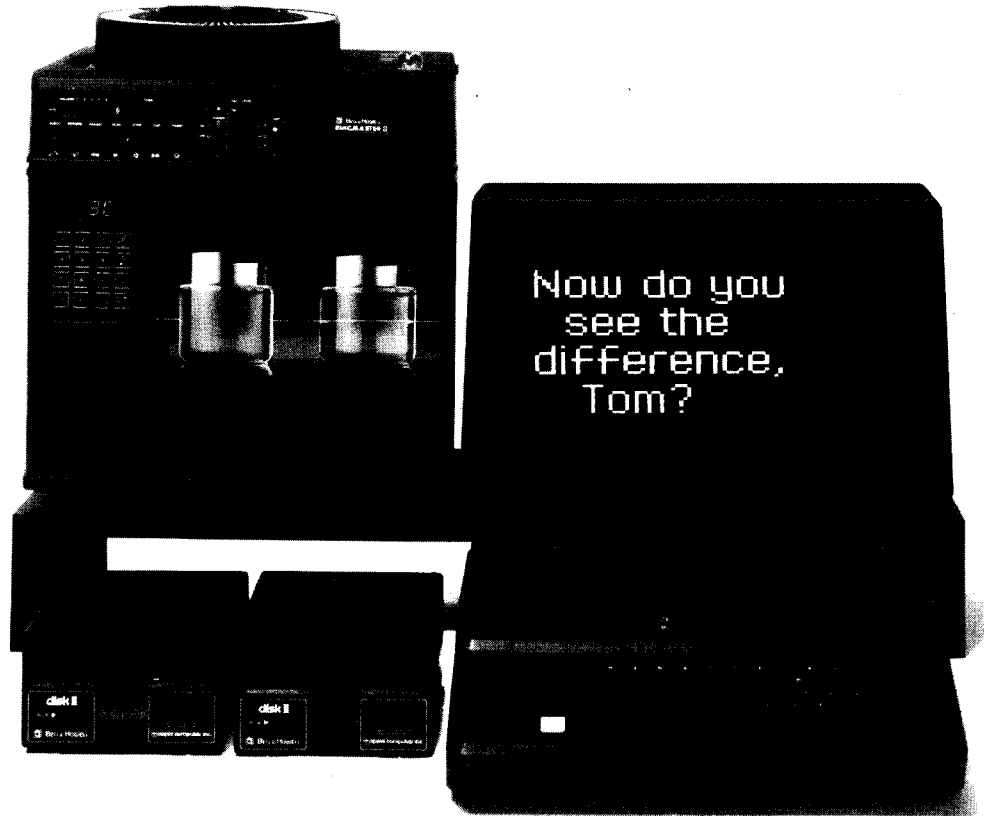
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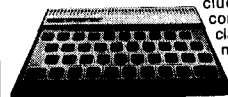
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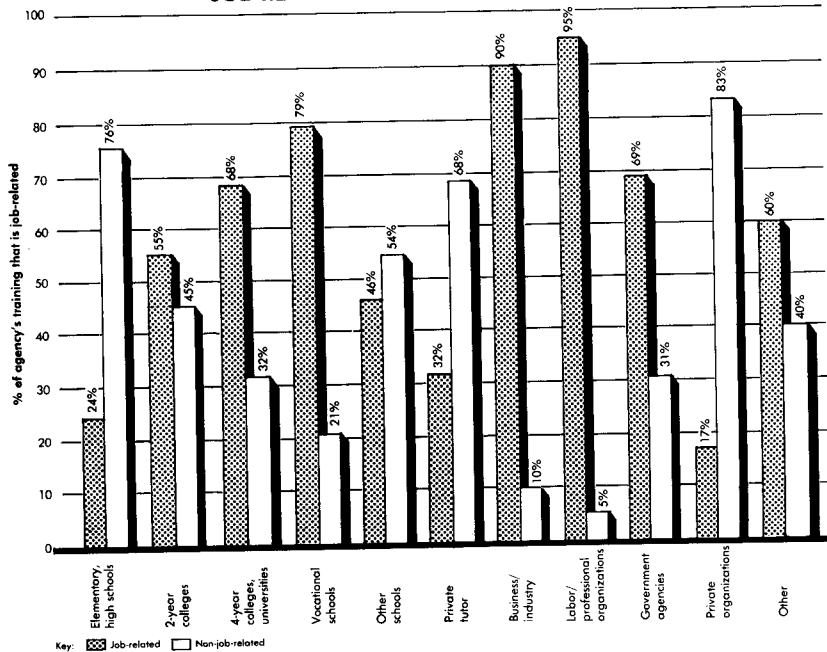


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FIGURE 2-3. WHO PROVIDES ADULT EDUCATION:  
JOB-RELATED VS. NON-JOB-RELATED



were considered job-related—that is, respondents said the courses would improve their skills for a current job or help prepare them for a new job. Of those, the largest proportions of courses were provided by four-year colleges and universities (23%) and by business and industry (20%). Two-year colleges and technical institutes provided about 15% of all job-related training courses. Vocational, trade and business schools provided an additional 12%. Figure 2-3 shows more detailed breakdowns.

Interestingly, two-year colleges and technical institutes provided the largest amount (21%) of non-job-related training courses. Four-year colleges and universities provided 17% and private and community organizations provided 18%.

As expected, businesses and labor/professional organizations were much more likely to offer job-related than non-job-related courses. Fully 90% of the courses offered by businesses and 95% of the courses offered by labor and professional organizations were taken for job-related reasons.

Private community organizations, elementary and high schools, and private tutors were more likely to provide non-job-related courses. Between 68% and 83% of the courses taken from these agencies were taken for non-job-related reasons.

## WHO PARTICIPATES?

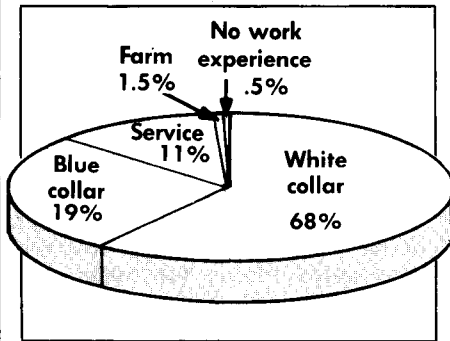
People who tend to become involved in adult education are not necessarily those who need it most. In looking at the overall profile of participants, the old cliché “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” comes to mind. Education, one of the great equalizers in our nation, can also serve to create gaps rather than to close them.

Compared to formal post-secondary schooling, adult education and training are purposefully nonthreatening and relatively inexpensive—obvious avenues by which to close those knowledge gaps. Seen in this light, the data are not heartening, but they are not all that surprising. For example, although white-collar workers make up only 50% of the labor force, they represented 68% of all people who participated in some form of adult education. At the other extreme, people with no work experience represented only 0.5% of adult education participants. Figure 2-4 shows the remaining breakdowns.

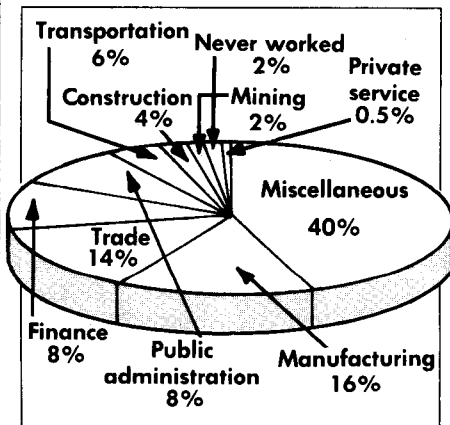
Industry classification is another way of viewing “employee group” participation in adult education. The Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system was used to produce the breakdowns illustrated in Figure 2-5.

The manufacturing industry classification had the highest segment of participation at 16%. The size of the manufacturing and trade segments of the economy, along with the willingness of workers and their employers to participate in continuing education and training, makes them stand out from the other classifications.

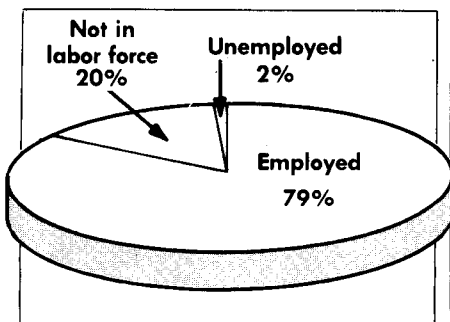
**FIGURE 2-4. WHO PARTICIPATES IN ADULT EDUCATION BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP**



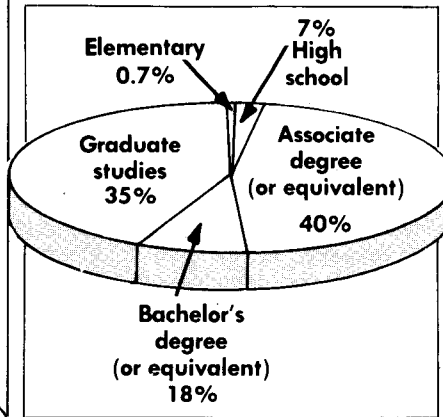
**FIGURE 2-5. WHO PARTICIPATES IN ADULT EDUCATION BY INDUSTRY CLASSIFICATION**



**FIGURE 2-6. WHO PARTICIPATES (ONE COURSE OR MORE) IN ADULT EDUCATION BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS**



**FIGURE 2-7. WHO PARTICIPATES IN ADULT EDUCATION BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL**



The employment-status comparisons also are striking. Of those participating in adult education, 79% were employed, 20% not in the labor market (e.g., handicapped, homemakers and so on), and 2% unemployed.

Another factor that seems to affect the likelihood that a person will participate in adult education is the amount of formal education the person has had. Generally, more formal education increases the likelihood of participation in adult education (Figure 2-7). It is interesting to note the high participation by those with associate degrees (40%).

This typically skilled segment of the work force has specialized knowledge that tends to need periodic updating. It is reasonable to assume that the

training and education activities of these people are focused toward that end.

Overall, women participate in adult education at a higher rate than men. They constitute a majority (57%) of the participants. Another relationship—this one discovered by E.R. Kay of the National Center for Educational Statistics—has to do with income: As income increases, participation in adult education increases.

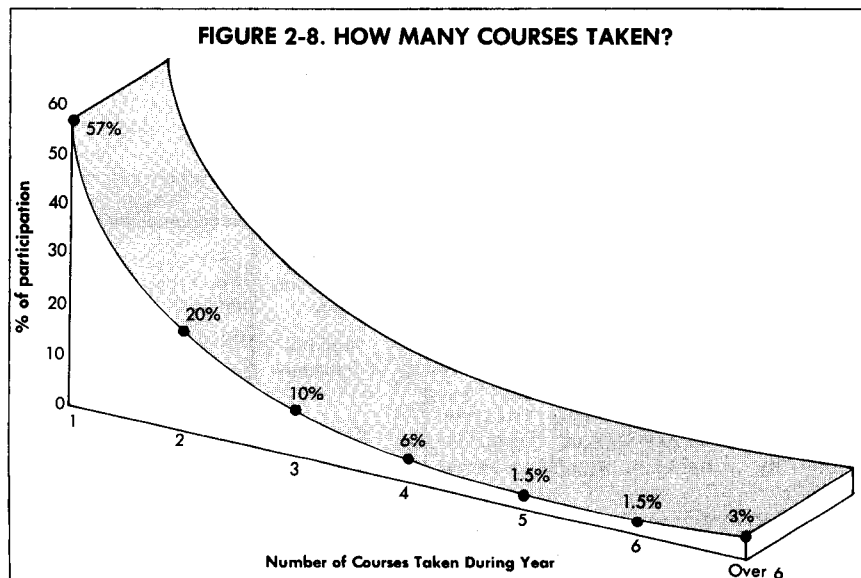
### HOW MUCH?

Moderation seems to sum up the attitude of U.S. census respondents toward adult education. Although a few people in the sample took more than 20 courses or activities during the year, Figure 2-8 shows that most respondents who took any courses at all took only one (57%) or two (20%). Only about 3% of the sample took more than six courses.

There are no practical differences between men and women in the number of courses taken. On the average, women took 1.9 courses during the year and men took 1.8.

Although the typical participant in adult education is much more likely to be employed than unemployed (see Figure 2-6), there is little difference in the number of courses the individuals in either category are likely to take. People with full-time jobs took an average of 1.9 courses during the year. Unemployed people took an average

**FIGURE 2-8. HOW MANY COURSES TAKEN?**



of 1.7 courses, as did people not in the work force.

There is significant variation, however, if we look at educational levels. As Table 2A shows, the average number of courses taken increases as the participants' education level rises.

A similar trend is seen among the major occupational groups (Table 2B). We were struck particularly by the indication that people in farm occupations took more courses than blue-collar workers.

Education Level	Average No. of Courses Taken
Elementary	1.2
High school	1.5
Associate degree	1.6
Bachelor's degree	2.1
Graduate studies	2.2

Occupational Group	Average No. of Courses Taken
White collar	2.0
Service	2.0
Farm	1.8
Blue collar	1.6
No work experience	1.4

The following profile emerges from these figures. Respondents were most likely to participate in two adult education courses during the year. These courses were most likely post-baccalaureate courses taken by white-collar or service workers.

### WHAT DO THEY TAKE?

The U.S. census survey asked respondents to classify the subject matter of each adult education course they took. As Table 2C shows, business courses were much more popular than those in any other subject area.

Men were most likely to take courses in either business (25% of all courses taken by men) or engineering (19%). Women were most likely to take courses in business (21% of all courses taken by women) or health sciences (13%).

Similar trends appear when subject choices are broken down according to employment status. Employed people

took 25% of their courses in business and 11% each in engineering and health sciences. Unemployed people took 26% of their courses in business. Among participants who were not in the labor force, the most popular subjects involved the arts (12%), physical education (12%) and business (11%).

An analysis by occupational categories yielded similar results. White-collar workers took the largest percentage of their courses (28%) in business. Blue-collar workers took the largest percentage (28%) in engineering and engineering technology. The most common subject for service workers was health care (19%), although social sciences also were popular (12%). And as expected, farm workers took courses primarily in agriculture (28%).

Only four of the 11 agencies providing adult education offered large percentages of courses in areas other than business. Elementary and high schools offered the largest proportion (15%) of their courses in education. Private tutors offered high percentages of their courses in art (30%) and physical education (20%). Private or-

ganizations offered 35% of their courses in philosophy. And although vocational schools offered 21% of their courses in business, 30% were offered in health care.

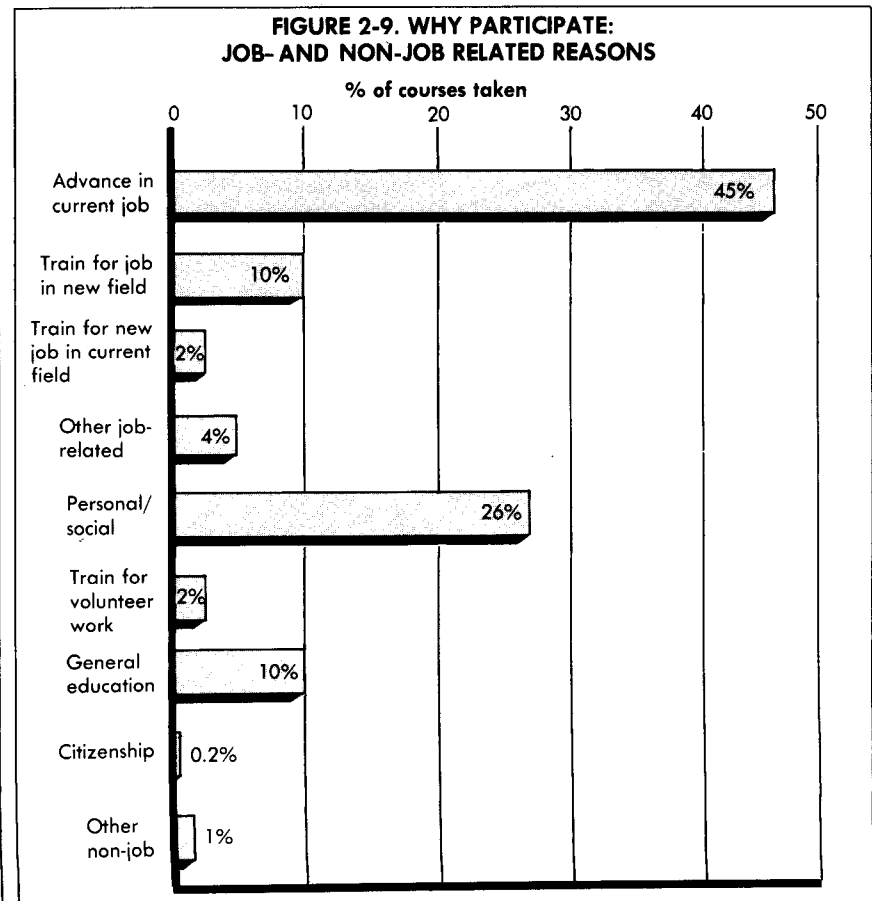
### WHY DO THEY DO IT?

There are, of course, many reasons for participating in adult education. In the Current Population Survey (CPS), however, participants' motives were classified according to two major breakdowns: 1) Was the course job-related or non-job-related? 2) Did the course meet a requirement for obtaining a certificate, diploma or degree?

#### Job-related vs. Personal Reasons

Among the questions participants in the CPS were asked was: "What was your main reason for taking this course?" The list of choices included the categories shown in Figure 2-9.

The first four choices clearly can be grouped together and called "job-related." The last five choices, collec-







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tively, can be called "non-job-related."

About 66% of all courses were taken for job-related reasons. Of those, a vast majority were taken to advance in the current job.

Non-job-related reasons accounted for the remaining 34% of courses taken. The most common non-job-related reason for taking a course was "personal or social"—a category that includes motives related to things such as community activity, home and family life, personal development, or social and recreational interests. Notice that personal or social reasons were given for almost two-thirds of the non-job-related courses, and accounted for 25% of all courses taken.

Men were more inclined to take courses for job-related reasons than

were women. About 70% of all courses taken by men were for job-related reasons, compared to about 55% of the courses taken by women. Women were much more likely to take courses for "personal and social" reasons; that category accounted for approximately 34% of all courses taken by women.

Employment status had a predictable effect on whether people took courses for reasons relating to jobs (Table 2D). But note that the 68% job-related figure for people with full-time jobs compares to a 54% figure for those who were looking for work.

A dramatic trend becomes obvious

**TABLE 2D. WHY PARTICIPATE:  
EMPLOYMENT STATUS**

Employment Status	Job-Related	Non-Job-Related
Employed	68%	35%
Unemployed	54%	46%
Not in labor force	31%	69%

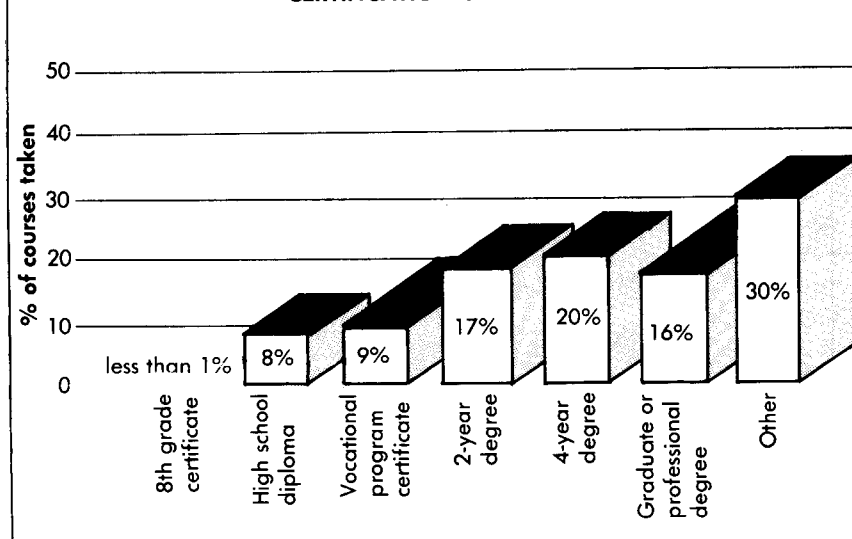
**TABLE 2C. WHAT IS TAKEN:  
SUBJECT MATTER AREAS**

Subject	% of Total
Business	22
Health sciences	11
Engineering	10
Education	9
Philosophy	7
Physical education	7
Art	6
Language	6
Social sciences	5
Health education	3
Home economics	3
Life sciences	3
Personal service	2
Interdisciplinary	1
Agriculture	1
Unable to classify	4

**TABLE 2E. WHY PARTICIPATE:  
EDUCATION LEVEL**

Education Level	Job-Related	Non-Job-Related
Elementary	17%	83%
High school	36%	64%
2-year degree or equivalent	59%	41%
4-year degree or equivalent	61%	39%
Graduate/professional work	68%	32%

**FIGURE 2-10. WHY PARTICIPATE:  
CERTIFICATION OBJECTIVES**



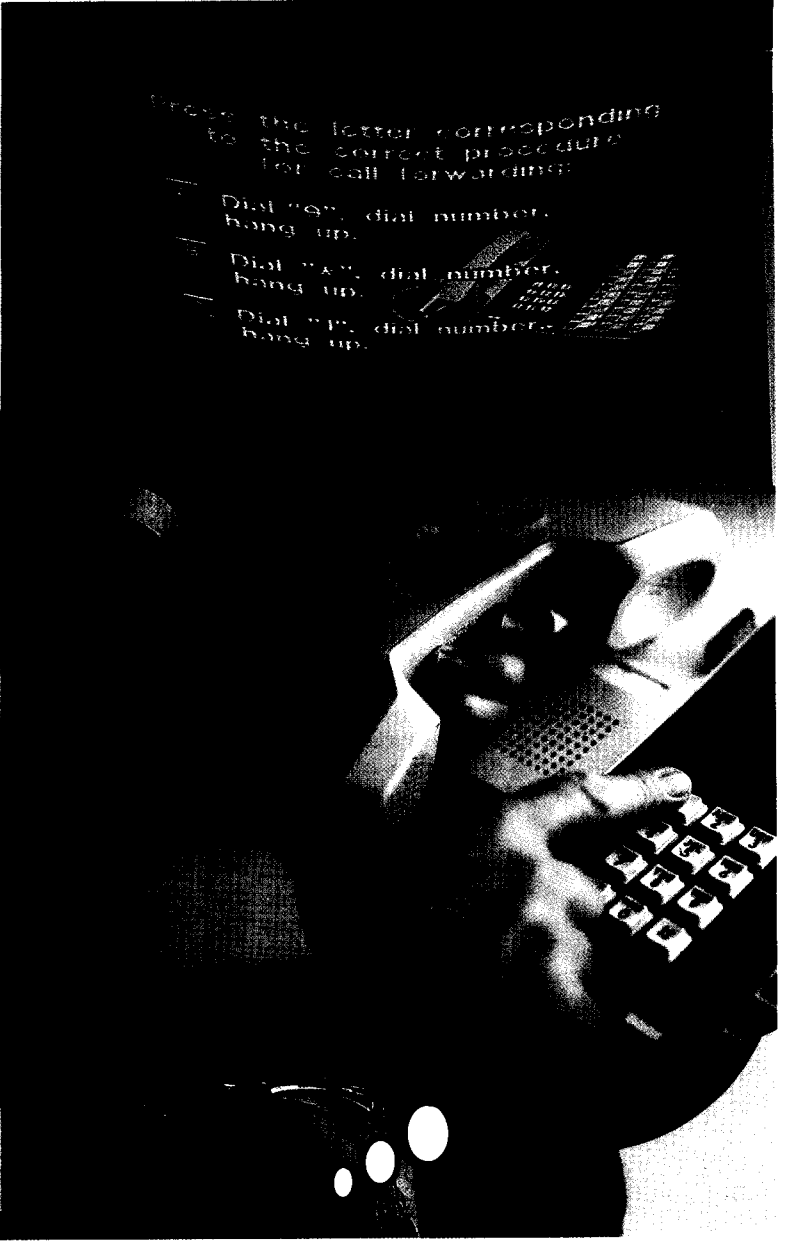


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## Case Studies in Communication

Effective communication skills are crucial to managers, supervisors, or anyone who deals with people. This film presents two dramatized case histories illustrating the major barriers to effective communication: (1) the way we see ourselves (our self-image); (2) the way we see others (perceptual screen). It demonstrates some of the ways in which our assumptions distort our perception of people and situations, resulting in a breakdown of communication. This film will help its audience become more aware of the need for feedback and active listening in order to avoid potential blocks to communication.

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when you match job-related vs. non-job-related motives with the educational levels of participants. Table 2E suggests that people with little formal education were much *less* likely to take courses for job-related reasons than were people with college degrees.

### Certification

Only 15% of all courses were taken to meet requirements for certification, diplomas or degrees. Of those that were taken for credit, 30% were aimed at something other than a standard diploma or degree (Figure 2-10).

Table 2F shows differences between men and women in terms of courses taken for certification. Fifty-six percent of all courses taken for credit were taken by women, most in two-year or four-year college-degree programs. Men were more likely than women to take courses for something other than a standard certificate, degree or diploma.

Again, an interesting trend is seen with employment status (Table 2G). Unemployed people and people not in the labor force who take courses for certification are most likely to be seek-

ing a high-school diploma—a fact that helps explain the relatively high percentage of unemployed people whose courses are not directly job-related. Employed people were most likely to be seeking a four-year degree.

### WHO PAYS?

The question of who pays for an adult education or training course obviously is a measure of commitment. Four questions on the CPS dealt with source of payment. Participants were first asked: "Who paid for this course?" The choices were:

- Self or family.
- Government.
- Business or industry.
- Private organization.
- Other.
- Don't know.

Unlike other multiple-choice items on the survey, this one allowed participants to choose more than one response for each question.

Respondents also were asked whether "self or family" was the *only* source of payment, whether their employer was one of the sources, and how much they (the participants) paid in tuition and fees. Table 2H illustrates a breakdown of payment sources and acknowledges the fact that payment for any one course may come from more than one source (e.g., self and employer).

As the table shows, adult education participants contributed all or a portion of the payment to about 54% of their courses; businesses contributed to 25% of all courses and government to 10%. But 48% of all reported courses were paid *in full* by participants or their families. This pattern clearly indicates a willingness on the part of

TABLE 2F. WHY PARTICIPATE: SEX DIFFERENCES AND CERTIFICATION\*

Certificate Sought	% Seeking Certificate	
	Men	Women
8th grade	0.1	0
High school	5	10
Vocational	10	8
2-year degree	13	20
4-year degree	20	20
Graduate/ prof. degree	17	16
Other	35	26

\*These figures represent only 15% of all adult education courses taken.

TABLE 2G. WHY PARTICIPATE: EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND CERTIFICATION

Certificate Sought	% Seeking Certificate		
	Employed	Unemployed	Not in Labor Force
8th grade	0	0	0.2
High school	4.5	25	22
Vocational	9	12	8
2-year degree	16	18	19
4-year degree	21	14	18
Graduate/ professional degree	18	7	8
Other	31.5	24	25

Americans to spend money for adult education.

Of those courses for which self or family were not the only source of payment, 67% were paid for at least in part by an employer and 33% were

paid for at least in part by some other source.

What were the actual costs to individuals? Thirty-three percent of the courses cost individual learners \$25 or less. A complete cost breakdown is

illustrated in Table 2I. Predictably, very few people spent large amounts of money for any of their adult education courses.

Over 50% of the participants paid \$50 or less per course and over 70% paid \$75 or less. These numbers are deceptive, however, in terms of the real costs of adult education. Most courses offered by the public sector are heavily subsidized at the development and delivery stages, and most private-sector training is fully subsidized by the employer, with the employee having no knowledge of the real costs incurred.

There is an investment associated with adult education. While a portion of it is regularly being paid by the recipient, it appears that the majority of costs are being absorbed by the public or by the sponsoring firm.

**TABLE 2H. WHO PAYS FOR ADULT EDUCATION? PAYMENT BY AGENCY**

Source of Payment*	No. of Courses Reported	% of Total Courses Reported
Self	10,500	53.8
Business	4,910	25.1
Government	2,009	10.3
Private	1,076	5.5
Other	923	4.7
Don't know	104	0.5
	19,522	100.0

\*Not mutually exclusive. More than one source of funding per course is feasible.

**TABLE 2I. WHO PAYS FOR ADULT EDUCATION? COST (TO PARTICIPANTS) PER COURSE**

Cost Per Course	No. of Courses	% of Total Courses
\$0-25	3,501	33.0
\$26-50	1,981	19.0
\$51-75	1,072	10.2
\$76-100	952	9.5
\$101-200	1,173	11.2
\$201-500	854	7.7
\$501-1,000	198	1.9
\$1,001-5,000	141	1.3
\$5,000+	651	6.2
	10,521	100.0

## REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Finally, the CPS data provided an opportunity to look at some regional aspects of adult education. Perhaps the most startling thing we discovered when we examined the data according to geographic regions was that nothing particularly startling jumped out.

The 50 states were grouped into four regions, as shown in Figure 2-11. Here are a few highlights of the differences we *did* find.

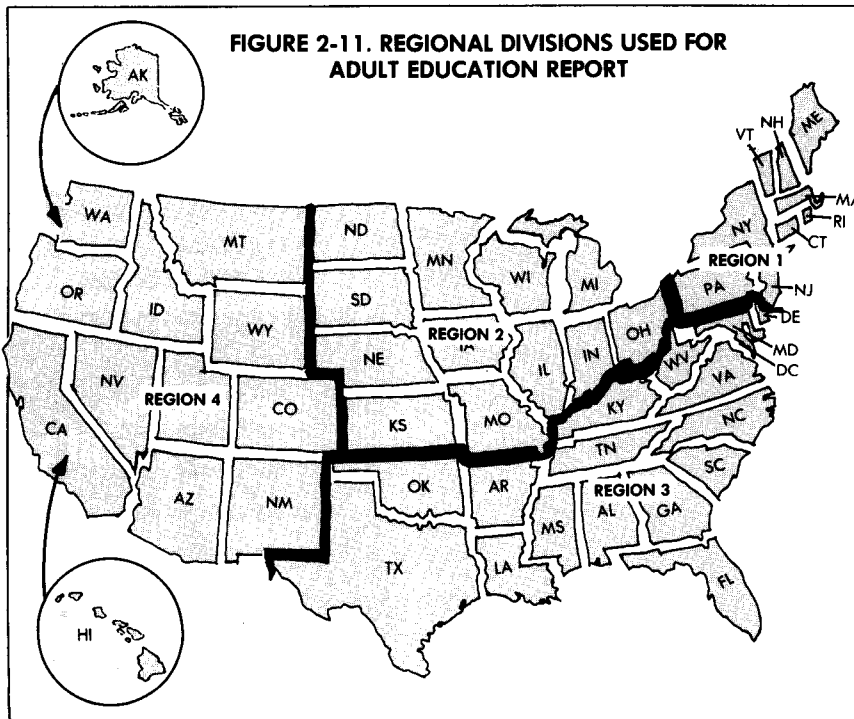
- *Region 1*, which included the New England and Middle Atlantic states, had the highest percentage of adult education courses offered by four-year colleges, and the highest percentage of courses offered by elementary and secondary schools.

- *Region 2*, which included the East North Central and West North Central states, had the highest percentage of courses in health care.

- *Region 3*, the South Atlantic, East South Central and West South Central states, had the highest percentage of employed people, and the highest percentage of courses offered by government agencies.

- *Region 4*, which included the Mountain and Pacific states (plus Alaska and Hawaii), had the highest percentage of people with graduate-level education, the highest percentage of non-job-related courses, and the highest percentage of courses in agricultural subjects.

**FIGURE 2-11. REGIONAL DIVISIONS USED FOR ADULT EDUCATION REPORT**



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