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Analyzing Barriers to Latino Adult Education in Rhode Island: How Community Voices Can Inform Future Engagement

July 2018

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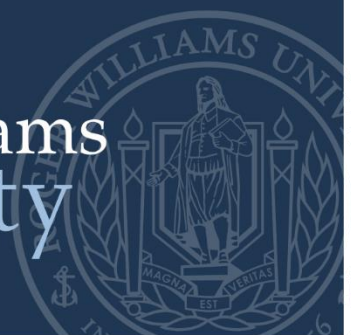


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Research conducted for this report was funded by a grant received from the United Way of Rhode Island. Specifically, at the United Way, we would like to thank our partners Sophie Tan (Project Manager for Workforce Development) and Kyle Bennett (Director of Public Policy Research) for their support of this project.

Members of the research team would also like to thank the community members who generously provided their time and insight to this project, and to the organizations who we partnered with to hold focus groups and to publicize our study through their networks: Genesis Center, the South Providence Public Library, the Literacy Volunteers of the East Bay and Progreso Latino.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Latinos in Rhode Island constitute 14% of the state's population and make up more than 50% participants in state funded adult education programs. Yet, during focus groups held with local Latino residents, we found that many individuals expressed a desire for increased program offerings, greater flexibility in course scheduling, issues with transportation to/from organizations offering adult education services and a lack of public information regarding the courses/programming available. While important studies in recent years have worked to increase knowledge about adult education students in the state across racial/ethnic groups, this study focuses specifically on Latino community members' participation in and use of such services. Drawing on a set of seven focus groups conducted with members of the Rhode Island Latino community who have not received a high school diploma and/or GED in the United States and had not yet completed adult education courses, this study offers four key recommendations to increase access to and the utilization of adult education services by Latino residents.

Based upon the research findings, our policy recommendations are:

- Improving transportation access to adult education provider sites;
- Conceptualizing adult education services for all members of a family unit rather than solely one individual;
- Expanding outreach efforts to specifically target the state's Latino community; and
- Working to assist adult education students in meeting all their educational aspirations in a holistic manner.

INTRODUCTION

When asked about whether she had ever accessed or considered accessing adult education services in Rhode Island, Maria, a participant in one of the focus groups conducted for this research project, explained, "I have never entered a class because first I don't know the different programs they offer...I've heard of Dorcas and I thought it was different than Progreso Latino, but I don't know..."¹ It was at that moment that Diana, another focus group participant chimed in, "I also know of Progreso Latino, the Pawtucket Library and I've seen a flyer from Dorcas, but when I went to see the programs that they offer it was already late..."

The sentiments expressed by the focus group participants in the exchange above were not isolated. They were in fact representative of other focus group dialogues where participants were aware of the multiple adult education services offered in their communities and at times, also the organizations that offered these services, but chose not to take advantage of these services or were hesitant to do so. Yet, this was not the case for all focus groups participants. "I took an English class once, but after that, I didn't take any more [classes]...[but] I love to cook, if I [had continued taking courses]...I would have taken a cooking course to become a chef and help me in my job..." Gladys, another focus group participant added. For Gladys, although she knew about the services and took advantage of them by enrolling in an English language course, she was unaware of the full range of services offered by that particular organization or other organizations and therefore did not continue her coursework.

Given Maria, Diana and Gladys's responses, one may then wonder why, with 34 adult education programs available in the state, there is a hesitancy on the part of Latino residents to access these services and, if they do access these services, what barriers might these community members face in continuing their education.

Rhode Island's Hispanic/Latino community² is the fastest growing racial/ethnic minority community in the state, has increased from 90,820 in 2000 to 130,655 individuals in 2010.³ In fact, Latinos were the sole source of population growth in Rhode Island from 2000-2010.⁴ As of 2016, it was estimated that Latinos account for 14% of the state's population.⁵ Also, across all racial/ethnic groups, Rhode Island has the lowest number of adults over the age of 25 who have completed a high school degree in New England.⁶ Of the overall population, Hispanics have the lowest high school completion rates for individuals over the age of 25 in the state: 65%.⁷ Given the

growing numbers of Latinos in Rhode Island, the state's already low level of high school completion for adults over the age of 25, and Latinos' disproportionately low levels of high school attainment in the state, adult education services are an important issue for members of this community and for the welfare of the entire state. As such, this project asks:

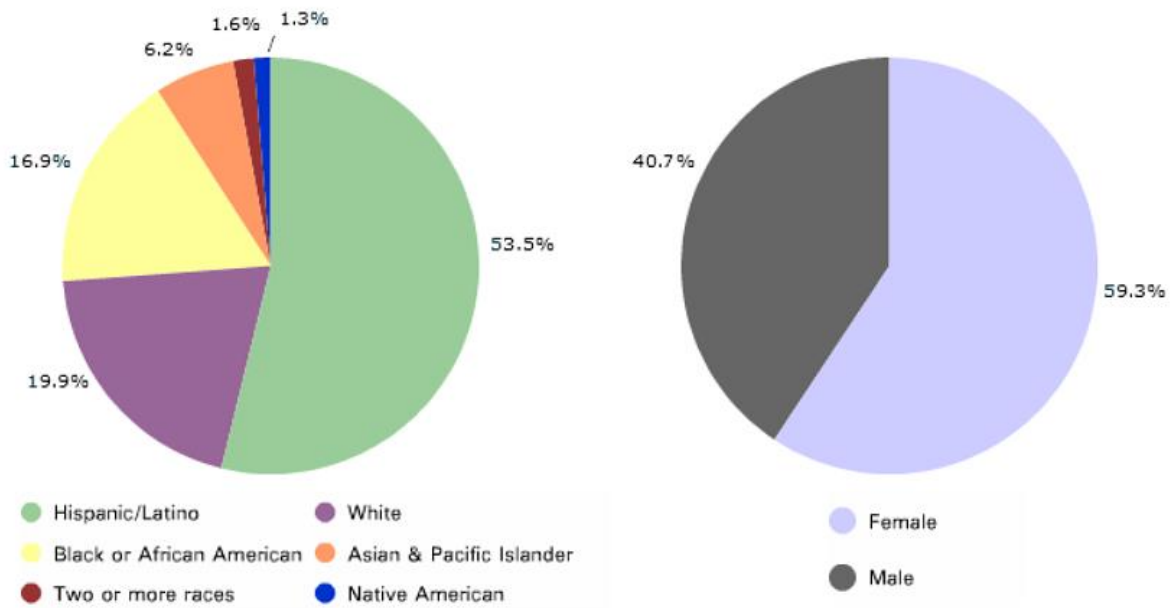
1. What factors affect the Rhode Island Latino community's access to adult education, in particular, those who were pushed out of the K-12 education system either in the U.S. or in their previous country/ies of residence?
2. What are the benefits of adult education in Rhode Island for those who utilize its services? How do these benefits vary by race, gender and citizenship status?
3. How does the Rhode Island Latino community approach the labor market in the state? What factors or underlying values affect how they view the job market and their potential for success and potential mobility in the current job market?

As existing scholarship on the adult education access has shown, these services are of growing importance nationally due to the increased diversity of the U.S. workforce.⁸ For immigrants and people of color, members of this diverse national workforce, adult education has been shown to shape individuals' employment opportunities, English language fluency, literacy skills and understandings of civic engagement and participation.⁹ Also, these programs have been shown to facilitate community building and support for immigrant community members as they adjust to life in a new country.¹⁰ Thus, while adult education can assist individuals in increasing their social mobility and workplace earnings, it oftentimes holds other purposes for the individuals seeking to enroll in such programs.

I. LATINOS AND ADULT EDUCATION TODAY

According to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), as of 2011-2012, Latinos made up more than half, or 53.5% of adult learners. Also depicted in the graph below and important to note is that in terms of gender, participants in adult education programs in Rhode Island consist of greater numbers of female as compared to male participants.

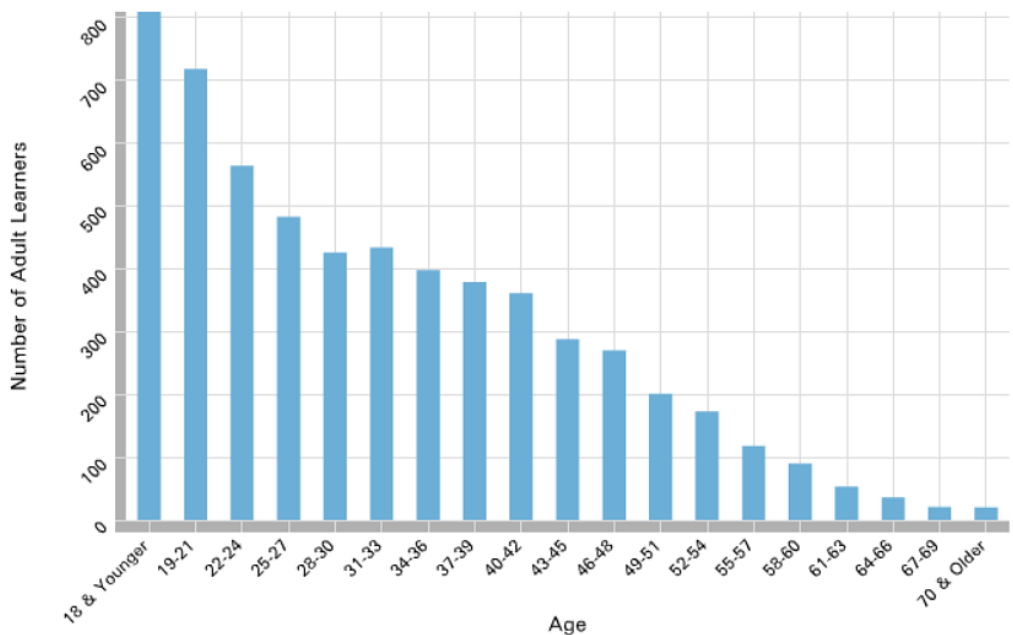
FIGURE 1.1: Demographics of Rhode Island’s Adult Learners FY 2011-2012



Source: <http://ridatahub.org/datastories/adult-education-and-ris-workforce/7/>

Age wise, data collected during the 2011-2012 fiscal year shows that younger and middle-aged residents have primarily been the group of individuals who have taken advantage of such services.

FIGURE 1.2: Ages of Adult Learners FY 2011-2012



Source: <http://ridatahub.org/datastories/adult-education-and-ris-workforce/7/>

Furthermore, according to a policy brief published by the United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI), during the fiscal year of 2014-2015, there were 34 state-funded adult education programs operating in Rhode Island.¹¹ For that year, these programs received approximately 8.3 million dollars in state funding.¹² As depicted in the graph below, according to data from the 2012-2013 fiscal year, the majority of the funding allocated to adult education programs across the state went towards intermediate adult basic education services¹³ as well as beginning and intermediate ESL (English as a Second Language) courses.

FIGURE 1.3: Educational Functioning Levels FY 2012-2013

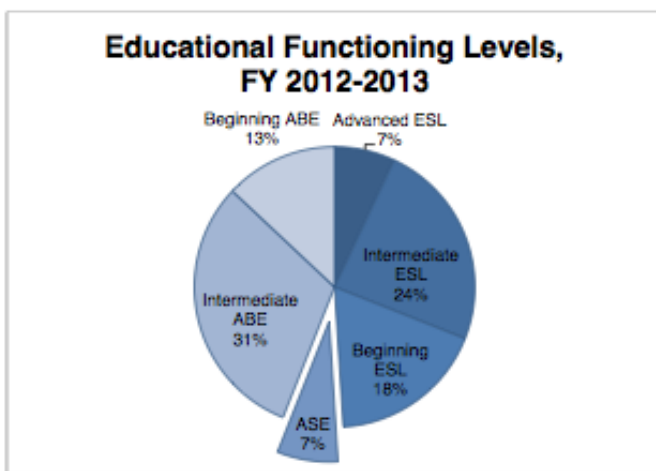


Figure 4. Skill levels of students in RIDE-funded adult education programs, FY 2012-2013. Students who test into ASE (Adult Secondary Education, 9th – 12th grade) are ready to study for a high school equivalency.¹³

Source: <https://uwri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Adult-Education-Convening-Project-2015.pdf>

Given the significant proportion of Hispanic/Latino residents in the state who make up more than half of adult education participants as illustrated in the 2011-2012 data and that after adult basic education services, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses received the second largest share of adult education funding in 2012-2013, it is clear that adult education access is a pressing concern for Latinos. Despite this finding, as the opening vignette to this report highlighted, there may, in fact, be even greater numbers of Rhode Island Hispanic/Latino residents who would take advantage of these programs if barriers to access were reduced and/or eliminated.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To provide a holistic analysis and understanding of the Rhode Island Hispanic community's experiences accessing adult education services, this project employed the use of a mixed methods research approach consisting of an analysis of data collected from research participants and publicly available data sets in combination with focus groups held with members of the Latino community across the state.

As part of the project's quantitative component, researchers analyzed data from the 2010 U.S. Census, the most recent national census administration to date, and the American Community Survey (ACS) to examine demographic trends and characteristics of the state's Hispanic community. This data was supplemented by data provided by Data Spark and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), which was collected from state-funded adult education service providers from 2005-2016. These two data sources provided important insight into who Hispanic community members are, particularly in terms of the region of the state in which they resided and their educational attainment.

This quantitative data was then supplemented with qualitative data drawn from five focus groups conducted with Latino adults statewide. Focus groups participants were selected using criteria that they: (1) identified as Hispanic and/or Latino; (2) were between the ages of 18-64; and (3) had not received a high school diploma and/or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) in the United States. This criteria was used to provide an in-depth understanding of a broad range of the population about which we know very little about and do not have data available for: individuals who were actively taking courses in pursuit of a high school diploma and/or GED; individuals who started to participate in adult education services, but chose not to continue; those who were eligible to do so, but for whatever reason had chosen not to begin taking classes. By including a broad range of individuals in the focus groups we sought to examine adult education access and participation across a diverse subset of the Rhode Island Latino community. To compare statewide demographics of the Latino community with our sample we also administered a short nine-question survey to participants in focus groups prior to commencing the group discussion.

Focus group questions covered a broad range of topics including prior educational experiences; whether participants had previously sought to access adult education and if so, what barriers and/or challenges they encountered, if any; if participants had begun taking adult education courses what their experiences doing so had been; what participants hoped to achieve by enrolling in adult education courses and what improvements and/or changes to the current Rhode Island adult education system they hoped to see, if any. Groups were conducted primarily in Spanish and while we offered individuals the opportunity to participate in an English language focus group, we did not receive any requests from potential study participants to hold a focus group in English.

Participants were recruited through informal community networks and partnerships with local community-based organizations, which provided adult education services. These organizations offered a variety of adult education courses and were selected given their close relationships with members of the local Latino community and their locations across the state in communities where according to U.S. Census data, high numbers of Latino residents

resided. For a description of the four organizations and the work that they do in the local community, please see the table below.

TABLE 1.1: Focus Group Organizations/Partnerships

Organization Name	Location	Scope of Adult Education Services Provided
Genesis Center	South Providence, RI	Provides English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses and courses for individuals seeking to take their U.S. citizenship exam.
South Providence Public Library	South Providence, RI	Provides courses to earn a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) taught in Spanish.
Literacy Volunteers of Rhode Island	Newport, RI	Provides training to community members interested in becoming more literate/fluent in English, assistance in preparing to take the U.S. citizenship exam and help with personal goal setting.
Progreso Latino	Central Falls, RI	Provides a variety of programming to members of the Rhode Island community including the Bridge to Careers (B2C) and Adult Education Curriculum (ESOL literacy coursework, Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, Citizenship and Job Development training).

Focus groups were conducted primarily in spring 2018, with one group being conducted prior to that time period. Overall, we sought to include a diverse range of organizations engaging in a varied programming and adult education opportunities for Rhode Island residents. Focus groups were conducted at the partner organizations’ headquarters/offices to facilitate participants travel and to enhance community members’ participation by holding groups in multiple locations across the state.

TABLE 1.2: Focus Group Locations

Date	Location	Partner Organization
November 2017	Providence, RI (Fox Point)	N/A
December 2017	Providence, RI (Fox Point)	N/A
May 2018	South Providence, RI	Genesis Center
May 2018	South Providence, RI	South Providence Public Library
May 2018	Newport, RI	Literacy Volunteers of

		Rhode Island
May 2018	Central Falls, RI	Progreso Latino
May 2018	Central Falls, RI	Progreso Latino

Overall, participants in this study consisted of 39 members of the Rhode Island Latino community. They ranged in age from 19 to 78 and hailed from all areas of the state, with the largest number of participants residing in the cities of Providence, Central Falls and Pawtucket. While some focus group participants had begun attending adult education courses, none had yet completed their high school diploma and/or GED in the United States as outlined in this study’s criteria for participating.

Table 1.3: Focus Group Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	City of Residence	Education Level
Maria	F	50	Central Falls	Some High School
Diana	F	47	Central Falls	Some High School
Gladys	F	55	Central Falls	Some High School
Marco	M	19	Providence	Some High School
Andrea	F	42	Providence	Some High School
Arelis	F	36	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)
Susana	F	55	Central Falls	Elementary School (outside the U.S.)
Jose	M	78	Central Falls	High School (outside the U.S.)
Mario	M	46	Central Falls	High School (outside the U.S.)
Angela	F	53	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)
Linda	F	20	Providence	High School (outside the U.S.)
Sara	F	21	Providence	High School (outside the U.S.)
Camila	F	76	Cumberland	High School (outside the U.S.)
Laura	F	19	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)
Pepe	M	38	Central Falls	High School (outside the U.S.)
Humberto	M	54	Pawtucket	Declined to State
Paulina	F	31	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)

Irene	F	Declined to State	Pawtucket	Some High School
Jesus	M	64	Providence	High School and some college (outside of the U.S.)
Azucena	F	62	Providence	High School and some college (outside of the U.S.)
Lupe	F	40	Providence	High School (outside of the U.S.)
Leticia	F	31	Providence	High School (outside of the U.S.)
Yenisey	F	41	Providence	College Degree (outside the U.S.)
Edwin	M	38	Central Falls	High School (outside the U.S.)
Ana Paula	F	56	Providence	Some College (outside the U.S.)
Jacqueline	F	Declined to state	Newport	High School (outside the U.S.)
Hermenia	F	58	Newport	High School (outside the U.S.)
Carmen	F	60	Central Falls	Elementary School (outside the U.S.)
Lisa	F	35	Providence	Elementary School (outside the U.S.)
Rocio	F	54	Providence	Elementary School (outside the U.S.)
Cristofer	M	19	Providence	Declined to state
Rafael	M	56	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)
Dolores	F	51	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)
Federico	M	52	Pawtucket	College graduate (outside the U.S.)
Ines	F	54	Central Falls	Elementary School (outside the U.S.)
Ignacio	M	74	Cumberland	High School (outside the U.S.)
Itzel	F	72	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)
Quetzal	F	35	Central Falls	High School (outside the U.S.)
Astrid	F	66	Pawtucket	High School (outside the U.S.)

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

For Latino residents in Rhode Island, education has played and continues to play an important role in their lives. This is also true for those residents who were born and/or lived abroad and later immigrated to the United States. By framing the findings below about access to adult education services in Rhode Island with this in mind, one can view the experiences of these residents in a manner that takes into account the central focus on education and educational access as reflective of key underlying values in the lives of Latino community members. While as the focus group participants explained, education offered increased access to jobs and social mobility, community members' interest in seeking such services also stemmed from the community's commitment to education on a broader level. Many participants also expressed tremendous appreciation for the opportunity to continue their education in the United States, something they did not have much opportunity to do in their countries of origin.

Responding to a question about the role of education in her life Susana from Central Falls said, "Education is very important. It helps us in our [daily] lives." Unpacking this statement further during the discussion, Yenisey from Providence offered, "I think education is the number one factor in the world affecting people's lives because it allows you to communicate with different people, to express yourself fully..." Reflecting on her educational experience after arriving in the United States, Arelis from Pawtucket added, "[Education] helps us [Latinos living in the United States] to be able to take advantage of more job opportunities, to be able to become more involved in our communities [and to develop] as people." As these quotes demonstrate, education is an integral aspect of Latino residents' lives, which residents see as not only providing a means to achieve a specific end, but also a resource for developing themselves as better residents and community members. The civic membership and participation of Latinos and the ability of Latinos from various racial/ethnic backgrounds and across different communities across the state are also facilitated through the adult education process.

Factors Affecting the Rhode Island Latino Community's Access to Adult Education Services

In terms of the barriers and/or challenges affecting Latino residents' access to adult education services in Rhode Island, three key challenges that participants in the focus groups noted were transportation, scheduling, and communication about classes offered. While adult education services are held in multiple locations across the state and busses provide low-cost transportation to adult education provider sites, many focus group participants still faced immense difficulty traveling to and from the organizations where services they hoped to access were located. Even when they were able to access reliable transportation to these services, they found themselves challenged by the schedules of the courses offered.

Describing his frustration getting to and from the location where he currently takes ESL courses, Humberto from Pawtucket, explained: "I have to take three buses to get to my classes and in the weather – when it is raining or snowing – it takes even longer." Echoing this sentiment, Irene from Pawtucket added, "I don't have a [driver's] license and so it is difficult for me to get to class [consistently] with public transportation..." Similarly, Jesus from Providence, added, "Yes, sometimes I don't have a ride and I walk to the center [where they offer classes]. It's not very convenient at all."

For others, like Gladys from Central Falls, transportation returning from a class is an obstacle: "I take classes at night after work, but it is difficult because classes end late around 9 pm and the bus to get to where I live only runs every hour. I don't like waiting by myself at the bus stop and so I don't take classes." Public transportation, while a helpful alternative for those who do not or are unable to drive, is difficult for those who take classes during morning rush hour/commute periods and/or the latter portions of the evening and need to travel far distances to return home. Safe, reliable transportation, whether it be a van and/or shuttle service or increased bus lines around adult education centers/locations, according to focus group participants, would greatly increase the feasibility of attending courses on a consistent basis and potentially in enrolling in additional courses later on.

Related to the issue of transportation is scheduling of classes. While many focus group participants expressed an appreciation for the course offerings during the day and after work hours, some respondents desired additional course times/hours. “We don’t have weekend classes here, which has been really difficult. I heard that they used to have weekend classes, but because of money, they don’t anymore. I would really like weekend classes to be offered again,” Andrea from Pawtucket explained. During another focus group, Gladys from Central Falls shared, “I think that classes during the weekends would be better for those of us who have children...” Jesus from Providence also explained, “The most difficult thing [I faced] when I went to enroll in [adult education] classes was all the time it took to enroll. I tried many times to enroll before I was able because of my work schedule that is always changing. Some days I work mornings, some days I work afternoons, sometimes I have the entire day off. It depends.” Nodding at Jesus’s point, Edwin from Central Falls affirmed, “I sometimes try to tell my boss that I am studying and so I need this schedule, but it isn’t always possible...” Both on the course provider and students’ side, the timing of adult education course offerings repeatedly arose as a difficult issue with regard to access. Many respondents expressed a desire for courses to be offered at a variety of times and for perhaps these times to be spread across different adult education service provider organizations. For instance, one organization could take all morning classes, while another located in a very central downtown location could offer the majority of the evening classes. Organizations that seek to build community among participants as part of cultivating their civic participation could offer weekend classes and provide additional services for families.

Through the focus group we conducted with local residents, we also found that communication with Latino community members regarding the courses offered was a cause for concern. Many individuals shared that they largely learned about the programs offered by non-profit organizations through word of mouth and family members who had previously attended courses at the organization. Federico from Pawtucket explained, “I had relatives who had taken courses here [at Progreso Latino] and so that’s how I found out about classes.” Another participant, Ines from Central Falls shared, “[After beginning courses at Progreso Latino] I learned about the many courses that these organizations offer -- not only English classes, but also citizenship classes, GED classes [and so on]. But, many [others] do not know about these programs...” While English language courses such as the ones offered at non-profit organizations such as Progreso Latino where we hosted two focus groups provide an important entry point into a broader set of adult education classes for Latino residents, if individuals are not necessarily looking for language education, they might overlook additional course offerings and assistance that these organizations could provide.

Benefits of Adult Education Services by Gender, Race and Citizenship Status

Based on the data provided in the table of participants above and additional questions included as part of the pre-focus group survey administered by the project’s principal investigators the data mirrored the high percentage of participants who were women. Many of these women also expressed the importance of modeling educational practices for their children as in the case of Maria from Central Falls: “For me, I tell my children to study hard and to do well in school. I keep telling them to do that if I don’t also do that for myself.” Another mother who participated in the focus groups, Diana from Central Falls, explained, “I want to pursue my education, but my children’s education is also my priority. If I could take classes in the summer when I don’t have to take my children to school, then I would have more time to enroll in a course.” Acknowledging the impact that having a largely female identified student body and these women’s motivation for participating in focus groups -- their children and their families -- will enable for programming to potentially be expanded to include a family-based model to adult education. While a number of adult education service providers across the state, some of which we partnered with to hold focus groups, offered childcare and/or services to assist families, ensuring a continued emphasis on family-based approaches to adult education, based on the data we collected, is an important opening to continuing to engage further numbers of adult education students, especially in the Rhode Island Latino community.

Furthermore, while all focus group participants identified as Hispanic and/or Latino, residents hailed from a variety of countries and immigrated to the United States under a complex set of different circumstances. Acknowledging the heterogeneity among Latinos in Rhode Island, not only in terms of country of origin but in terms of their experiences as people of color in the United States is a key takeaway of this study. As Astrid from Pawtucket shared, “Coming here [to the United States] you are excited because there are so many opportunities for you and you’re able to continue your education unlike back home. [At the same time,] there is a lot of racism and discrimination that we face here as immigrants and as Latinos. Learning English for me helps me to speak up when I am being discriminated against or [treated unfairly].” Thus, for Latino residents, English language and adult education courses also served as a form of empowerment for residents who as they integrated into American society and became familiar with the meaning of being a person of color in the U.S., also sought to demand and uphold their rights. A focus on the role of such programs in terms of promoting civic participation and activism is one area that could potentially warrant further study, especially as related to the heterogeneity of the Latino community in the state both racially and ethnically.

While we ultimately ended up not including questions about immigration and citizenship status on the survey administered to focus group participants or in the focus group discussion questions, we did find that for immigrant participants, many who pursued adult education courses often times had been very rigorous in their pursuit of an education in their countries of origin. For some of the middle-aged focus group participants, they noted that they had completed high school in their countries of origin and begun taking college courses and/or considered doing so prior to immigrating to the United States. While this finding may result from the snowball sampling approach used to recruit focus group participants, it may also serve as an area that could warrant future investigation, specifically examining data regarding participants’ education levels in their countries of origin and their enrollment in adult education classes in the U.S., to see if a correlation exists and if this is a Rhode Island specific finding.

Rhode Island Latino Community’s Approach to/Engagement with the Labor Market

For members of the Rhode Island Latino community, adult education classes, in particular, English language classes, are instrumental in assisting community members to gain employment and to move up in the ranks of their current employment. As Gladys from Central Falls explained, “For me, I am interested in learning English because all of the work I do is in English and I understand, but I do not speak [English] very well. I have learned a lot about the culture of other employees at the hotel who are from different [countries]...It is very important [for me] to learn English..” Expanding on this statement, Diana from Central Falls added, “Speaking English can help you get a better job. It gives you the ability to find a job that is better depending on your level of English [fluency]...” Maria from Central Falls echoed this sentiment adding, “When one knows less English, [one of] the only jobs you can find is in a factory. In the factory, I was surrounded by other Hispanic people who did not need to speak English. [By taking English classes though] ...one can at least work at a store, and little by little advance your level at the workplace... You aren’t just always at the same level [in your work...] you’re advancing...”

While focus group participants expressed an intimate understanding of the importance of English language coursework and fluency for their success in the U.S. labor market, there was also an interest in taking other types of adult education courses. While such courses are currently offered at a variety of organizations that provide adult education programming, it is important to note that for members of the Latino community, while English language fluency is a priority, there is also a broader interest in different types of educational course offerings. Describing her interest in taking cooking classes, Andrea from Providence explained, “I have always been a chef since I was born...but just without the title.” For Andrea, taking cooking classes would help her to gain formal recognition as a cook and offer additional opportunities to find employment as a chef in the workforce. Though Andrea is indeed able to find employment as a chef without any formal training, during the focus group conversation she expressed the importance of how employers see her qualifications and why it is important in the context of the U.S. job market.

According to data from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) discussed earlier in the report, the primary participants in adult education courses in the state ranged from the ages of 18-50. Though the narratives above in terms of adult education's role in providing increased access to the U.S. labor market focuses on the experiences of middle-aged focus group participants, this study also included participants who had recently arrived at the U.S. and were around the ages of 18-21. This age group comprises a 26% of adult education learners in the state or approximately. Some of these individuals barely missed the opportunity to enroll in a U.S. high school given their age of migration and thus found themselves thrust into the workforce with little assistance in terms of how to use skills they learned in their countries of origin in the context of the U.S. labor market.

For Marco from Providence, this challenge was especially difficult in that he immigrated to the United States right after graduating high school in his home country, the Dominican Republic, but aged out of qualifying for high school in the U.S. Instead, Marco found himself working in a restaurant during the week and found adult education courses as the only educational opportunity available to him: "Currently, I am working at a restaurant in Providence and taking classes here...I enjoy my classes and right now I'm working on learning English. But, my goal is to earn my GED, then to go to college here [in Rhode Island]. I want to study bioengineering and I really enjoy science and math classes." For younger immigrants enrolled in adult education classes such as Marco, there is a strong desire to learn English as a means to continue their education and work towards an Associates, Bachelors and/or graduate degree in the United States. With English language fluency and a U.S. high school equivalency certificate and/or degree as prerequisites for advanced degrees, ESL classes are taken advantage of as the first step towards pursuing this path for younger Latino immigrants.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A recent report published by the United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) in October 2015 examined the impact of adult education services for Rhode Island residents across racial/ethnic groups.¹⁴ While this report focused on the experiences of Rhode Islanders from various racial/ethnic groups and their use of adult education services, our study discussed here complements this earlier work by focusing on the experiences of Latino residents as part of this overall population.

UWRI Led Recommendations

The most recent and thorough investigation examining the community members' experiences in the adult education system was conducted by the United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) in 2015.¹⁵ Through the use of an online survey and a series of community meetings, the UWRI project collected information on community members, providers and local leaders' perspectives on what they believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of the adult education programs and services currently offered. The project organizers then held community forums where stakeholders shared their responses to the researchers' findings and then developed working groups to discuss next steps around the following three areas: (1) Promoting equitable access to education services for all adults; (2) Increasing and leveraging resources to meet current demand for adult education services; and (3) Improving collaboration and coordination across state systems serving adult learners. The project's survey instrument, findings, and full report are available online at <https://adulthoodri2015.weebly.com/>.

Drawing on a comprehensive series of conversations on adult education services statewide, UWRI and colleagues developed four overarching recommendations and strategies as follows:

1. Update the structures of leadership and governance for adult education in Rhode Island to reflect the importance of this work to the economic development of the state and to continue advancing improvements to the state's foundational skills development system as a whole.
2. Fully integrate a set of priorities designed to advance the development of foundational skills among Rhode Island adults into all future state plans for education, workforce development, and economic development.
3. Revisit and redesign data collection, data use, program quality indicators, and performance targets for foundational skills development to ensure that education and workforce development systems support service of adults with the greatest barriers to employment and that they are able to remain responsive to both learner goals and workforce needs.
4. Expand the capacity of the state's education and workforce development systems to help more Rhode Islanders improve their foundational skills by reducing barriers for adult learners at all levels of literacy

When speaking of the Latino community in Rhode Island, the two recommendations from the UWRI report that are most closely related to the needs of this community are the third and fourth recommendations. The third recommendation has to do with collecting additional data about and increasing performance targets for individuals with "the greatest barriers to employment" and to continue to assist individuals at all levels of literacy, and perhaps also English language fluency. While these recommendations and strategies apply to the entire adult education population, the unique needs and characteristics of Rhode Island Latino residents call for a more specific approach to reaching and engaging this community.

Latino Community Specific Recommendations from the LPI Research Project

In this study, we work to supplement this important work already undertaken by the United Way to provide specific insight into the experiences of Hispanic/Latino residents and their experiences accessing and utilizing adult education services across a variety of organizations. Latino residents, who make up more than half of adult education students, are the fastest growing minority group in the state and have high school completion rates that are lower than white residents in the state. They are a critical constituency for existing programs, stand to gain the most from them and their participation in these programs is essential to the state's economic well-being.

More specifically, based on the findings from the study presented in this report, we provide three specific recommendations to improving access to adult education services for Latino residents in Rhode Island:

1. **Increasing Access to and Subsidizing Transportation to Adult Education Classes:** Improve the reliability of transportation to adult education sites by providing residents with assistance from a designated transportation official and/or RIPTA representative at adult education centers/organizations. Also, provide vouchers for students to take public transportation free of charge and/or at a reduced rate. This recommendation mirrors a [pilot program recently implemented in the District of Columbia](#) providing vouchers to individuals seeking to complete adult education courses. What we propose also includes offering an evening shuttle service to residents to/from classes that run later in the evening so that they do not have to worry about the additional time it will take them to return home after an already long day at work and the needs of their family and/or relatives once they arrive home.
2. **Adult Education Services should be Tailored for Families, not Individuals:** Rather than viewing adult education as solely an effort on the part of one individual, we recommend viewing and approaching adult education as a family issue. Many parents, as our report explains, either wait until their children are old enough to resume their education often delaying the potential benefits of such courses for themselves and their families, or they choose not to participate at all. Given the multiple responsibilities, parents must juggle, providing funding to cover the cost of childcare services while taking adult education courses and increasing programming for youth at organizations which provide adult education classes would increase accessibility and utilization of such services among members of the Latino community.
3. **Improving Outreach to Members of the Latino Community and Utilizing Spanish language media as a means of doing so:** As our study found, Latino participants in adult education courses and individuals seeking to enroll in such courses overwhelmingly learned about the programs offered through word of mouth. Therefore, to reach a wider audience of potential adult education students among members of the Latino community, we recommend increasing funding for advertisements in Spanish language media (newspapers, radio and online social media platforms) and devising strategic, innovative methods for reaching members of this community (e.g. through employers, school newsletters to parents, etc).
4. **Tapping into Future Aspirations:** Given the makeup of the adult education students in this statewide study, we want to underscore the importance of considering individuals' workforce aspiration alongside their future educational aspiration. While many Latino adult learners sought to use their increased knowledge and skills to move ahead in the workforce, many also expressed an interest in continuing the education they had completed in their home countries prior to immigrating to the United States. Many of

these individuals had completed high school and/or some college education in their countries of origin and sought to pursue a technical and/or professional career requiring additional post-secondary education in the United States. Thus, English language fluency for these individuals would help community members in their immediate workplace situations, but also holds the potential for participants to access a much broader set of career and educational aspirations across multiple fields and/or sectors.

REFERENCES

¹ All focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish and the translations included in this report were conducted by the research team members.

² Throughout this report we use the term “Hispanic” and “Latino” alongside one another. Hispanic is used specifically to refer to individuals who are from Spanish speaking countries (in the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America) and the term Latino is used to refer to community members’ self-identification. Thus, Hispanic is primarily used in this report when referring to state and federal agencies’ data on about community members and Latino when referring to discussions of community members’ lived experiences and related perspectives.

³ See <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/census/demo/ethnic.htm>.

⁴ See <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/reports/140.pdf>.

⁵ See <http://www.pewhispanic.org/fact-sheet/latinos-in-the-2016-election-rhode-island/>.

⁶ United States Census Bureau. (2017, February 24). Educational Attainment 2011-2015, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

⁷ American Community Survey Data from 2011-2015 as analyzed by the Economic Progress Institute (EPI). See <http://economicprogressri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/SOW2017-Full-Updated-Report-for-web-FINAL.pdf>.

⁸ Toso, B.W., Prins, E. & Mooney, A. (2013). “The Changing Face of Immigrants in the U.S.: Implications for Adult Learners.” *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 22: 1-21.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Prins, E., Toso, B.W. & Schafft, K.A. (2009). “‘It Feels Like A Little Family to Me’: Social Interaction and Support Among Women in Adult Education and Family Literacy.” *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59(4): 335-352.

¹¹ See https://aduldedri2015.weebly.com/uploads/4/8/0/7/48073865/summary_brief_-_ri_adult_education_2004_-_2015_5.8.15.pdf.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ According to a 2015 UWRI Report, adult basic education is defined as follows: “The 2003-2004 Rhode Island Governor’s Adult Literacy Taskforce defined adult basic education as ‘beginning through advanced English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), beginning literacy, beginning through intermediate adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and transition to college programs.’ In Rhode Island, the term “adult basic education” is at times used interchangeably with the term ‘adult education.’” (see <https://uwri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Adult-Education-Convening-Project-2015.pdf>).

¹⁴ See https://aduldedri2015.weebly.com/uploads/4/8/0/7/48073865/final_report.pdf.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



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