

# **NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES**

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Huey B. Long

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:  
ADULT EDUCATION



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Volume 20

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UNITED STATES

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**HUEY B. LONG**

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# ***NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES***

HUEY LONG

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## PREFACE

The education of adults is the most rapidly growing sector of American education, increasing by 17 percent between 1978 and 1981 (Cross, 1984). The rate of growth in education for and of adults provides a foundation for much of this book. Expansion of educational opportunities and participation by adults parallels other significant social, demographic and economic developments. Furthermore, the expansion of education opportunities and involvement are believed to be structurally related with many if not most of the changes occurring in modern American society. As a consequence, a variety of issues are generated by these developments (Cross, 1984). Issues such as who are to be the providers? under what circumstances or conditions will education services be provided? who will, can or should participate? what kind of quality assurance can or should be provided? by whom? and how? and what kind of relationship does and should exist between education of adults and economic revitalization?, are just a few of the issues that are of interest to practitioners, researchers, policy makers and others.

Given the rapid and significant growth of education of and for adults it is not surprising to observe that the education of adults in the United States is changing. Some of these changes are subtle and cumulative, as a result, they may not be readily apparent without some benchmark observations. Changes in the education of adults encourage us to look once again at adult education as an area of graduate studies and field of practice in order to revise our perspectives and expectations. Without continuing re-examination and

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criticism we are apt to become trapped by old definitions, program concepts and ideas of earlier generations outmoded by contemporary developments. Analysis and reflection should enable us to discover the strengths of older ideas while discovering new applications and extensions. As a consequence, new perspectives emerge. Therefore, one of the purposes of *New Perspectives on the Education of Adults* is to provide an opportunity where both the author and reader may engage in some occasional perspective transformations, to experience some differences of opinion and to consider some different conceptualizations. Of course, new perspectives must be constrained by reality in reporting and interpreting current events and programs in education of adults to be useful.

More is said later about the content, but one or two observations are appropriate here. Given the scope and scale of education of and for adults in the United States some parameters concerning the thrust and content of a book on new perspectives are required. Therefore, it was necessary to select what appears to be among the most significant issues and subject matter. The topics discussed meet this basic criterion. For example, participation questions are among the more important questions addressed in adult education literature. It is desirable to know who participates, why, where, when and how. Understanding of these questions contribute to program development and the provision of education services consistent with a variety of need schemes. These schemes may range from those that focus on the individual to those that emphasize the larger society. Thus, three program areas that demonstrate this in some way are addressed. Finally, there is a need for knowledge and comprehension of the research and theory bases of education of and for adults. These topics, plus some final observations and speculations provide the framework for the discussion of new perspectives.

*New Perspectives on the Education of Adults in the United States* is designed to navigate the middle way between reporting "old perspectives" and creating a fantasy perspective. This Preface contains important information on how this was done. Definitions, a brief description of the structure of the book and chapter summaries are provided. Definitions are reluctantly included because so often the process of defining concepts appear to become ends within themselves. The

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definitions provided in the following pages are given only because they seem to be necessary to understanding the objectives and content of the book. Descriptive information concerning the content is also kept to the barest essential minimum as brief introductions are provided at the beginning of each of the four major divisions of the book..

### DEFINITIONS

#### New

Prior to any meaningful dialogue on new perspectives on the education of adults in the United States, agreement on the use of terms is desirable, if not necessary. The topic contains several terms that may be used with different meanings. The word new, for example, has a variety of connotations. To observe that a neighbor has a "new" automobile may communicate different images; one person may assume that the automobile has not been owned previously by anyone other than the dealer and manufacturer; another person may accept the statement to mean the neighbor has an automobile of the latest model (the question of prior ownership is not important); yet another person may understand that the neighbor has simply purchased a different automobile, it may be one or twenty years of age, but it is new to the neighbor.

The American Heritage Dictionary (Morris, 1969) contains a rather lengthy list of definitions for new. Eight different uses of the term are given:

1. Of recent origin, having existed only a short time . . .
2. (a) Not yet old; fresh; recent; (b) used for the first time...
3. Recognized or experienced lately for the first time, although existing before; recently become known;...
4. Freshly introduced; unfamiliar; unaccustomed...
5. Begun afresh; . . .
6. (a) Newly entered into a state, position or experience. (b) changed for the better; refreshed; rejuvenated; ...
7. Different and distinct from what was before; . . .

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8. (a) Modern; current; fashionable ... (b)  
In the most recent form, period, or  
development of something...  
(Morris, 1969, pp. 883-84)

New as used in this work emphasizes current perspectives in the education of adults. It is a desire that the work is, in some respects, different and will provide a new experience for the reader, but it is not necessarily designed to be novel. Nevertheless, some observations are provided that are believed to be fresh in the sense that they have not been frequently published or given attention as provided here. The distinctiveness of the work will be found in interpretation, synthesis and criticism of what has existed before, plus some speculation about future directions. Hence, the first, third, fourth and eighth uses of the term new, as noted above, have served as a guide in this book.

### Perspective

Perspective is not as difficult to define as the word new. The story of the blind men who described an elephant as a tree, as a snake and as a wall according to the different parts of the animal's body they touched, communicates the nature of perspective. A perspective is generally derived from one's relative position, physical, cognitive or emotional. Perspective, thus, connotes a point of view.

Taken together, the words new and perspective, suggest that the individual who has a new perspective has a point of view that differs in some way from other points of view. This need not be original, it may not be completely different from a perspective of another person, i.e., it need not be unique, but it must differ in some manner. One individual may have a new perspective that is similar to that of a majority of his or her peers, but it is new to the individual. Therefore, the use of the term new perspective in this book does not necessarily connote originality, novelty, or uniqueness. The emphasis is upon a degree of distinctiveness as suggested by the selected connotations of new as discussed in the previous paragraph.

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### Education

Education, as the two previously discussed terms, has a variety of meanings. The American Heritage Dictionary (Morris, 1969) defines education in terms of a systematic process of imparting or obtaining knowledge or skill and as a field of study. Scholars and philosophers frequently place additional limits to the definition. Paterson (1979) for example observes that education is clearly the concept of some kind of purposive activity. It is an activity because it is perceived to be the kind of things that does not just happen to a person. It represents some degree of deliberate contrivance by the educator and the individual who is the object of the activity. It is purposive in the sense that it sets out to attain specific or general essential objectives. Furthermore, according to Paterson it is these objectives that provide the main grounds by which we pick out the "educational" activities from the many other activities that may be similar to them. There is no single empirical activity or group of activities that are in themselves educational. Citing R. S. Peters (1967), Paterson (1979, pp. 14-15) says education "refers to no particular process; rather it encapsulates criteria to which any one of a family of processes must conform."

Essential objectives that contribute to an activity's designation as education are best stated according to Paterson (1979, p. 15) "in relation to our nature as persons, as conscious selves, moving centres of action and awareness whose being is the radically finite being of individuals conscious of the shifting but ever-present limits placed upon their being by time, space, and matter, but conscious also that these limits exists to be surpassed." Hence, an educational activity is one that is intended to foster, and in fact does foster, the highest development of individuals as persons. Later he adds "a recipient of education, then, is someone whose potentialities of becoming a full person are being developed and who is therefore being treated, by those responsible for his education, as immanently a being whose existence is worthwhile in his own right" (p. 17).

The communication of knowledge is at the center of Paterson's concept of education. It is through the communication of knowledge and the initiation of the individual into rationally organized and objectively validated systems of publicly shared belief that an individual engages in any truly educational undertaking. Such a



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thought is critical to Paterson's idea of education as a body of knowledge, as he believes that body of knowledge enshrines our most sustained and thorough attempts to grasp and penetrate some meaningful reality and of which we seek enlarged awareness (p. 21). Furthermore, to be truly educated, a man must care profoundly about the bodies of knowledge in which he has been initiated - about the manner in which they have been arrived at and the manner in which they will be preserved and transmitted. Education in enlarging man's awareness, should enlarge his awareness of the value of his awareness, according to Paterson.

Eventually Paterson equates educational activity with liberal education and the goal of developing those desirable intrinsic qualities and capacities that constitute personhood. From this position it is only a short step to critical comment on the appropriateness of labelling vocational courses as "educational" on the grounds that they do not address those central processes of being that are critical to the definition of education.

Paterson's position is logical and attractive. It fails, however, to reflect the reality of the definition of education as used in the United States. Increasingly the boundaries between education and training in the United States are becoming blurred and indistinct. The terms are often used interchangeably without any effort to distinguish between them, more is said on this point in the main body of the book. It is also possible that it will fail to represent the reality of the education of adults in most of the western industrialized nations within a few years.

When the term education is used in this work, the emphasis is upon the cumulative process of obtaining knowledge or skill (including the cognitive affective and psychomotor adjustments that follow) and the social provisions for facilitating the process. No effort is made to discriminate between different kinds of knowledge or skills or institutional providers. Thus, education of adults includes skill development in business and industry as well as more cognitive based learning. It also includes a similar range of aims of higher education.

## Adults

As other terms defined in the preceding paragraphs, the word "adult" is used in various senses. Morris

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(1969) provides four definitions, two for adult as a noun, and two for adult as an adjective. All four definitions emphasize maturity. When adult is defined as a noun, maturity is linked with age or what is described as a fully grown, mature organism. Criteria to determine adult status have changed over the centuries. Anania (1969) provides a useful discussion of the social, legal and economic characteristics associated with the meaning of the word. His explication of adult as a concept reveals that adulthood was once believed to contain a number of preliminary stages that eventually led to full adulthood. Certain rights and privileges were associated with each of the preliminary stages. For example, the right of marriage was associated with a younger age than the right of inheritance. Full adulthood was marked by the age at which a male qualified for ordination as a Priest.

Educators of adults in the United States have not developed such an hierarchy of biological, economic and legal stages and associated social scales and privileges to distinguish among adults. Neither have they always agreed on the criteria to be used in defining an adult for data collection and theory building purposes. These definitions have included several legal age definitions from the normal compulsory school age of 16 to legal voting age 18-21 to the so-called traditional college student age of 22. A review of the various individual books that constitute the 1980 Handbook Series in Adult Education suggests the contributors preferred to not become involved in the struggle to define either adults or adult education. Long (1980) discusses definitions along lines similar to the following observations.

Since Bryson (1936) defined an adult for adult education purposes as one "...engaged in the ordinary business of life" (p.3) some others such as Jensen (1964) and Houle (cited by Schroeder, 1970) have also favored that limitation. Other characteristics, such as being responsible for self or others, have sometimes been added (Verner, 1964). These characteristics were added to get away from legal age restrictions while providing for maturity and independence from parents. Despite all the mental gymnastics that have been used to arrive at a definition of an adult, the most workable one seems to be aged based. Therefore, for the purpose of this book, an adult is defined as any person beyond compulsory school age (16) who is not regularly enrolled in a secondary school (grades 9-12) and or

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who meets one or more social, civic and legal definitions of adulthood. No effort will be made to distinguish between the 17 year old who has dropped out of school and the one who has graduated or the 24 year old who is living independently and the 26 year old graduate student who receives regular maintenance support from parents or others.

### Education of Adults

Two different phrases are often used interchangeably, "Education of adults" and "adult education." In its broadest sense, education of adults can be used to include all systematic efforts of adults to obtain knowledge or skill. Adult education is frequently a much more narrow term. It is usually used to refer to people (adults) who meet specific age, legal or social characteristics who are involved in a specific educational activity such as adult basic education, hobby and craft activities, religious education and so forth. As a result, the term adult education often connotes a program of instruction for a target group and is a noun, in contrast education of adults connotes action and may be thought of as a verb phrase. Adult education by definition frequently excludes college and university students despite an increasing trend toward a combination of work and educational careers. For the objectives of this book, adult education is broadly defined, and includes all systematic and purposive efforts by the adult to become an educated person (obtain knowledge and skill).

Grattan (1955, p. 3) defines adult education as education that occurs after formal education, or what is called "schooling." Nevertheless, he notes that the two are related in many ways. For example, opportunities for adults to continue their education are often offered by schools, from the public school through higher education. But, it would be incorrect to assume that adult education is inextricably connected with the schooling system at any level. Grattan correctly observes adult education is free to address adults as adults and that this uniqueness is the real field of adult education (p. 4).

Consequently, in keeping with the title of this book, a new perspective that encompasses a broader view of adult education and which more closely equates with the education of adults influences the observations and conclusions shared in the following pages. Education of adults and

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adult education both include a variety of postcompulsory educational opportunities and independently conceived, designed and pursued learning activities. Graduate education, baccalaureate degree work, non-credit activity, staff development programs in business and industry, and self-directed (autonomous) learning activities qualify for inclusion in the discussion.

The terms adults, adult education and education of adults as used in this book are inclusive rather than exclusive in nature. Hence, adults are defined to include those individuals who by virtue of one or more of social, civic and legal definitions have assumed the status of adults in American society. Included is the 16 year old mother, the 17 year old secondary school dropout and the 22 year old college student. Institutionally, education of adults begins upon completion or termination of secondary school. The 18 or even 19 year old who is a regular high school student is not included in the definition of adult, but the 16 year old college freshman is. As most definitions of adult status, the one used here is controversial, and is not generally used in adult education literature in the United States.

Equally controversial is the interchangeable use of the term adult education and education of adults. However, once one accepts the idea that adult education is broader than schooling, it is much easier to move to the position of interchanging the terms. Using the term interchangeably has a practical benefit; the author is not limited to the continuous use of the rather awkward term, education of adults. Adult education is easier to write and to read.

### New, Perspectives, Education of Adults

Collectively, the selected definitions of the above terms imply that New Perspectives on the Education of Adults in the United States is designed to achieve the following objectives:

(a) to provide descriptive, interpretative and critical comment on selected important aspects of education of adults in the United States of America; (b) to challenge some of the older positions that either may no longer be appropriate or which may have never been valid; and (c) to provide some speculations concerning future directions in the education of adults in the United States. Three general criteria were used in the selection of content and trends: (a) the topics

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selected and discussed are sufficiently related to lend coherence to the commentary; (b) discussion of the selected topics provides a new point of view (as established in the section on definitions) of education of adults in the U.S.; and (c) the variety of sources selected for inclusion such as popular trends, latent trends (trends that always have not been duly noted, but which are apparent upon examination), recently reported positions and views in the practice and study of adults contribute to a subsequent new point of view on the education of adults in the United States.

Based on the definitions discussed in the preceding pages, the following chapters are designed to provide a personal point of view on the current developments and trends in the ways and means by which adults obtain knowledge and skills in the United States. Novelty is not a goal, neither is originality in its strictest and narrowest sense. Yet, it is hoped that a creative use of what is known, believed and espoused or frequently debated will provide a fresh, accurate and rational view of the education of adults in the United States. To accomplish this objective, *New Perspectives...* is divided into four sections: (a) introductory concepts; (b) clientele for education; (c) theory and practice; and (d) conclusions.

Part one has two chapters, chapter one and chapter two. The first chapter is designed to present a brief overview of the status of adult participation in education as reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics. Other selected related works on participation are also examined and discussed.

Chapter two, focuses on philosophies, purposes and conceptualizations in the education of adults in the United States. The introduction to Part One provides additional information.

Part two contains three chapters concerning perspectives on the clientele of education for adults. It was difficult to determine which program areas to include in this section. Finally, corporate education, education of the elderly and literacy education were selected. Separately and collectively these three kinds of education services appear to be part and parcel of the post industrial American society. Corporate education is perhaps one of the most significant developments in education of adults in the last quarter of the century. Education of the elderly is a yet relatively uncharted area despite its increasing prominence in educational gerontology, but because

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of the increasing significance of the elderly in American society it is one of the program areas of the future. Literacy education is far from new in the United States. But, the involvement of the Federal government in the program is relatively recent, beginning in 1964. The contradiction inherent in the existence of millions of illiterate adults in a high tech society emphasizes the importance of literacy education.

Two of the three chapters in part two are co-authored. Bradley Courtenay, a well known educational gerontologist, is the senior author of chapter four. Curtis Ulmer, an experienced specialist in literacy education, is senior author of chapter five.

Part three, theory and practice is comprised of two chapters. Chapter six provides new points of view in the study of adults; chapter seven discusses theoretical developments. Additional comment on the content of these two chapters is found in the introduction to Part three.

Part four contains one chapter which, among a variety of topics, offers some speculations about future directions in adult education in the United States.

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Athens, Georgia

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## PART ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Two important topics important in the education of American adults are discussed in this section. Chapter one is primarily a report on the related topics of participation, variables in participation and adult education agencies. Chapter two, in contrast, challenges some of the traditional views concerning philosophies, purposes and conceptualizations of education of adults in the United States.

As set forth in chapter one, the education of adults in the United States is far from a simple monolithic phenomenon. Even the number of adults who annually engage in some kind of educational activity is debatable. A range of estimates exists, however, none of the estimates including those provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics are perceived to accurately define adult participation in the nation. Limited discussion of the relationship between participation and diverse variables is provided. It is also suggested that new and different research methodologies, including statistical procedures, are desired.

The picture of adult participation is further obfuscated by the complexity of the provider scene. Efforts to conceptually organize the purveyors of education of adults are noted.

Chapter two follows upon the topical heels of the first chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a range of views concerning the philosophies, purposes and concepts in use today. Some of the more cherished concepts such as the idea of adult education as a social movement and as



## Introduction

a province of the voluntary learner are challenged. The philosophical positions of educators of adults such as Apps (1973, 1979), Cotton (1968), Elias and Merriam (1980) and Kallen (1962) are reported. In addition, two conceptual schemes of adult education purposes separated by approximately fifty years are noted.

## Chapter One

### PARTICIPATION AND ADULT EDUCATION AGENCIES

Participation of adults in all kinds of instruction increased considerably over the past decades and is expected to continue to increase into the 1990's (USDE 1983). Educational participation of adults in the United States is a multi-faceted phenomenon that defies accurate description. From the 17th century to the present American adults have participated in diverse educational activities provided by all kinds of providers (Long, 1976). Nevertheless, it has never been accorded the same status as childhood education. As a result the provisions for education of adults have been uncoordinated, unregulated and almost invisible in the history of education.

Changing conditions associated with increasing technological advances and social complexity over the past century have contributed to the steady and continuous emergence of adult education. Numerous institutions emerged in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries to address educational needs and aspirations of American adults. These institutions include the Mechanics Institutes, American Lyceum, Chatauqua, University Extension, Cooperative Extension Service and a variety of special purpose programs such as Americanization, agricultural education and literacy education.

The contemporary scene is even more complex. Education of adults is provided by all kinds of community, volunteer, professional organizations as well as educational institutions, business and industry and governmental agencies. Education of adults includes those services provided by the department of defense, (civilian and military),

## Participation and Adult Education Agencies

educational institutions such as the public schools and postsecondary education institutions, professional associations, and corporations. They include special purpose education activities such as religious education, corrections education and personal development activities from transcendental meditation to positive thinking and assertiveness training.

The number of adults annually engaged in education in the United States is unknown. Various estimates are available in the literature (Long, 1983b). Some estimates are as low as about 13% while others range up to 90%. Numbers vary from about 21 million to 60 million. Scholars who have carefully considered the various estimates of adult participation generally agree that despite the questionable validity of most estimates, education of adults is an important educational activity in the United States. The range of providers and purposes of programs preclude the possibility of providing any kind of comprehensive description of education of adults in the United States in one brief book. The only way to accomplish such an undertaking would be to limit the book to a gazetteer.

Therefore, instead of attempting to be overly comprehensive this chapter, like the book, tends to be concerned with specific and selective topics while addressing particular current themes and developments. It is not offered as a balanced representation of the entire range of education services and activities for adults in the United States in the 1980's. Particular concerns that are discussed include (a) trends in educational participation as reflected by one authoritative source, (b) variables often identified in studies of participation and some contemporary trends in participation, (c) the provider scene, which some believe is becoming increasingly complex (Cross, 1984), and (d) a summary.

## PARTICIPATION

Participation of adults in education is one of the most popular topics in the literature of the field. Educators of American adults have been interested in ascertaining motives and justifications for participation in education for more than half a century. Love's (1953) work may be one of the better known early example of modern inquiry into the topic. Certainly Houle's (1961) work is

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perceived as an important contribution that stimulated research and conceptualization concerning participation.

Estimates of participation have been reported by Aslanian and Brickell (1980), Carp, Peterson and Roelfs (1974), Cartright (1935), Cross, (1981), Holden (1958), Johnstone and Rivera (1965), Knowles (1955, 1977), Long (1983b) and Tough (1978) to cite a few. Studies of local and state participation rates have also been reported (Long, 1983b). One thing the various studies of participation have in common is their uniqueness. Most of the investigations of participation have used their own definitions of adult education and of adults. For example, the age criterion ranges from age 14 (Holden, 1958; Knowles, 1955) to 25 years of age (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980). Similar variations are discovered in definitions of participation. Therefore, the range of estimates from approximately 21 million by the NCES to about 50 million by Peterson (1979) is understandable. But, while it is easy to understand the discrepancies among estimates, the problem of determining a reasonably accurate appraisal of total participation or the percentage of participation is not resolved. For example, recent estimates of participants in employer sponsored education, as cited in chapter three, is over 12 million or approximately 57 percent of the total estimate for 1981.

The available information contributes to some paradoxical conditions. For example, possibly most students of the topic would agree that between one of three and one of five adults annually engage in some educational activity (variously defined). Yet, standard national statistics published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 1983 p. 158) reports a participation rate of approximately 13 percent. This more conservative estimate seriously fails to portray what is believed to be an accurate and realistic picture of the scope and size of adult education. One of the more serious problems with the 13 percent figure is associated with the definition used by the Census Bureau.

Adult education as defined by NCES is as follows: The term adult education is used to describe all part-time instruction, including nonacademic as well as degree-credit activities engaged in by adults. Specifically as defined in the 1981 Adult Education Participation Survey it refers to all courses and organized educational

## Participation and Adult Education Agencies

activities, excluding those taken by full-time students in programs leading to a high school diploma or an academic degree. It also excludes courses taken as part of occupational training programs of 6 months or more duration. For the purposes of the most recent NCES survey, adults were defined as persons 17 years of age and older. Full-time students also engaged in part-time adult education activities were included as participants (U.S. Department of Education, 1983, p. 158).

Note the NCES excludes (a) educational courses and activities taken by full-time students in programs leading to a high school diploma or academic degree, (b) courses taken as part of occupational training programs of 6 months or more duration. It is difficult to accurately determine the effects of the above exclusions. For the purposes of this book it is noted that the 13 percent rate of participation fails to represent the true rate of participation of adults in education as discussed in the Preface. Despite the obvious limitations of the NCES data they are preferred for some purposes for several reasons. First, they provide a national data base. Second, the data are perceived to be more reliable than other estimates (based on the definition employed). Third, they are widely available for use. Fourth, within reason, they can be used for noting trends and possible changes in participation over a number of years. Fifth, they have been obtained regularly and reported every three years since 1969. Therefore, comments made in this chapter, unless noted otherwise, are based on NCES data.

For the year ending in May 1981, more than 21 million people participated in adult education programs in the United States. This is an increase of over 3 million since 1978, or almost 17 percent. Part of this increase can be explained simply by increases in the adult population; in 1978, 72 percent of the population was 17 years old and over, compared to 74 percent in 1981. However, even accounting for the effects of population growth, the rate of participation in adult education also increased, by over 8 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). In 1981, almost 13 percent of all adults chose to further their education through participation in part-time instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

Participation rates varied substantially by age; the most active participants in adult education were 25 to 34-year-olds. For example, almost one of every five adults between the ages of