OPEN ENROLLMENT

Major Advantages According to Research

Adult education began with the mandate to serve the “least educated and most in need” adults. Research has confirmed that this potential group of students has serious, multiple barriers to accessing, attending and persisting in classes. (Beder 2001; Comings 1999, 2000; Reder & Strawn 2001). Open enrollment maximizes access to instruction for these learners. No other enrollment type allows more learners access to educational opportunity. And once enrolled, no other type provides such flexibility in attendance.

Adult education learners “do not have poor attendance or lack persistence for frivolous or trivial reasons. Instead, they face an array of conflicting challenges, barriers, and responsibilities.” (Comings 1999). Allowing students to attend when they are able, and miss class when they must, respects the multiple obligations, responsibilities and challenges the adult faces.

Adults must make an active decision and overcome significant barriers every time they attend an adult education class. “ABE and ESL learners often face hundreds if not thousands of hours of learning in order to achieve their goals.” (Comings 2006). They cannot put their lives on hold to attend every class and ignore other adult responsibilities. Challenges that may be managed for the short term may prove to be quite daunting when needing to be handled for many months or years of classes.

The structure of open enrollment classes presents less of a psychological barrier to some students to enrollment. Comments reported to researchers include that since open enrollment classes are not like the K-12 classes they had before, they don’t have to worry about falling behind the rest of the class if they don’t understand something, or not being able to “catch up” with the rest of the class if the need to miss some days (Beder 2005, 2006; Smith & Hofer 2003).

Open enrollment meets the common need of students who must drop out of classes, but plan to return when life circumstances stabilize. Research has used the term “stopouts” to describe this pattern, and argues for a new definition of persistence based on the student’s rather than the program’s schedule of goal completion. (Belzer 1998, Comings 1999).
Open enrollment allows these students to persist with little wait time when they are ready to re-enroll in classes. Students gain instruction, even if erratic. Research is showing that students frequently engage in self-study during breaks between classes. (Comings 1999; Reder & Strawn 2001). Programs gain attendance hours, at least for the "stop-in" times.

Programs, although using a great deal of open enrollment, are not necessarily doing so because of a belief in its educational value. "Directors and teachers had, by and large, mixed feelings about open enrollment, wanting to serve as many students possible, but wondering what this meant for the quality of teaching". (Smith & Hofer 2003)

Programs are driven both by a "desire to be flexible to student’s attendance needs and by the program’s needs to keep student enrollment numbers up" (Smith & Hofer 2003). Open enrollment is the most effective enrollment structure for keeping classes filled and enrollment numbers high for reporting to funders.

**Major Disadvantages According to Research**

Open enrollment’s greatest strengths are its open access and flexibility for students. But once in the classroom, these strengths can create challenges to teaching and learning. A disruptive environment of “enrollment and attendance turbulence” is created when new students are constantly dropping in and out of class, placing conflicting demands on the teacher, and making it difficult for teachers and learners to focus on teaching and learning. (Sticht 1998; Smith & Hofer 2003)

When teachers in an open enrollment class do not know who will be in class on any given day, or how many new students may show up or drop out, planning and delivery of instruction is challenged. Constraints are placed on effective teaching and learning. (Taylor et al, 2005; Robinson-Geller, 2007).

Teachers are limited in their instructional choices. Direct, sequential, interactive instruction is seriously challenged. In open enrollment. Researchers have concluded that the structure “necessitates teaching individualized versus direct instruction.” (Strucker 2007). STAR programs are advised that it is not possible to deliver evidence-based reading instruction in an open enrollment environment.

The typical non-ESL classroom was found by researchers to be organized in “independent group instruction”. Students worked independently with a core curriculum of workbooks. Instruction was found to be mostly focused on the literal recall of factual information and discreet skills. (Beder et al 2001, 2005; Robinson-Geller & Lipnevich, 2006, 2007)

Many teachers report a diminished sense of professionalism and frustration in an open enrollment environment due to their inability to plan, follow a syllabus, and provide sequential instruction. (Robinson-Geller 2005; Strucker 2006, Smith & Hofer 2003).

In an individualized environment, teachers continually had to choose between “spending more time with fewer students in order to help each student understand skills more
thoroughly; or spend less time with each student in order to keep more students moving forward” (Beder 2006, p.28 ; Robinson-Geller 2007).

Where whole group instruction was used in open enrollment the teacher struggled with what content to teach. The need to review for those who had missed previous days conflicted with the need to move forward for those attending. (Smith & Hofer 2003; Strucker 2006, 2007) "Instruction often takes place without a clear scope and sequence”. (Cronen et al 2007).

Open enrollment may produce disincentives to attendance when there are no ramifications to days missed, and when due to individualized instruction, one day is much like the next (Snow & Strucker 1999). Research suggests that the higher percentage of classes a student attends, the higher score he or she is likely to demonstrate on outcome testing. (Condelli 2007).

Attendance and persistence are highest when social support is greatest. High engagement was found to be built through active participation in teams or groups in class; learners assuming a leadership role in the class; and a high degree of learner interaction (Kegan 2001; Beder 2006; Comings1999, Ziegler & Durant 2001).

The development of social support, cohorts of learners, and learning communities are key to persistence. All depend upon a stable attending group of learners. Open enrollment classes have been found to have less cohesiveness and support among learners than other types of classes. (Beder & Medina 2001).

Open enrollment is associated with low learning gains. According to the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the open enrollment policies of many programs, along with the relatively low retention and attendance of adult ESL students, interfere with the continuous level of instruction needed to acquire literacy and language skills. (Cronen et al 2007).

With open enrollment, large numbers of students may be served. However, with the erratic attendance and persistence patterns typical of open enrollment, the program’s goal of satisfying federal requirements regarding funding guidelines about sufficient intensity and duration of instruction may not have be met (Comings 2006)

FIXED ENROLLMENT

Major Advantages According to Research
Fixed enrollment would seem to be the answer to many of the disadvantages of open enrollment. Since all students who are going to be part of the class have entered by the first few class meetings, the makeup of the class is known by both the teacher and by the other learners.

Fixed enrollment allows for optimal educational planning and delivery circumstances. The structure does not limit the type of instruction that can be delivered, so direct, sequential, group instruction of the kind found effective for adult learners can be
delivered. STAR programs are urged to implement their instruction in managed or fixed enrollment environments. (Strucker 2007).

Since teachers in fixed enrollment classes have the same group of students to work with throughout the class, they are not limited to individualized instruction, but can have group activities, project-based instruction, learner involvement, sequential, direct group instruction, and choose from the full spectrum of educational delivery methods appropriate for the particular group of students.

The teacher can plan instruction and follow lesson plans since the student body remains constant throughout the class. Teachers can continue to move forward in instruction unlike the open enrollment teachers who felt forced to choose between the need to constantly review for returning students and the need to move forward for persisting students. (Robinson-Geller 2005; Beder et al 2006).

The focus of a fixed enrollment class can be on curriculum development and instruction. It is not distracted by enrollment turbulence. Students do not have to deal with the enrollment turbulence of the open enrollment classroom either, and profit from the focus of the teacher and instruction. It is a stable educational environment.

The teacher in a fixed enrollment class can plan instruction so that each day missed is an important day missed. Incentive to attend should thereby be increased. And research suggests that the percentage of class days attended positively affects learning gain. (Condelli 2007).

Learners in fixed enrollment classes have the necessary characteristics to develop cohort groups. They enter together, and share a common goal and commitment. (Drago-Severson 2001; Kegan 2001). Since there is a stable, attending group of learners, a learning community can develop that forms strong, supportive bonds. This has been shown by research to increase persistence and learning gains. (Beder et al 2006; Kegan 2001; Walker & Strawn 2004; Ziegler and Durant 2001).

Research indicates that high levels of learner engagement increase persistence. Engagement can be built through interactive learning, leadership opportunities within the class, and building bonds among learners. (Beder et al 2006; Ziegler & Durant 2001). Due to the stability of enrollment, these are all possible in a fixed enrollment class.

Research on persistence indicates the importance of learners seeing the progress they are making towards their goals. (Comings 2000; Malitz & Ponder 2008). In a fixed enrollment class with a syllabus and sequential instruction, learners see movement. With ongoing assessment and feedback, learners can see their progress towards goals.

The structure of a fixed enrollment class is the same as that of postsecondary. Transition is therefore eased for those who succeed in the structure. (Crandall & Shepard 2004; Cronan 2004). Adult education programs at community colleges find fixed enrollment classes “fit” neatly into the institutional credit hour system. (Walker and Strawn 2004).
Major Disadvantages According to Research

Fixed enrollment allows teachers and students to focus on instruction and learning, but it is at the cost of access and flexibility. Fixed enrollment provides the least access to educational opportunity of any of the enrollment types.

Many potential adult education students are unable to commit to long term regular class schedules due to part time erratic work schedules, shift work, child care issues, and other barriers. For others, regular attendance is challenging due to health, work, or family issues. (Beder 1990; Comings 1888; Reder & Strawn 1998; Robinson-Geller 2007; Tolbert 2005).

For many students, barriers make it impossible to make it to registration on the few days scheduled. For others, a search for finding solutions to reliable child care, transportation or other barriers, for example, may reveal that short term offers are made, but a long term commitment from a friend or family member of several months is not forthcoming. Therefore, they do not enroll. (Beder 1990; Long 2001; Robinson-Geller 2007; Tolbert 2005.)

Agencies often refer learners to programs throughout the year, many mandating that they “get their GED” or “learn English” and report back to their caseworkers or parole officers within a designated period of time with progress, or face serious penalties. In a fixed enrollment environment, these individuals may have to wait many weeks or months before a class begins in which they can enroll.

A barrier to enrollment reported by research includes the fact that fixed enrollment classes “look like” the K-12 class structures from which they came. They report fearing the will fall behind the rest of the class and not be able to catch up. This can become a barrier both to enrollment and to attendance once enrolled. (Beder 2005).

The long term nature (usually several months) of fixed enrollment classes requires long term persistence of the learner. Often, large numbers of students enroll in a fixed enrollment class, but high attrition sets in after several weeks. Research suggests this high attrition is at least partially due to the reality of the complexity and multiple life challenges of the educationally and economically in need adult student’s life and the inflexibility of the fixed enrollment structure. (Beder 2000; Comings 1888; Reder & Strawn 1998).

Since the learners have formed strong bonds in the beginning of the class, as attrition sets in and students see their peers stop coming to class, the loss of the factors supporting persistence is especially keen. Comings 1999, 2007; Drago-Severson et al; 2001; Kegan 2001).

Often, by the end of the term, there may only be a handful of students left attending a fixed enrollment class. The number of students who persist long enough to post test and make measurable gains for NRS reports may be quite small. The program goal of satisfying the federal funding guidelines about sufficient intensity and duration of instruction may not be met. (Comings 2006).
MANAGED ENROLLMENT

**Major Advantages According to Research**
The structure of managed enrollment combines the strengths from both open and fixed enrollment while minimizing their challenges. It is meant to recognize and allow for the adult learner’s life realities and challenges, while providing instruction in a sequential, stable, educational environment likely to produce learning results.

One of the major advantages of managed enrollment is its locally designed nature. Its exact structure is developed to meet local goals and needs.

The provider no longer has to make the forced choice between “whether it is better to serve as many students as possible and be as flexible as possible, or serve fewer students with more focus on curriculum and sequential instruction” (Smith & Hofer 2003, p. 51). The local program decides just how much access to allow; how long students are expected to persist and how many absences can be allowed; how the class will be structured; and how the students will meet their goals if the enroll and persist to the end of the class.

Enrollment turbulence is controlled or eliminated entirely depending upon how the program structures new enrollments. At minimum, intake, assessment, and orientation are handled in groups outside of class, freeing up intake staff time for more retention and support work.

When new students do enter a class, the teacher is expecting them, has information about them, and has prepared the class and instruction for a more optimal entry for the students.

Orientation is required of all learners. Research has shown orientation to be a major predictor of retention. (Kegan 2001; Comings 2006; Taylor 2005). Learners arrive in class already as cohorts of learners. Cohorts have been found to significantly increase retention, persistence, and learning gains. (Drago-Severson 2001; Kegan 2001).

Unlike open and fixed enrollment, there are usually attendance requirements in managed enrollment classes. This provides an incentive to attendance higher than in either open or fixed enrollment. Research suggests that the percent of classes a student attends leads to increased learning. (Condelli 2007).

Like open enrollment, managed enrollment accommodates the need for learners to “stop out” of program instruction for periods of time and come back when life circumstances allow, without having to wait the long terms fixed enrollment would dictate. (Belzer 1998; Comings 1999).

Managed enrollment, like fixed enrollment, allows for optimal educational planning and delivery circumstances. The structure does not limit the type of instruction that can be delivered, so direct, sequential, group, instruction of the kind found effective for adult
learners can be delivered (Robinson-Geller & Lipnevich 2006). STAR programs are urged to implement their instruction in managed or fixed enrollment environments. (Strucker 2007).

Beder’s study of 598 classes in 12 states found that teachers in managed enrollment classes were more interactive with their students than those of open enrollment classes, used more direct instruction, collaborative methods, and the teaching of higher level thinking skills. (Beder et al 2001, 2005; Robinson-Geller & Lipnevich, 2006).

Managed enrollment requires a focus on curriculum and instruction. With attendance requirements and learning modules (when applicable), the curriculum and lesson plans are carefully designed so that learning goals can be achieved within the structure of the class. Students can see progress towards goals, which is an important factor in persistence (Comings 2000; Malitz & Ponder 2008).

Managed enrollment classes can be structured like fixed enrollment to fit seamlessly into the postsecondary education and training system. Some programs have made changes to managed enrollment primarily to ease transition. Oregon made such a decision more than twenty years ago primarily for such a reason. (Walker & Strawn 2004).

Researchers have found that managed enrollment increases attendance, and decreases attrition. (Beder 2006; Chisman 2007 Post 790; Polis 2006; Povernmire 2006; Ramirez 2006; Smith & Hofer 2003; Ziegler & Durant 2001).

States and most programs moving from open to managed enrollment are reporting anecdotal information that they are seeing increased attendance, persistence and outcomes to report to funders. Often reduced enrollments accompany these. Many states are moving from enrollment based to outcome based funding, so the outcomes are positive for both learners and programs. (Hyzer & Haupt 2006; Povenmire 2006; Ramirez 2006; see State Profiles, this report.)

Managed enrollment is being found to result in increased learning outcomes for programs. (Chisman 2007; Condelli 2003; Hyzer & Haupt 2006; Povenmire 2006, Ramirez, 2006; Strucker 2007, and State Profiles this report).

Managed enrollment has direct benefits for programs. Managed enrollment helps programs keep classes from emptying at the end of each session, thereby gaining the program more post tests and outcome gains. Due to increased attendance and persistence, enrollment hours are increased. With an increase focus on curriculum, teaching, and learning, plus an increased attendance, learning gains should be higher. The program may have a better chance of meeting the federal funding guidelines regarding intensity and duration of instruction. (Comings 2007)
Major Disadvantages According to Research
Managed enrollment has been developed out of individual program frustrations with the limitations and negative effects of open and fixed enrollment. It is formed out of taking the strengths from open enrollment and fixed enrollment, fitting them into individual program environments and population needs, and creating customized class by class answers to needs. This is one of its greatest strengths, but it also creates its greatest challenges.

The success of managed enrollment lies in local program planning and systematic, data-driven development. Therefore, it will have varying levels of success. (Povenmire 2006; Hyzer & Haupt 2006, 2007; Ramirez 2006).

Change requires program wide commitment. Structural changes will be made in the classroom, curriculum, intake, and orientation, as well as in determining how many weeks a class will last and when new students will enter. Managed enrollment will require initial program investment in terms of staff time and effort to plan and make program changes. (Hyzer & Haupt 2006, 2007; Polis 2006; Povenmire 2006; Ramirez 2006).

Programs considering managed enrollment often fear loss of funding because they believe it will result in fewer enrollments than open enrollment would have produced. Initial results have not indicated this, but there have not been enough research based pilot programs documented to be able to report whether or not this is a valid fear. Many states have negated this fear by moving their funding mechanisms from enrollment based to outcome based ones. (See state profiles this report.).

Some programs have reported stable or increased enrollments or attendance, or report having to get used to fewer students at the end of the term, even if their attendance and learning gains were higher. (Povenmire 2006; Ramirez 2006; State profiles this report).
Researchers suggest that funders could put forth a hold harmless period for programs piloting managed enrollment in order to gather data. Some states have implemented this strategy.

Concern has been raised that managed enrollment does not meet the needs of the “most in need” adult learners with multiple life challenges whose lives will not allow them to commit to a stable schedule of attendance. Managed enrollment attempts to alleviate this by shortening the commitment time of each class. By shortening a class length to as few as 3-6 weeks, many learners are able to experience successful completion, build self-efficacy, and enroll in another short term commitment.

Still, there will be some who need more flexibility than managed enrollment offers. Researchers suggest providing an open enrollment option or other drop-in type learning situation on-site alongside managed enrollment for those who are unable to commit to more scheduled classes.