

# Investing in Adult Continuing Education as a Strategy for Rural Economic Development

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a conceptualization of how adult education can be a strategy for rural economic development. Adult Education has the potential for improving the quality of life for individuals living in rural areas by expanding their access to income and employment opportunities. Adult education is a continuing process where adults, who perform multiple social roles, participate in organized learning activities to improve their human resource skills or their human capital assets.*

*Economists view participation in adult education as an investment in the capital assets of the individual. These investments may be viewed as existing levels of education (stock) or what is under development (flow). Benefits from investment in adult education accrue to both the individual and community. Rural economic development is linked to the existence or improvement of physical, material, capital, and human resources of an area.*

## INTRODUCTION

It has been said (Bunce, 1982 p. 13) that "...the majority of the world's land is used for rural activities, and most settlement units are rural." In contrast, only one-fourth of the population in the United States is classified as rural, people living on farms in open countryside and non-metropolitan areas.

Providing educational services for adults living in rural areas is a challenge. It also has become an important local, state, and federal policy issue as several major reports on the future of rural America have linked rural economic opportunity to investment in education (MDC Inc., 1986; Southern Growth Policies Board, 1986; Rosenfeld, 1985). Adult education is more often described than it is defined. Very simply stated, it is an activity for adults that involves learning. Activities are usually planned to achieve some goal such as, gain knowledge about a specific topic, develop a particular skill or achieve a particular status, or attain personal satisfaction by accomplishing a task. Adult continuing education activities are organized and directed by: others; the learner and assisted by others; or by the learner without the assistance of others (Dark-

enwald and Merriam, 1982). Houle (1976) has defined adult education as: "any process by which individuals, groups, or institutions try to help men or women improve their skills, knowledge and sensitiveness" (pp. 7, 19, 32, 248-249).

While adult education has been recognized as a key element in individual and regional economic development opportunity (MDC Inc., 1986 and Schultz, 1961), limited work has been done to examine how adult education can be used as a local development strategy or to evaluate economic returns to individual and community investments in adult education. This paper describes adult education and relates various adult education program areas to economic development. The paper then examines linkages between adult education and rural economic development strategies.

## METHODS AND PROGRAMS

Adult continuing education is designed for people above 18 years of age who are not enrolled in formal education or schools for degrees. These adults are seeking information, knowledge and skills about their current social role and status. They may participate in

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learning activities at any one of a variety of public and private agencies or institutions. The methods (Kelvins, 1976) used to teach include discussion, panels, forums, lectures, demonstrations, tutoring, interactive computers, audio visuals, simulations, games, and case studies. Teaching techniques range from traditional approaches such as lectures, role playing and discussion to nontraditional methods such as interviews, journal keeping and simulations.

Adult continuing education programs are directly related to community economic development to the degree that they improve the quality of the work force (Carnevale, 1983). Subject matter focusing on basic skills, such as reducing the rate of illiteracy among adults (Sticht, 1983) or offering education and options for teenagers who may be potential high school dropouts (Sullivan, 1984), has been increasingly recognized as a vital component of rural and regional development efforts (Rosenfeld, 1985). A variety of community services and facilities can be directly related to economic development if they influence either "quality of life" or economic efficiency. Education has been found to influence development decisions as an amenity (Hekman, 1982) and as a cost factor (McNamara, et. al. 1988). For example, adult education programs can improve quality of life by providing recreation activities and opportunities for youth, adults, and senior citizens. The programs can also provide a more direct link to economic development by providing specific training to support new or expanding industry. To the extent that adult education can retrain displaced farmers or other workers for entry into new career areas or can update the existing workforce members to help them remain professionally competitive, adult education reduces the demand for other publicly provided services. Through these activities, adult education can provide a critical link between individuals and communities and their development programs.

## **PARTICIPATION IN CONTINUING EDUCATION**

Adults participate in continuing education for a variety of reasons. However, research indicates that the majority of adults participate for a job related reason (Swanson and Mosier, 1983) . . . to get a job

. . . to get a better job . . . to change careers . . . to learn a new skill . . . to stay up-to-date in their current job. Other reasons include community improvement, personal development (e.g., health, nutrition, diet, exercise) and recreation (to play a sport, to learn new games).

An important premise about adults participating in continuing education programs is that every adult should have access to programs of interest. However, if programs or experiences are not available adults may conduct learning activities on their own via "self directed" means. Tough (1971) has shown that almost 90% of all adults conduct at least one self-managed learning activity of 7 or more hours on an annual basis. The number of self-directed learning projects an individual may conduct on an annual basis can range from as few as one to as many as 100. Learning projects may take as few as 7 hours or as many as 2000 hours to complete. Adults do learn on their own for their own specific reasons!

Table 1 classifies the variety of programs offered by both public and private continuing education agencies according to Schultz' human capital investment model (1961). The middle column presents examples of programs, experiences, and activities for adults in rural areas. Brief notations are made in the far right column about the economic impact of these activities. For example, Schultz mentions health development and maintenance as a way of investing in the capital assets of the individual. Continuing education agencies in rural areas often sponsor exercise, fitness, or medical assessment programs to promote health care. The economic impact would be to reduce the cost of health care for individuals (or groups), to increase productivity by having fewer people "out sick" as well as to increase the potential for a longer life and work span. Similarly, the benefits of on-the-job training would be a better, more efficient and higher paid workforce. Formal education programs in communities offer residents the option of increasing their knowledge and skills and provides support for marketing these skills to current and potential employers. Study programs on a variety of professional, personal, community and cultural topics add to the overall quality of life in the rural area. Information about local and regional employment opportunities enables adults in rural areas to assess their local and regional employment potential.

*Table 1*  
**Program Responses to Human Capital Investment Needs of Adults**

<b><u>Human Capital Investment</u></b>	<b><u>Programs with</u></b>	<b><u>Economic Impact</u></b>
Needs (Schultz, 1961 Framework)	Potential to Impact Rural Residents	in Rural Areas
<b>Health Development and maintenance</b>	<b>Fitness, Stress management, promotion</b>	<b>Reduced health care costs; increased productivity; longer life span</b>
<b>On-the-job training include apprenticeships</b>	<b>Job improvement, job development, new business development</b>	<b>Expansion of local job market, attract new plants, improved performance on the job; no defects/high quality</b>
<b>Formal education including post-secondary and higher education as well as graduate professional education</b>	<b>Advanced degrees and skill certifications</b>	<b>Market the education level of of personnel in area to potential employers</b>
<b>Study programs (non-firm) for adults including "extension" (University extension, cooperative extension, community service type programs)</b>	<b>Job and personal improvement and community development related experiences, culture, arts, recreation, etc.</b>	<b>Improve overall "quality of life" for residents in rural areas. Attract tourist and potential new business to region</b>
<b>Mobility relocation for changing job opportunities (career counseling centers; and</b>	<b>Assess costs, benefits and potentials for staying or moving</b>	<b>Retraining displaced agricultural workers for other jobs and markets. Realistic assessment of employment in other rural areas or nearby suburban/ urban areas.</b>

## **SOCIAL ROLES AS A MOTIVATOR FOR PARTICIPATION**

Parent, spouse, employee, volunteer, committee member, and hobbyist are just a few of the multiple social roles that adults play (Loomis, 1960). Personal interest, pressure or stress to act on these social roles is also a motivator for participating in a continuing education program which would be referred to as human capital investments. An employee may be promoted to a new job or assume responsibilities that "trigger" (Aslanian and Brickell, 1983) the need for learning new skills or knowledge. A shift in role from spouse to parent may also trigger the need to learn new skills and to perform new roles.

Interest in being healthy, productive and fully functioning individuals and family groups is a motivator to develop a healthful lifestyle. Emphasis on diet, nutrition, exercise and health habits (Bruhn and Cordova, 1987) is currently a strong motivator for participation in continuing education.

There is a difference between adults who are skilled and those who are unskilled (Perelman, 1984). The "haves" seem to be better off economically . . . they have jobs, careers, training opportunities, and employment options. The "have nots" are in a constant struggle to "get even". They have few opportunities to get ahead. Basic literacy education, vocational-technical training, and continuing education offer some opportunities for the "have nots" to possibly "get even" and maybe "get ahead".

## **CONTINUING EDUCATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Rural development means many different things to people. Rasmusen (1985) summarized the major rural development objectives of federal programs from the 1908 Country Life Commission through the 1982 establishment of the National Advisory Council on Rural Development. The general objectives of the programs are consistent with Deavers' (1980) definition of rural development policy as "deliberate action by federal, state, and local governments and private institutions and individuals to achieve three goals: (a) improved rural income levels and employment opportunities; (b) improved access by rural residents to adequate housing and essential community facilities and services; and (c) responsible use of rural life." It

can be viewed as a process of changing communities and resources. Increasingly recognized, however, is the role of local leaders in the development process (Georgia Power, n.d.; Rosenfeld, 1985). Leaders must be encouraged to assess their area and work together to develop a plan or strategy for improving the community. Within this strategy are the needs for services and infra-structure support. As interest and commitment is organized to put the plan into action there is the need to begin marketing the community to existing and external business, industry, government, and other agencies. When the message about the area, the people, services, resources, and strengths are disseminated, it is likely that specific goals of promoting the expansion of existing enterprises and attracting new employment, education and cultural ventures can be enhanced, if not fully achieved.

Continuing education (CE) agencies, both public and private, are important supporters of the economic development process. Successful CE directors are fully informed about the demographics of their community, the current education and skill levels of the employed and unemployed workforce, the skills needed by existing employers, and the promotion possibility (i.e. "marketing") of available skills in the area. The connection between continuing education and economic development is that short term and long term training programs can be quickly designed and delivered to meet the human capital investment needs of individuals and community groups.

## **RURAL ADULTS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Communities across the country have different resources, capital, and facilities endowments and, consequently, face different development opportunities. The quality and educational level of the general population of a community appears to be a key element in overcoming economic isolation imposed by natural barriers such as mountains and rivers, and lack of communication or transportation facilities (Rosenfeld, 1985). Some rural areas have successfully developed land, water, air, and their human resource base to achieve development objectives and have a bright future. Other regions have faced decline or stagnation. Leadership and local investment in education appear to be key differences between growth and non-growth communities (Rosenfeld, 1985) argued that the benefits of investing in the capital assets of individuals may

have a greater economic impact than the production of goods and services. Schultz (1961) described these investments (see Table 1, column 1) in individuals in terms of health maintenance and development, on-the-job training, formal education, informal study programs and migration to other areas for changing job opportunities. These investments are a direct benefit to the individual . . . they acquire new skills, knowledge, attitudes, and personal development. Benefits also accrue to communities, in which these individuals live, work, play, and worship. Applying Schultz's framework, continuing education programs can be the methods for carrying out these capital investments! By providing continuing education opportunities to a broad spectrum of adults the economic potential of individuals (e.g. literacy skills, job skills, health promotion knowledge) and communities are improved.

Several studies on the economic status of the rural south (MDC Inc., 1986; Southern Growth Policies Board, 1986) also have focused on the need for investment in education to assure the economic and social vitality of rural communities for the future. Economic research has been undertaken to better understand the link between investment in education and economic opportunity. Schultz (1963) and Denison (1962) both examined the relationship between education investments and national income growth. Both studies found education to account for 30 to 50 percent of national income growth. Several micro level studies have attempted to identify the impact of local education investments on economic growth (Dorf and Emerson, 1978; Leuck, 1979; Smith, Deaton, and Kelch, 1978; and Salaiman and Husak, 1980). While some of these studies have found a relationship between education and manufacturing growth, the studies do not offer uniform support for the hypothesis that education investments influence local economic development. McNamara, Kriesel, and Deaton (1988) argue that the situation is in part due to two problems, 1) difficulties of specifying and measuring the products of results of education investments, and 2) the failure of researchers to distinguish between stock (i.e. existing levels of education) and flow (i.e. education and skills under development) concepts when examining the role of education in economic development.

Traditional human capital measures have included high school dropout rates, cost of public elementary and secondary education, and standardized reading and mathematics achievement test scores. Few, if any, studies have included measures to impact

that adult participation in nondegree training sponsored by public post-secondary education institutions such as vocational-technical schools and community colleges.

Moore and McNamara (1988) reported in a Georgia study that increased investments in public elementary and secondary school (i.e. investments in human capital) were associated with declines in high school dropout rates. They (Moore and McNamara) speculate that students receive more attention, perform better, and thus have more incentive to stay in school. Another finding from their study indicates that as more people move into an area the local income level increases. The employment rate increases, and the average educational attainment level increases. These findings imply the need to further examine the impact of human capital investments on local economic opportunity.

## CONCLUSION

While investment in education is presented in the literature as a capital building process (Schultz, 1961), research is needed to identify specific linkages between various types of education investment and individual and community economic opportunity. Researchers concerned with rural economic development, which includes education as a process for empowering adults, need to work closely with economists, sociologists, adult educators, and human resource developers to specify both the stock (existing) and flow (under development) variables resulting from investing in human capital. Additional data is needed regarding the educational levels of people moving into communities, the types of training received on the job, salary levels upon entry into a job, and salary increases, if any, after being on the job as a result of continuing education or training. If these data were available, it would be possible to specify economic models to measure the impact of these factors on local and regional growth. The analysis would yield valuable information for public policy regarding the allocation of local, state and federal funds to primary, secondary, and post-secondary adult education to achieve local economic development objectives.

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