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Reasons for Adults' Participation in Work-Related Courses, 2002-03

In 2002-03, approximately 68.5 million people, or one-third of civilian, non-institutionalized adults age 16 and older in the United States, took formal courses or training that were not part of a traditional degree, certificate, or apprenticeship program for reasons related to their job or career (O'Donnell forthcoming). This Issue Brief examines these adult learners' reasons for participation in such formal, work-related courses. While much information about adults enrolled in college/university and vocational/technical credential programs is available from institution-based surveys, less is known about participation in formal courses outside of these traditional programs, such as those offered by an employer.

Research suggests that there has been an increased demand for work-related adult education, resulting from changes in the labor market, technology, and management practices. These changes have placed new demands on workers, who increasingly are expected to assume multiple responsibilities, handle changing procedures, and use a broad base of knowledge on the job (U.S. Department of Commerce et al. 1999). During the 1990s there was an upward trend in participation rates in adult education programs overall, and among most subgroups identified by age, sex, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and income (Creighton and Hudson 2002). While previous research has examined trends in participation rates, additional information about reasons for participation is needed to understand why adults take formal work-related courses. Such courses may help adults to respond to labor market demands, fulfill their own desires to learn and improve their skills, or satisfy employers' requirements (for example, for certification or skill development).

The data on reasons for participation in formal, work-related courses discussed in this Issue Brief come from the Adult Education for Work-Related Reasons Survey (AEWR) of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES). NHES is a random-digit-dial telephone survey, and the sample chosen for the AEWR is representative of civilian, non-institutionalized adults age 16 and older in the United States who were not enrolled in 12th grade or below at the time of the survey. Between January and April of 2003, interviews were conducted with 12,725 adults,¹ who provided information about their educational activities during the previous 12 months. The formal work-related courses that respondents described in the survey had an instructor and were reported as related to a job or career, whether or not the adult learner was employed while taking the course. Such courses included classes taken at colleges or universities that were not part of a degree program,² as well as semi-

nars, training sessions, or workshops offered by various providers including businesses, unions, and government agencies, among others. Courses categorized as work-related education could pertain to any topic so long as the adult learner considered the courses to have been taken for work-related reasons. Excluded from this type of adult education are basic skills or GED classes, as well as courses that participants took in pursuit of a degree or diploma or as part of an apprenticeship leading to journeyman status.

All respondents who had taken formal work-related courses, regardless of employment status, were asked whether they had done so for any of a series of selected reasons: to maintain or improve skills or knowledge they already had; to learn completely new skills or knowledge; to help change their job or career field, enter the workforce, or start their own business; and to get or keep a state or industry certificate or license. In addition, participants who had been employed at some time in the previous 12 months, excluding those who were self-employed and had no other employer, were asked whether they had taken work-related courses to receive a promotion or pay raise or because their employers had required or recommended participation.

As shown in table 1, the maintenance or improvement of skills or knowledge was the most frequently mentioned reason for taking formal work-related courses. Almost all adult participants (92 percent) indicated that they sought to maintain or improve skills or knowledge that they already had, and a majority (77 percent) also sought to learn completely new skills or knowledge. One-third took courses to get or keep a certificate or license,³ and about one-fifth took courses to help change their job or career field, enter the workforce, or start their own business.

About 94 percent of work-related course participants were employed sometime during the period from early 2002 to early 2003 (not shown in tables).⁴ Among these employed participants, about three-fourths took a course because their employer required or recommended that they take it, while 18 percent took a course to receive a promotion or a pay raise.

Reasons for participation varied by characteristics such as age, educational attainment, employment status, and income. The youngest participants were most likely to take classes to learn new skills or knowledge, compared to older participants. In contrast, they were less likely than those in the three middle age categories to be taking

¹ The weighted sample represents approximately 206.5 million civilian, non-institutionalized adults age 16 or older and not enrolled in 12th grade or below. The overall response rate for the 2003 AEWR, which is the product of the response rate for a screener questionnaire and the response rate for the AEWR interview, is 52.1 percent. For further detail about the NHES survey methodology and response rates, see Hagedorn et al. (2004).

² Enrollment in college/university degree programs is ascertained separately from enrollment in work-related courses that are not taken in pursuit of a formal degree. Therefore, estimates included here do not include adults enrolled in programs in pursuit of a college or university degree.

³ Examples of such certificates or licenses include teaching certificates, licenses for physicians, nurses, and cosmetologists, commercial driver's licenses, and industry certifications such as A+ certification for computer technicians.

⁴ In this report, adults referred to as employed are those who had worked at some time in the previous 12 months. These adults were not necessarily employed either at the time they took the course or on the date the interview was conducted. Additionally, respondents who were self-employed and had no other employer are not included in the group of employed participants, because they were not asked reasons for participation having to do with an employer.

Table 1. Percentage of adult participants who gave selected reasons for participation in work-related courses, by adult characteristics: 2002-03

Characteristic	Number of adults (thousands)	Reasons for participation					
		All adult participants				Employed adult participants ³	
		To maintain or improve skills or knowledge	To learn completely new skills or knowledge	To help change job or career field ¹	To get or keep certificate or license ²	Because employer required or recommended it	To receive a promotion or pay raise
Total	68,499	92	77	19	33	76	18
Age							
16 to 30 years	16,781	88	84	29	27	79	26
31 to 40 years	16,429	94	77	18	37	79	18
41 to 50 years	19,304	93	74	16	34	74	14
51 to 65 years	14,012	95	70	13	35	74	13
66 years or older	1,973	84	75	7	35	68	11
Sex							
Male	32,458	93	73	17	35	77	19
Female	36,041	92	80	20	32	76	17
Race/ethnicity							
White, non-Hispanic	51,552	92	75	16	34	76	16
Black, non-Hispanic	7,245	93	85	28	39	75	26
Hispanic	6,150	91	83	30	28	78	26
Asian or Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	2,414	90	66	24	26	72	19
Other race, non-Hispanic	1,139	90	76	19	31	80	23
Highest education level completed							
Less than a high school diploma/equivalent	2,972	78	82	41	25	75	22
High school diploma/equivalent	14,268	89	78	22	34	77	27
Some college/vocational/associate's degree	21,183	92	79	20	33	79	21
Bachelor's degree	18,740	94	74	16	32	77	13
Graduate or professional degree	11,336	96	72	11	36	69	9
Employment and occupation							
Employed in last 12 months	64,559	93	76	18	33	76	18
Professional/managerial	29,207	96	75	12	35	73	13
Sales/service/clerical	26,433	91	79	23	30	78	22
Trades and labor	8,919	87	75	19	37	83	21
Not employed in last 12 months	3,940	83	78	38	34	†	†
Household income							
\$20,000 or less	5,099	82	84	42	33	70	27
\$20,001 to \$35,000	8,921	89	78	26	37	81	24
\$35,001 to \$50,000	10,574	92	82	21	36	77	19
\$50,001 to \$75,000	17,351	93	78	17	32	79	18
\$75,001 or more	26,553	95	71	12	32	74	14

† Not applicable.

¹ Full text as worded in the survey: "To help you change your job or career field, enter the workforce, or start your own business."

² Full text as worded in the survey: "To get or keep a state or industry certificate or license."

³ These items were asked only of adults who reported having worked in the past 12 months and who were not only self-employed.

NOTE: Formal work-related courses include any training, courses, or classes that had an instructor and were related to a job or career, whether or not the respondent had a job when he or she took them. Excluded from this type of adult education are basic skills or GED classes, as well as courses that participants took in pursuit of a formal postsecondary credential or as part of an apprenticeship program. Information was collected on up to four work-related courses or trainings taken in the previous 12 months and reported as work-related. If an adult took more than four courses, four were sampled for data collection. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard errors for this table are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2005088>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Adult Education for Work-Related Reasons Survey of the 2003 National Household Education Surveys Program.

classes to maintain skills or knowledge they already had or to get or keep a certificate or license. Course-taking to help change or get a job or start one's own business declined with age. Among employed participants, course-taking to receive a promotion or pay raise also declined with age. Additionally, it was more common for employed participants ages 16 to 40 to take courses because of an employer's requirement or recommendation than for those over age 65 to do so.

Among participants, women were more likely than men to report taking formal work-related courses to learn completely new skills or knowledge (80 percent vs. 73 percent, respectively).

Among all participants, Whites were less likely than Blacks or Hispanics to take a course to learn new skills or knowledge or to help change their job or career field. Among employed participants,

Whites (16 percent) were less likely than Blacks or Hispanics (26 percent each) to take courses to receive a promotion or a pay raise.

Reasons for course-taking also varied by the course taker's level of education. The percentage of participants who reported taking courses to maintain or improve existing skills or knowledge increased with educational attainment, from 78 percent among high school drop-outs to 96 percent among those with a graduate or professional degree. Other reasons for participation were cited less frequently by participants with graduate or professional degrees. For example, course takers with a graduate or professional degree were the least likely to take courses to help get or change a job (11 percent), while participants with less than a high school diploma were most likely to report this reason (41 percent). Among employed participants, the most highly-educated workers were less likely than those with less than a bachelor's degree to take courses in order to receive a promotion or pay raise (9 percent vs. 21–27 percent).

Reasons for participation also varied by the course taker's employment status. Participants who held a job at some time in the 12 months prior to the survey were more likely (93 percent) than those who were not employed (83 percent) to take courses to maintain or improve existing skills or knowledge, while employed participants were about half as likely (18 percent) as those not employed (38 percent) to take courses to help get or change a job, enter the workforce, or start a business.

Among participants who were employed in the 12 months prior to the survey, there were some differences in reasons for course-taking by occupational group (classified as professional/managerial, sales/service/clerical, or trades and labor). Across the three occupational groups, most participants took work-related courses to maintain or improve skills or knowledge they already had. However, participants in professional or managerial jobs were the least likely to take courses in order to get or change a job (12 percent), because their employers required or recommended participation (73 percent), or to receive a promotion or pay raise (13 percent), compared to participants in other occupations. Additionally, participants working in sales/service/clerical occupations were less likely than participants in other types of occupations to report taking formal work-related courses to get or keep a certificate or license.

Household income was associated with differences in reasons for course participation. Participants in higher-income households were more likely than those in lower-income households to take courses to maintain skills or knowledge they already had. Conversely, participants in higher-income households were less likely than those in lower-income households to take courses to learn completely new

skills or knowledge or to take courses to get or change a job. Among employed participants, those with lower household incomes were more likely than those with higher household incomes to take a course in pursuit of a promotion or pay raise.

Summary

More than 90 percent of adults who took formal work-related courses in 2002–03 reported doing so in order to maintain or improve skills or knowledge they already had, while fewer than 20 percent took such courses to get or change a job or career field. Among employed adults, the majority took courses because their employer required or recommended participation, while about a fifth did so in order to get a promotion or pay raise.

The likelihood of taking classes for the selected reasons examined in this brief generally varied by participants' age, education, employment status, occupation, and household income. A few differences also were found between participants of different races/ethnicities and between men and women. Participants who were older, the most-highly educated, employed, or living in higher-income households were more likely to say they took work-related courses to maintain or improve the skills they already had and less likely to report doing so in order to get or change a job. Among employed course takers, participation to fulfill an employer's requirement or recommendation, or to get a promotion or pay raise, was less common among the oldest, most highly-educated, and professional/managerial workers.

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The Issue Brief series presents information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level. Additionally, the discussion is limited to differences of at least 5 percentage points. Regression analysis was used to test for linear relationships between reasons for participation in work-related courses and both age and income.

In the design, conduct, and data processing of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For more information on the National Household Education Surveys Program, visit <http://nces.ed.gov/nhes>.

This Issue Brief was prepared by Matthew DeBell of the Education Statistics Services Institute (ESSI) and Gail Mulligan of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This Issue Brief was formatted by Carol Rohr of Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. For further information, contact Gail Mulligan, NCES, at 202-502-7491 or gail.mulligan@ed.gov. To order additional copies of this Issue Brief or other NCES publications, call 1-877-4ED-PUBS or visit <http://www.edpubs.org>. NCES publications are also available on the Internet at <http://nces.ed.gov>.

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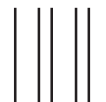
Courses, 2002-03

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