



Supporting Under-Represented Groups...

FACTSHEET #3: Strategies

In 2021, the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development developed five areas of focus for the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program. One of the areas of focus is enhanced efforts to support groups who are under-represented in the labour force.

The Ministry shared these examples of under-represented groups: Indigenous persons, Newcomers to Canada, Persons with disabilities, Racialized persons, Women, and Youth. The Ministry further noted that the list of under-represented groups can vary based on the local labour market or within a specific sector.

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) conducted province-wide research in 2022/2023. While LBS programs agreed with the above examples set by the Ministry, in this research LBS programs noted that an extremely important under-represented group is people living in poverty. Other additional groups under-represented in the labour force, as identified by adult literacy programs, are older workers, people who have been incarcerated, members of the LGBTQ+ community, homeless people, and people with mental health or addictions issues.

Community Literacy of Ontario has created three factsheets on this important subject. Our **Factsheets on Supporting Under-Represented Groups** cover the following topics:

1. Successes
2. Challenges
3. Strategies

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS FACTSHEET 3

CLO shares some of the **strategies** Literacy and Basic Skills programs have experienced while supporting groups under-represented in the labour force.



NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

To most effectively serve members of under-represented groups, Literacy and Basic Skills programs must provide opportunities for these learners to share their perspective on what they need, and how they need it. Replacing the lens of privilege that says “let’s create a program for you” with “let’s create a program with you” gives us an opportunity for co-creation that will result in more authentic and appropriate learning opportunities for all involved.

Traditionally, we ask for feedback from learners after they have participated in a fully designed learning program. While post-learning feedback is valuable, it is the least engaged way for learners to provide input into the learning experiences that would best serve them.

What didn’t work is identified after the program has already run, leaving practitioners to make changes to better support future learners, assuming time and funding allows for revisions. Co-creation brings the perspectives and needs of learners into the picture before anyone attends the training.

The voices and experiences of those who we are trying to support must be included when making decisions about how to best serve them.



ASK FOR FEEDBACK

People from non-marginalized groups offering services may not always recognize or understand what is needed to create an environment that’s culturally welcoming and inclusive for others. If serving members of under-represented groups is our goal, seeking their feedback on what would make them feel as though they belonged in Literacy and Basic Skills programs is critical. We need to ask questions about not only what sort of training we offer, but the environment we offer it in.

Asking for honest, and potentially challenging feedback from learners is an excellent step towards creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for members of under-represented groups.

To generate the most authentic responses, providing opportunities for anonymous feedback may be helpful. Of course, what makes learner input valuable is what LBS programs choose to do with it. It's important to not only gather learner feedback but make an effort to respond to that feedback by making changes when possible.

Some questions you may ask to gather feedback from under-represented groups include:

- On a scale from 1 to 10, how welcoming is our environment to everyone – regardless of income, disability, sexual orientation, race, age, or nationality?
- Do you think everyone gets treated fairly in our program?
- What could we do to make people of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and identities feel more welcome in our program?

“There can be fear and distrust (of institutions, of being told they can't be helped, of learning environments and teachers).”

- Focus Group Participant

If you have a paid SurveyMonkey account, they offer templates specific to belonging and inclusion.

Visit: <http://bit.ly/3lxDQAE>.

After gathering feedback from under-represented groups, be sure to let people know what changes you are making based on their input.

Feedback should also be gathered on an ongoing basis as new learners arrive in your program, and as current learners become more familiar with your program.

PROVIDE STAFF TRAINING

To help overcome a potential lack of understanding of the experiences, realities and needs of under-represented groups, training and professional development for Literacy and Basic Skills staff is key.

Participating in webinars and workshops and using online resources to learn more about issues facing people with disabilities and people living in poverty, trauma-informed approaches to learning, discrimination and unconscious bias, the use of inclusive language, and cultural awareness can ensure staff are well-informed and thoughtful in their approach when working with under-represented groups.

Ontario's colleges and universities often offer programs specific to equity, diversity and inclusion through their continuing education or corporate training divisions.



Various local organizations across the province, including Local Immigration Partnerships and United Ways, sometimes offer workshops focused on diversity and inclusion and its impact on both programs and the clients or learners they serve. There are also many resources and toolkits available freely online on these topics.

On a broader level, the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (CCDI) is a registered, not-for-profit organization that promotes diversity, inclusion, and equity in Canadian workplaces. They offer free toolkits focused on diversity, inclusion, and employment equity. Some of these toolkits are intended for businesses, and others offer ready-to-run workshops originally developed for high school students but are appropriate for a much broader audience. Topics include:

1. Making the case for diversity, equity, and inclusion (Toolkit)
2. Responding to social issues – The ‘when’ and the ‘how’ of workplace responses (Toolkit)
3. Exploring my power and privilege (Workshop)
4. Prejudice, bias, and discrimination (Workshop)

View these toolkits, workshops and more at: <https://ccdi.ca/toolkits/>.

The Royal Bank of Canada’s (RBC) Inclusion Learning Centre offers a series of tip sheets, discussion guides, diversity and inclusion videos, self-assessments, podcasts and research papers to help develop a deeper understanding of the role of equity and inclusion for both staff and clients. To learn more about RBC’s free resources, visit:

<https://www.rbc.com/diversity-inclusion/inclusion-learning-center.html>.

HIT THE ROAD

When trying to reach a new demographic of prospective learners, going to them rather than expecting them to travel to a LBS program location is very effective. In CLO’s “Successes” Factsheet, we shared stories of co-delivery at locations including shelters and support groups. Consider also where people go when they aren’t seeking learning opportunities – food banks, their children’s schools, community groups – thinking outside the box may provide new and innovative opportunities to expand the reach of Literacy and Basic Skills. Some of this work can also be done virtually, by following the social media accounts of potential partners and commenting on their posts to share what you can offer.

“Through grant funding, we have partnered with a community agency that provides transitional housing to Indigenous members of our community who were previously without stable housing. We offer 1-1 instruction on-site one day per week”

- Provincial Survey Respondent

It is worth noting that enhanced government funding is absolutely critical for LBS practitioners to be able to leave their programs and travel to other locations in the community. Without additional funding for both travel and replacement practitioners to allow a staff member to “hit the road,” this effective strategy is difficult or impossible for smaller programs to execute.

CREATE ACCESSIBLE CONTENT

Utilizing practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) makes learning more universally accessible. UDL is an educational framework designed to help practitioners create inclusive learning environments that are accessible to all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

The goal of UDL is to provide multiple ways for learners to participate in their learning, so that each person can learn in ways that are most effective for them. Multiple means of engagement, representation and expressions of learning are the foundations of UDL.



For more information about Universal Design for Learning and how it can support learners of varied skills and experiences, visit:

<https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

LOOK AT DEMOGRAPHICS

Which groups are least represented in the labour market differs from community to community across the province. What we might expect to see in terms of representation within the Metro Toronto area is likely to differ from labour market representation in the District of Nipissing, for example. For this reason, it's important that Regional Literacy Networks and Literacy and Basic Skills programs work closely with their local Workforce Planning Boards to gather data about the groups least represented in their local labour market and compare that to categories of under-represented groups within the local population. Creating and offering programming specific to an under-represented group is only effective if that population exists in the area and is going unserved.

Workforce Planning Boards can access and interpret demographical data from Statistics Canada and other sources, broken down by Planning Board region. A network of 26 Workforce Planning Boards covers every region across the province. To find the Workforce Planning Board near you, visit:

<http://www.workforceplanningontario.ca/en/>

GET THE WORD OUT

While marketing budgets are extremely limited (or nonexistent) within the broad Literacy and Basic Skills program, there is incredible value in promoting the good work that adult literacy programs do and the difference that skill development can make in people's lives – both within and beyond under-represented groups.

Marketing can be formal, through the development of pamphlets and flyers, newspaper, and radio advertising, and via social media, and online marketing campaigns. It can also be informal, through networking and attendance at events and meetings frequented by either the target audience or organizations that work closely with them already. All of these efforts have costs associated with them – monetarily and in the time they take to execute.

While free or low-cost advertising may be possible for LBS programs with the time and money to devote, working in collaboration with a larger group of LBS programs – particularly through the system of regional literacy networks set up to support LBS – can help programs get the word out more effectively than they could on their own.

There are many great ideas for learner recruitment available in CLO's Learner Recruitment Challenges and Strategies Report at:

<https://www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/Learner-Recruitment-Report-March-2022-FINAL.pdf>

SIGNIFICANT SYSTEM-WIDE CHANGES

As shared in CLO's "Challenges" Factsheet, because of the diverse needs of many under-represented groups, flexibility in programming is required. As a result, changes to the Ministry's expectations for scheduling, attendance, how progress is measured, the use of training supports, and cost-per-learner funding need to be reconsidered.

SCHEDULING

While traditional Monday to Friday daytime programming meets the needs of some learners, it doesn't meet the needs of everyone who could benefit from LBS programming.

To provide training flexible enough to meet learners' schedules in a welcoming environment that fosters the development of trusting relationships, additional government funding for more one-on-one tutoring programs and small group learning opportunities to be offered in evening and weekend hours would be helpful.

ATTENDANCE

With competing priorities and responsibilities that can include life stabilization, settlement, legal concerns, and/or juggling multiple jobs and family needs, regular attendance is a commitment that some members of under-represented groups cannot meet.

While measurable learning gains, as required by the Ministry, are easier to track with regular attendance, the benefit of welcoming flexible attendance can be significant. Keeping learners connected to Literacy and Basic Skills even during challenging times means they can return to work towards their goals, even if their progress is slower.

HOW PROGRESS IS MEASURED

This flexibility should also be reflected in how learner success is defined and measured by the Ministry, so the outcomes being measured are relevant to members of under-represented groups. If the measurement of success is defined in a uniform way for all learners, and by decision-makers who themselves are not members of these under-represented groups, they hold little meaning to the learner and may push them away rather than making them feel supported.

“The amount of time and partnerships required to serve learners with multiple barriers is very high and does not match the funding received. The cost per participant is much higher.”

- Focus Group Participant

TRAINING SUPPORTS

Expanded training support dollars with more flexible interpretations of how those funds could be used would have a significant impact.



Programs suggest that many members of under-represented groups cannot access the adequate food, transportation, and mental health supports they need to engage effectively in learning. Additional funding would allow programs to offer individualized support to learners, increasing their ability to learn and their sense of connectedness to the program.

COST-PER LEARNER FUNDING

Clients with intersecting challenges often require additional flexibility and resources and take longer to serve.

Programs need to be resourced appropriately via enhanced government funding to ensure learners are not seen as “less desirable” as a result – particularly for programs whose success is measured by learner outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The **Factsheets on Supporting Under-Represented Groups** were researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario. CLO is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our **website** and by following us on social media.

To learn more, read CLO's research report on this topic. In 2022/2023, CLO conducted province-wide research and wrote a report called **"Here to Help: Supporting Adult Learners from Underrepresented Groups in LBS Programs."**

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