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An Action Research Approach To Workplace Inclusivity For Operational Employees In Higher Education

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AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY

FOR OPERATIONAL EMPLOYEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

By

Carrie L. Cooper

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AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY

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Approved September 19, 2023 by

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to Peter Mark Magolda (2016), who did an ethnographic study with campus custodians, and, to the participants in my study who support the educational enterprise by doing work that makes campus living, teaching, learning, and research possible.

May all of us advocate for a more inclusive university and workplace.

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

This action research study implemented an intervention, the Learn at Work program, for operational employees in facilities management at William & Mary earning less than $19 an hour. One of eight dimensions in the Workplace Inclusion Scale, developed by Lennox et al. (2022), is "access to opportunity" (p. 27). This study's theoretical framework included feelings of individual belonging, coupled with workplace learning, as powerful factors in shaping workplace experience. The program offered various opportunities: (a) health, computer, and financial literacy classes; (b) university-led workshops; and (c) individual tutoring. Two research questions guided the study: (a) What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting? and (b) How does participation in classes, workshops or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants? Among the population (159), 32.7% participated in at least one aspect of the program. Findings established participants were interested in (a) a variety of learning and training options, (b) pathways to promotion, and (c) more knowledge about workplace benefits. Class participants ($n = 24$) had a statistically significant improved work experience during the intervention, and the impact transcended boundaries of work and life. The program improved personal relationships and offered a positive learning experience. Recommendations include staffing and structural changes that enable and support increased opportunity, career advancement, and a sense of belonging for operational employees at William & Mary.

AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY

FOR OPERATIONAL EMPLOYEES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

The investment a university makes in its workforce should be consistent with its recruiting effort to make the campus more inclusive and diverse. Opportunity is ripe for increasing opportunity for operational employees in positions at the low end of the pay scale, and for whom workplace learning may serve to facilitate a stronger sense of belonging and inclusivity, and ultimately a more positive employee experience. According to Mor Barak (2015):

> One of the most significant problems facing today's diverse workforce is that of exclusion- both the reality experienced by many and the perception of even more employees that they are not viewed by top management as an integral part of the organization. (p. 85)

Inclusion in the workplace, according to Shore et al. (2018):

> involves equal opportunity for members of socially marginalized groups to participate and contribute while concurrently providing opportunities for members of nonmarginalized groups, and to support employees in their efforts to be fully engaged at all levels of the organization and to be authentically themselves. (p. 177)

Central to the inclusive model presented by Shore et al. (2018) is feeling "included in the workgroup" (p. 178), which requires attention to belonging and uniqueness—complimentary and separate concepts—that address an individual's ability to bring their authentic self to work.

The distinct differences in how universities hire, manage, and develop employees across the various job categories and employee classifications demands extra attention be placed on workplace equity. These differences are described by the term "workforce diversity" (Mor Barak, 2014, p. 136) and are helpful in the higher education context. Many of the operational employees who play an essential role in higher education operations have not had access or opportunity to pursue a formal education. Higher education is facing challenges after the COVID-19 global pandemic consistent with other industries that are exacerbated by an aging population. In 2019, The Challenges of an Aging Higher Ed Workforce report pointed to aging employees occupying the skilled craft, facilities, maintenance and clerical roles, and no clear strategy to attract younger employees. Pritchard et al. (2019) stated, "Employees who are 55 years old and older make up almost one-third (29%) of the higher ed staff workforce, whereas less than one-fourth (23%) of the U.S. workforce is over 55" (p. 4). These data combined with evidence that the employee experience is different for some segments of the workforce is an opportunity for reflection and examination. In the fall of 2021, William & Mary experienced vacancies in 35% of the positions in building services. These numbers were consistent with national employment data, which begs for new strategies to attract and retain the higher education workforce.

The Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker showed the employment rate among workers in the bottom wage quartile decreased by 24.7% between January 2020 and April 2022 (Chetty et al., n.d.). The COVID-19 global pandemic heightened an awareness of the inequities in the U.S. workforce, showing a growing urgency to understand the connections between job quality and worker mobility (Congdon et al., 2020). Universities have been struggling to fill positions across

the board and higher education has lost appeal because salaries are not competitive (Zahneis, 2022).

Although the challenges with the workforce are significant, universities have been preoccupied with the projected decline in the population of traditional college-aged students, alongside the national trends in the decline of state support for public universities (Grawe, 2017; Thelin, 2019). A loss of income has created a flurry of interest in adult learners of all ages. P. Smith (2022) wrote the following reflection for the Rethinking Learning and College Access for the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges:

> Millions of people simply cannot adapt to the traditional collegiate model and its assumptions—financially, culturally, or physically. In most cases, this is not a function of intelligence or native talent. Life circumstances simply get in the way. Some have a high school diploma and others have some college, but no certificate or degree. As a result, their only option to employ talent and acquire knowledge is through personal and experiential learning including noncollegiate training as they live and work. (para. 3)

This column targeted governing boards in higher education and was a call to action for universities to be more inclusive of adult learners. The message was also relevant for college and university administrators as they seek to attract and strengthen the workforce. A benefit for working in higher education can be access to the employer's degree programs. This strategy alone does not meet the needs of the diverse workforce. The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) provides leadership on issues related to higher education workforce issues in the United States and reported 95% of the surveyed 349 public and private institutions offered educational benefits and only 11% of employees used the benefit (Fuesting et al., 2020). Tuition reimbursement programs mostly benefitted the employees who

already had the resources and motivation to take advantage of an opportunity, and they did not consider learning outside of formal educational degree programs (Cappelli, 2004).

Statement of the Action Research Problem

William & Mary employees earning an hourly wage of less than $19 have had a different work experience than those in positions that pay more, according to climate surveys and an external equity audit (B. Bengtson, personal communication, September 28, 2022). These operational employees have lacked a sense of belonging and inclusion and have less access to opportunity. The purpose of the study was to improve the work experience and lives for employees who occupy operational positions in higher education by encouraging growth and learning at work.

Context of the Action Research Problem

Universities have prioritized social justice and equity work as evident in enrollment data, financial aid investment in first-generation students, the effort to increase diversity in the student body and faculty, and in reshaping curriculum to include new perspectives and marginalized voices. There has been a heightened awareness of the physical landscape of institutions, including the narrative conveyed by names on buildings and lack of physical and visual representation of women and minorities (Donnor, 2021; Patton, 2016; D. G. Smith, 2020). Universities have relied on the surrounding communities to fill roles that are essential in the support and operations of a residential community. As of July 1, 2022, the minimum wage was raised from $12 to $15.50 per hour at William & Mary. Hard-to-fill vacancies coupled with an increasing focus on social justice issues makes this study timely and necessary. Workplace inclusivity is an issue that effects recruitment and retention across the board.

Information Related to the Organization

This study was conducted at William & Mary, a public university known for its rigorous liberal arts curriculum, excellent teaching, and reputable graduate and professional programs. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council for Education (2022) designated the institution as having *high research activity*, which is the middle group out of three possible research university classifications. William & Mary has consistently ranked in the top tier of public universities by numerous college rankings. At the time of this study, approximately 8500 students were enrolled, with 75% of the student body as undergraduates. Full-time faculty and staff totaled about 2400, all of whom were eligible for employee education benefits. Although, educational benefits were available to all employees in theory, the policy was designed for those enrolled in graduate level courses at William & Mary. Consequently, there has been a lack of access to educational benefits and learning opportunities for those who had not previously earned an undergraduate degree or had access to a formal education.

For this study, data were used from a 2021 equity audit by a national consultant focused on identifying hidden and apparent barriers to belonging, a value of William & Mary. The audit's purpose was to build a strong foundation of data from which to make decisions in key competitive areas as the university looks toward long-term, strategic operations. A key finding showed people of color had more negative experiences than their White peers and there were limited opportunities for people of color, including a lack of mentoring and ability to self-advocate and no exposure to career development and skill development planning. Furthermore, the minority employees absent in many job categories were over-represented in the job roles

associated with lower salaries. This is relevant to understanding the context of the intervention and the study to learning for the identified participants.

Information Related to the Intended Stakeholders

The stakeholders in the action research study were William & Mary employees in the department of facilities management (FM; see Appendix A). At the time of this study, there were 323 positions in the department and vacancies were a point of concern according to the managers. The 159 employees in the population made up 58.5% of the employees in FM who met the criteria for participation in the study. Employees had a wide range of educational backgrounds and required qualifications across the unit. FM employees were spread across departments in building services; business services; operations and maintenance; gardens and grounds; and facilities, planning, design, and construction. Building services roles included custodians and postal workers; business services employees were responsible for fiscal operations; operations and maintenance roles included trade experts in heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning, plumbing, locksmithing and carpentry; gardens and grounds employees oversaw landscaping, brick masonry and nursery operations; and, facilities, planning, design, and construction includes architects, project managers and construction managers.

At the time of the study, three quarters of the 64 vacant positions were in building services and gardens and grounds. The chief facilities officer was appointed with the charge to improve operations and increase engagement for a unit that is important to the university's operations. He had experience as an executive leader and a strong interest in ensuring systems were equitable and accessible at all levels. In his first 6 months, he conducted a listening tour and heard repeatedly that employees lacked support for professional development and pathways for

advancement were unclear. This was confirmed again in the equity audit that was conducted by an external reviewer.

The study benefited participants by offering increased access to learning opportunities during the workday. The study benefitted William & Mary by providing data about the population interests related to training and learning and how it impacted their work experience and life.

Brief Description of the Action Research Intervention

One of eight dimensions in the Workplace Inclusion Scale developed by Lennox et al. (2022) is "access to opportunity" (p. 27), and, without it, organizations are at threat for falling short of their diversity goals. The intervention for this study was increasing opportunities during the workday for operational employees within FM, a division with a high number of employees who met the criteria for participation. Literacy for Life offered three courses and university staff led six workshops. Additionally, there were three voluntary meetings throughout the program for the purpose of building community, engaging with me as the researcher, and providing time for self-directed learning.

McKernan (1991) described action research as "a form of reflective problem solving, which enables practitioners to solve pressing problems in social settings" (p. 6). Zambo and Isai (2013) offered a list of options for action research dissertations:

- Find a problem of practice to resolve,
- Take action informed by scholarship,
- Investigate the action systematically and methodically,
- Reflect on what this means to participants and for the researcher,
- Report the results to a stakeholder audience.

Action research requires repeated cycles of look, think, act and provides people with a process by which to "engage in systematic inquiry and investigation to discover effective ways of resolving problems" (Stringer & Aragon, 2021, p. 7). Figure 1 shows Cycle 1 of planning that included collecting data, asking questions, and reading the literature to inform the intervention. Cycle 2 implemented the intervention with room for adaptions based on the look, think, act process. Cycle 3 evaluated participation and impact. Each of the three cycles required observations and reflections to inform the action.

Figure 1

Learn at Work Action Research Cycles
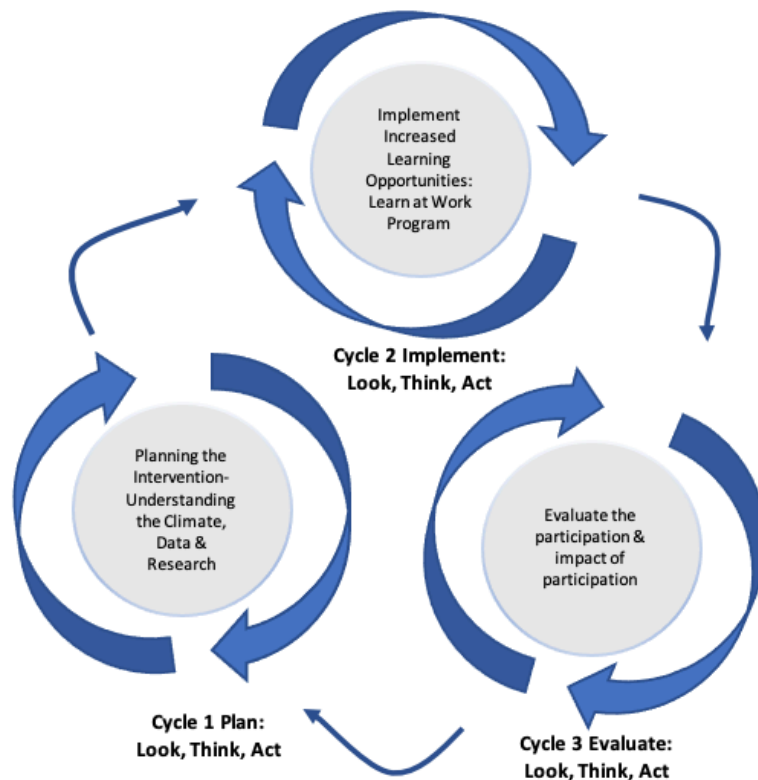
Note. This figure illustrates the cycles of action research. Adapted from *Action Research,* by E. T. Stringer and A. O. Aragon, 2021, p. 10. Adapted with permission by SAGE Publications.

There has been a lack of action research in the field of human resource development (HRD) as noted by Ardichvili (2012), a leading scholar in the field of human resources, who stated:

> While part of the human resource development (HRD) research needs to focus on understanding the past and current practices of learning and development in organizations, a significant part of our research ought to concentrate on the design of new systems and practices. (p. 265)

According to Ardichvili (2012), scholars should work with practitioners to solve problems and test theories. This action research study did what he suggested. I collaborated with practitioners in human resources and across the university to plan and operationalize learning for a segment of the workforce that has had limited access to opportunity to learn and develop new skills.

Theoretical Framework

This study was designed to increase access to opportunity, track participation, and hear directly from operational employees within a university setting during a specified period and implementation of a Learn at Work program. I took a constructivist approach and relied on the primary stakeholders—"those whose lives are affected by the problem under study" (Stringer & Aragon, 2021, p. 22)—to be engaged in the process of investigation. This action research sought to improve the work experience and lives for operational employees at the low end of the university's compensation scales.

Research informing the study was drawn from the foundational work of Dewey (1938), who proposed "all genuine education comes from life experiences" (p. 13). In this study, I recognized formal education was out of reach for many of these employees and valued the life

experiences they bring to work. The central ideas for the study were self-directed learning, workplace inclusivity, and personal mastery—one of the five disciplines of a learning organization (Senge, 1990). Self-directed learning is dependent on the person, the process, and the context (Hiemstra & Brockett, 2012). I relied heavily on research conducted in the last decade on workplace inclusivity (Ferdman, & Deane, 2014; Lennox et al., 2022; Mor Barak, 2015; Shore et al., 2018). I hypothesized an individual's experience at work is shaped by workplace inclusivity, the behavior of the people they interact with daily, and the organizational culture that has varying degrees of supports for personal mastery and access to opportunity. According to Senge (1990):

> Personal mastery is the phrase we use for the discipline of personal growth and learning. People with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. From their quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization. (p. 131)

Figure 2 presents a theoretical framework that connects the individual's perception of workplace inclusivity with the organizational commitment to personal mastery.

Figure 2

Theoretical Framework for Improving Work Experiences for Operational Employees

Workplace inclusion and support for personal mastery
shape employee experience and influence self-directed learning
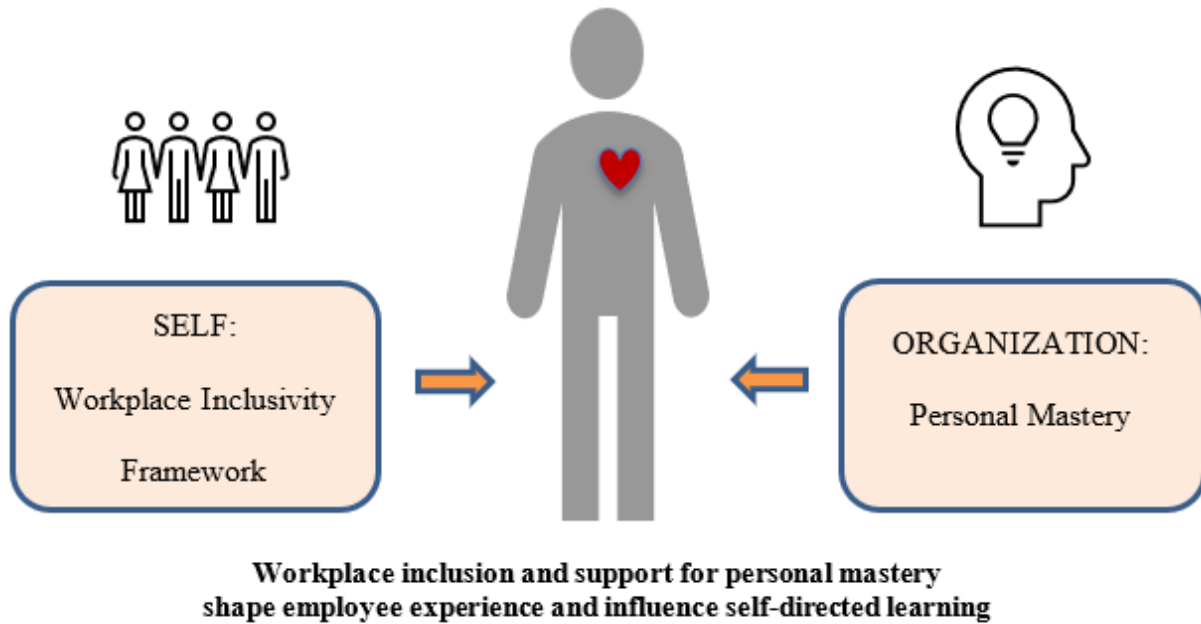
Rana et al. (2016) provided five practices for merging self-directed learning (SDL) and the learning organization, which provided guidance in the design of the intervention: (a) building community and a shared vision, (b) fostering collaboration and teamwork, (c) empowering employees through participation, (d) providing opportunities for continuous learning, and (e) using relevant technologies in the workplace.

Research Questions

This mixed method study sought to improve the work experience and lives for operational employees in higher education by providing increased access to opportunity at work. I addressed these questions:

1. What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting?

2. How does participation in classes, workshops or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants?

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined for clarification:

Formal learning includes "the highly institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured 'education system,' spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2012) defined it as the "formal education system of a country" and "typically takes place in educational institutions that are designed to provide full-time education for students in a system designed as a continuous educational pathway" (p. 11).

Informal learning is "characterized by a low degree of planning and organizing in terms of the learning context, learning support, learning, time, and learning objectives" (Kyndt & Baert, 2013, p. 374).

Lifelong learning was explained by Regmi (2017) in two models: (a) the humanistic model and (b) the economic model. The humanistic model, promoted by UNESCO (2019), includes the following:

Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, encompassing learning activities for people of all ages in all life-wide contexts and through a variety of

modalities (formal, nonformal and informal) which together meet a wide range of

learning needs and demands. (p. 4)

The economic model—embraced by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD), the World Bank, and European Union—focuses on the individual and nation's response

to the knowledge society and the responsibility to learn and update skills (Commission of the

European Communities, 2020).

Low-wage earners, for this study, included those making less than $19 per hour or

$39,520 annually. According to Ross and Bateman (2019), determining a definition for low-

wage earners requires (a) determining who counts as a worker; and (b) setting the earnings or

dollar threshold. For this study, I relied on the university and state salary structures for

employees and included all positions at the U01, U02, and U03 and 01, 02, and 03 categories for

the university and state compensation systems.

Nonformal learning includes educational opportunities and programs offered outside the

formal educational system. Historically, educational programs that did not result in certifications

or credentials were classified as nonformal education and tended to be short term, voluntary, and

have few if any prerequisites. They are "usually local and community based, such as those

programs and offered by museums, libraries, hospitals, service clubs, and religious and civic

organizations" (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, p. 55).

Self-directed learning (SDL) "describes a process in which individuals take the initiative,

with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals,

implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles,

1975, p. 18).

Workforce diversity was defined by Mor Barak (2014) as:

the division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived

commonality within a given cultural or national context and that (b) impact potentially

harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the

workplace, and promotion prospects—irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications.

(p. 136)

Workplace inclusion was defined by Ferdman (2017) as follows: "In inclusive

organizations and societies, people of all identities and many styles can be fully themselves

while also contributing to the larger collective, as valued and full members" (p. 235)

Workplace learning, according to Matthews (1999), involves:

The process of reasoned learning toward desirable outcomes for the individual and the

organization. These outcomes should foster the sustained development of both the

individual and the organization, within the present and future context of organizational

goals and individual career development. (pp. 19–20)

Summary

The problem addressed in this study was an uneven work experience for operational

employees at William & Mary. FM operational employees who earn less than $19 an hour had

increased opportunity to learn during the workday. The purpose of the study was to improve the

work experience and lives of employees through increased access to personal growth and

learning. For "institutions to survive and thrive as employers of choice" (Brantley & Shomaker,

2021, p. 1), universities must model an inclusive workplace—a requirement for achieving the

diversity that will advantage organizations in the global knowledge economy (Livermore, 2016).

Action research posits that the best way to fully understand a problem is to try to change it

(Stringer & Aragon, 2021). The introduced change at William & Mary was a Learn at Work

program intervention that increased access to opportunities for a segment of operational

employees. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature as it relates to the history of adult

education and workplace learning, studies that have relevance for participants that have had less

access to formal education and self-directed learning, and the current state of workplace

inclusion.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

What follows is a review of the literature for a study investigating workplace learning for employees who occupy low-wage positions at William & Mary. Although adult education has been heavily researched, fewer studies have isolated nonformal learning for adults in the workplace. For adults who have had less access to formal education, nonformal learning is an alternative that may improve a person's work experience and life. Workplace learning and workplace inclusivity are core themes for this chapter and the study. Chapter 2 explores adult education participation as it relates to lifelong learning and self-directed learning, investigates the growing necessity for workplace learning in an increasingly diverse world, and adds important context for higher education as an employer.

Adult Education Participation

Many studies have explored the reasons why adults choose to participate or not in adult education. Fifty years after Johnstone and Rivera's (1965) original study, the profile of the typical adult learner has remained the same: compared to those who do not participate in education, participants are better educated, younger, employed full-time, and have higher incomes. It has remained true that individuals with an education are more likely to participate in further education (Boudard & Rubenson, 2003). This is deeply concerning for the United States, where 27.9% of the population over the age of 25 have not attained educational goals beyond a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Further studies and literature analysis (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2011; Jarvis, 2012; Kyndt & Baert, 2013; P. Taylor & Urwin, 2001)

have explored the role of personal background, social class, race, and gender on learning participation. Head et al. (2015) reviewed 185 research articles on adult participation in lifelong learning between 2008 and 2013 and identified participation was most influenced by "organizational climate; learner characteristics and attitudes; market, social policy, and regulatory forces; and underserved populations" (para. 5). Their analysis confirmed participation was dependent on personal and contextual factors. My study focused on underserved populations and filled a gap in the research noted in their analysis. They concluded, "disadvantaged adults were less likely to participate in formal learning for reasons that had little to do with poverty" and they pointed out "a strong case made for understanding, fostering, and enhancing the learning potential of underserved populations" (Head et al., 2015, para. 5).

Early studies on participation and nonparticipation focused on formal education (Henry & Basile, 1994). Research has expanded to include nonformal education and lifelong learning (Aberg, 2016; Hamil-Luker & Uhlenberg, 2002). Increasing interest in adult learning can be explained by rapid changes in technology and the labor skills necessary in the knowledge society (Deggs & Boeren, 2020), which connects to trends and attitudes related to learning at work (Durr et al., 1996). The definition of participation in an educational activity for Johnstone and Rivera (1965) was expansive and included full-time and part-time students and individual self-directed learning. To understand participation, the definition of learning is relevant. The inclusion of nonformal and informal learning was a strength of this seminal work (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Knowles (1968) introduced the concept of andragogy. His model of andragogy was based on several assumptions about the adult learner that are foundational to developing learning programs for adults that will attract participants. The assumptions as a framework have remained

relevant and continued to guide adult educators in their pursuit of meaningful opportunities that are increasingly accessible to those from marginalized communities and who have had less opportunity to participate in formal education. This study was situated within the larger body of adult learning that focuses on lifelong learning, self-directed learning, and nonformal learning.

Lifelong Learning and Self-Directed Learning

Boeren's (2017b) analysis of adult lifelong learning approached the complexity of participation, and the need for a multileveled approach to studying adult learning that considers the roles and responsibilities of the learners, the education and training providers, and a country's social education policies. Her recommendations aimed to improve research participation across countries and draws on insights across disciplines. In 2000, the Commission of the European States issued a 36-page memo declaring the importance of lifelong learning in the knowledge age; and, defined lifelong learning as "all purposeful learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies" (p. 3). Lifelong learning was relevant in the context of this study because it is accessible and aimed at enriching one's life without regard to formal education. Similarly, self-directed learning is also a concept independent of educational experience and closely related to lifelong learning.

Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Hiemstra and Brockett (2012), and Boeren (2017b) separately concluded the context for the learner is significant when trying to understand learning participation. Hiemstra and Brockett presented a reframing of their Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model that had been used for decades to explain self-directed learning. The PRO model of self-directed learning is based on three ideas: "That human nature is basically good, . . . that individuals possess virtually unlimited potential for growth . . . [and] that only by accepting responsibility for one's own learning is it possible to take a proactive approach to the

learning process" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, pp. 26–27). The original PRO model helped

explain the concept of self-direction and played a role in setting the research agenda, including

the development of the PRO-SDLS, a measurement of self-direction in learning.

The revision of the PRO model (Hiemstra & Brockett, 2012) sought to eliminate

confusing language and "reconfigure relationships among the model's key elements" (p. 155).

The updated person, process, context model stated self-directed learning is most effective when

all three are in balance—the learner is self-directed, the process is set up to encourage learning,

and the climate or context supports the learner. Hiemstra and Brockett (2012) explained the

update was meant to encourage the intersection of the person and process with context, knowing

that social context is an "equal partner" (p. 158) in its influence on self-directed learning.

Workplace learning provides a context that has gained considerable attention in the

literature. Boeren (2017b) provided a comprehensive lifelong learning participation model

(Figure 3) that shows the interconnectedness of the individual; the learning providers; and a

country's policies, culture, and economy to a person's likelihood to learn in adulthood. Her

conceptual theoretical framework shows a strong relationship between social and behavioral

characteristics and the importance of matching the individual with an opportunity, which is

largely driven by the environment or workplace. This conceptual framework is the guidepost for

organizations and communities seeking to elevate and encourage participation in lifelong

learning. Like the updated personal responsibility orientation model, this model shows context

for learning is significant to understanding participation and it distinguishes itself by expanding

context to include learning providers and consideration of macro level factors including the

policies and cultural aspects of society.

Figure 3

Comprehensive Lifelong Learning Participation Model
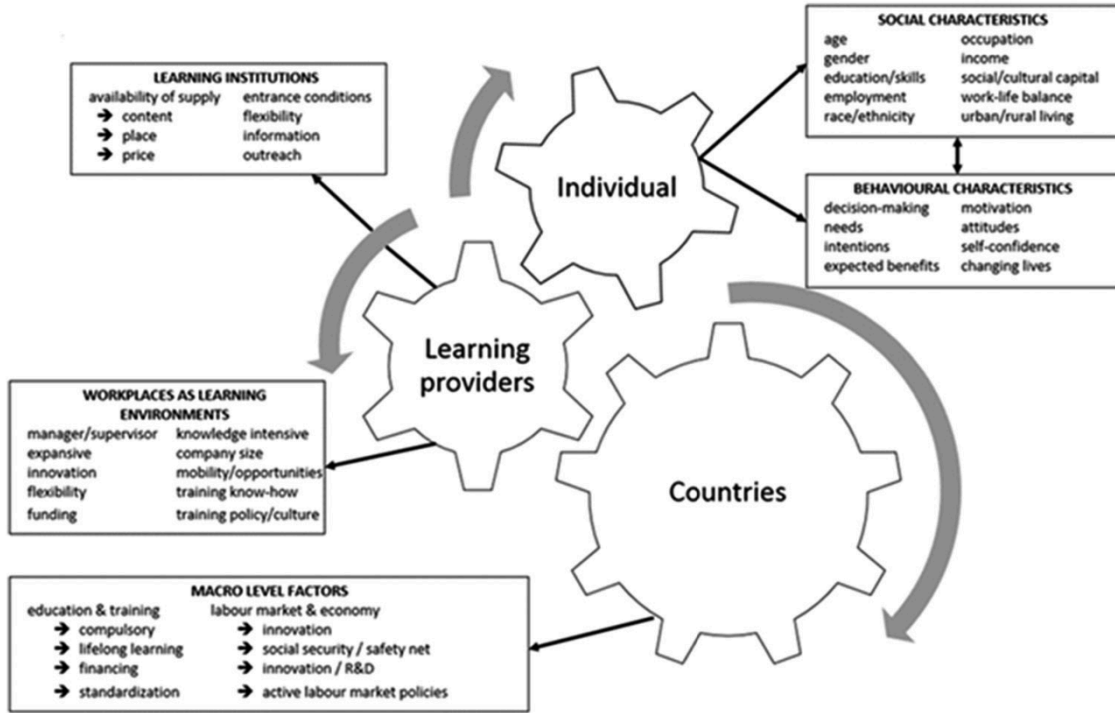
Note. From "Understanding Adult Lifelong Learning Participation as a Layered Problem," by E. Boeren, *Studies in Continuing Education, 39*(2), p. 168, 2017. Reprinted with permission by Taylor & Francis.

Nonformal Learning

Whereas formal learning refers to a traditionalist perspective on attaining educational degrees and credentials, and informal learning is characterized as spontaneous and self-directed, nonformal education is used to describe the organized learning activities that are short-term, voluntary, and have few prerequisites. Often, these community-based programs are offered by museums, libraries, and civic organizations, and they can also be organized in the workplace (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Brennan (1997) suggested nonformal education is a reaction to

the "limitations and failures" (p. 187) of formal education and made a compelling case that nonformal education should be viewed as a complement, alternative and supplement to formal education. In the current dissertation study, the intervention of the Literacy for Life classes or university workshops were just as Brennan described—nonformal learning that supplements and complements the knowledge and skills of the operational employees. Similarly, study participants who opted for tutoring services for the purpose of earning a general education diploma (GED) or citizenship sought an alternative to formal education.

Understanding the distinctions in how adult education has been defined in the literature over time provides insight into the limitations of adult education research. According to Coombs and Ahmed (1974), three settings captured the spectrum of learning: formal, nonformal and informal, and they spent much of their effort studying nonformal learning in rural and impoverished communities. Other studies focused on participation and nonparticipation in formal education (Henry & Basile, 1994). Much current research has taken an expansive approach and definition to include nonformal and informal learning. Coombs (1976) wrote about the myths of nonformal education and lifelong learning, "The most serious misconceptions about nonformal education result from the great difficulty people have liberating their minds from the school-bound concept of education and all of the forms, rituals, doctrines, and terminology associated with it" (p. 284). Nonformal education research has built on the work of Coombs and spoken to the learner-centered approach by nonformal educators (E. W. Taylor & Caldarelli, 2004) and the influence of nonformal education on the postmodern world and formal educational institutions (Romi & Schmida, 2009). The current literature on nonformal education has come from all parts of the world, especially developing countries that suggest it is precisely the kind of education that is accessible and responsive to vulnerable communities and individuals.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was among the organizations that expanded the definition of learning in 2005 to include informal and nonformal learning in their random telephone survey of 211,607 adults (over 16 years and not enrolled in secondary school). NCES found 44% of adults participated in formal educational activities, with "work-related courses" as the most cited reasons for participation, and "personal interest courses" as the second most cited reasons for participation (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, pp. 85–88).

The merging of the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education and the Learning and Work Institute in Great Britain resulted in more expansive definitions and analysis in the 2017 survey results in which 55% of adults reported learning in a work setting. The Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2017 had several key findings and recommendations related to this proposed study and the action research approach (Egglestone et al., 2018). First, respondents who left full-time education at 16 or younger were least likely to have a current or recent learning experience and participation was lower "among adults who have higher levels of disadvantage in employment and those who live in areas that have the highest levels of multiple deprivation" (p. 8). Additionally, Egglestone et al. (2018) stated:

> To engage more and different adults in learning, outreach and interventions should seek
> to target adults in lower social grades, adults who are furthest from the labour market,
> older adults, and those who left full time education at their earliest opportunity. (p. 9)

Furthermore, motivation to learn varied widely so ensuring a variety of learning opportunities was important to successfully engaging adults in learning, and disadvantaged groups were more likely to be motivated by offerings related to "learning and knowledge, social and community, or health and well-being" (Egglestone et al., 2018, p. 9).

Recent studies in the Czech Republic (Kalenda & Kocvarova, 2022; Kalenda et al., 2020) showed a significant increase in participation trends in nonformal learning; they argued a near 40% participation ($n = 12,272$) was the outcome of higher investments by employers to invest in low-skilled workers. Participation in adult education becomes more complex when broader definitions include employees in labor positions that are not required or expected to learn. Time and lack of money have been cited as reasons in the research for nonparticipation (Johnstone & Riviera, 1965; Valentine, 1997), which directly affect the design of the research at William & Mary where learning offerings were offered at work as part of the workday without any cost to the participants.

Workplace Learning

Because most lifelong learning occurs at work and in the workplace, there is much to be learned about adult learning by examining learning in the workplace. The rapid advancement of technology, the globalization of the economy, and changing demographics are interrelated factors shaping learning in the United States (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated the decline in the working-age population, according to the 2022 report on the shortage of labor. Among the recommendations was to tap "overlooked sources of talent" (Committee for Economic Development of the Conference Board, 2022, p. 2) and cultivate talent in economically vulnerable and underrepresented groups with training and retraining. Rapid changes in the economy and the work required of the labor force have created a perfect storm, and a solution for the lack of demand is a willingness to retrain and promote learning for those who do not have the formal education or training.

Manuti et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of literature related to formal and informal learning in the workplace through the human resource development (HRD) perspective,

recognizing the value of learning for the employee and the organization. Manuti et al. (2015) concluded employers must take an expansive view of learning at work and realize formal and informal learning are complementary and necessary for organizations and employees to thrive, as they stated:

> Learning is predominantly determined by the complex social practices in any learning setting, which integrate what are sometimes termed formal and informal components. Thus . . . in all or nearly all situations where learning takes place, elements of both formal and informal learning are present. But the most significant issue is not the boundaries between these types of learning but the interrelationships between dimensions of formality/informality in particular situations. (p. 12)

Like Brennan (1997), Manuti et al. (2015) believed in embracing the full spectrum of learning.

It seems reasonable that educational institutions would set expectations for learning for their employees and turn to theories related to how organizations learn to ensure they are able to keep pace with change and evolve to face challenges. One strategy is to offer educational benefits that offset the cost of tuition for employees; however, these benefits and policies exclude those who have not had formal education experiences and are unprepared to pursue a degree at a 4-year university. According to a 2021 College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR, 2021) report surveying 223 institutions, the median percentage of eligible employees who used the tuition benefits available to them was 11%. Studies have confirmed reimbursement programs have too many strings attached, are difficult to access and understand, and are not used by those who need them most (Cappelli, 2004; Committee for Economic Development of the Conference Board, 2015). The literature has

not shown higher education has taken steps to examine workplace policies that are inclusive of nonformal learning and ensure equitable access to learning for operational employees.

Global trends in workplace diversity require attention to workplace inclusivity. Mor Barak et al. (1998) were the first to systematically study workplace inclusion, and many current scholars have studied diversity management and inclusion (Cheng et al., 2019; Ferdman, 2017; D. G. Smith, 2020). Workplace inclusivity as it relates to workplace learning is worthy of closer examination. In higher education, in which increased diversity distinguishes a university's ability to prepare students for the global workforce, workplace diversity and inclusivity are core to the mission and prerequisites for future success.

Workplace Diversity and Inclusivity

This current study's intervention about workplace learning for employees in low-wage positions required close examination of studies about workplace diversity and inclusivity. Shore et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive review of inclusion literature, expanding on Ferdman's (2014) work, that resulted in an expanded framework for inclusive organizations: (a) "feeling safe" (p. 185) relates to sharing different opinions; (b) "involvement in the workgroup" (p. 185) relates to having access to information or resources; (c) "feeling respected and valued" (p. 185) is being appreciated as an individual and member of an identity group; (d) "influence on decision-making" (p. 185) is believing your opinion is listened to and acted upon; (e) "authenticity" (p. 185) occurs when a person believes they can bring their unique identity without fear of repercussion; and (f) "recognizing, honoring, and advancing diversity" (p. 185) is a final theme that happens when there is fair treatment and managers show their appreciation for cultural diversity.

This model has several overlapping themes with the eight dimensions of workplace inclusivity used to develop the Workplace Inclusion Scale, which was designed to be simple and accessible and validated across multiple contexts and industries (Herlihy et al., 2022; Lennox et al., 2022). In Table 1, I organize the themes and connections between the Workplace Inclusion Scale, the model for inclusive organizations by Shore et al. (2018), and the self-directed wellness model (Teal et al., 2015) that brings together positive psychology and self-directed learning. Changes in the workforce have made this concept a crucial conversation and area of research. As workforce diversity increases, the desire for an inclusive workplace increases too and becomes a central topic of study. Mor Barak (2014) provided this definition:

> Workforce diversity refers to the division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and that (b) impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace, and promotion prospects—irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications. (p. 136)

Table 1

Visualizing the Related Frameworks and Measurements of Inclusivity

Lennox et al.'s (2022) eight dimensions of workplace inclusion measured in the WIS	Shore et al.'s (2018) inclusive organizations model	Teal et al.'s (2015) self-directed wellness model
Trust	Psychological safety	-
Value individual attributes	Authenticity	Positive emotion—empowerment Engagement—learner autonomy, learner control Relationships—learner autonomy, learner control Meaning—self-monitoring, personal ownership Accomplishment—Learner control, self-determination
Personal work engagement	Involvement in the work group and influence on decision making	Positive emotion—empowerment, curiosity Engagement—learner autonomy, learner control, interactivity, self-regulation Relationships—interactivity Meaning—personal ownership Accomplishment—self Determination
Fair rewards	-	-
Cultural responsiveness	Recognizing, honoring, and advancing diversity	-
Respect	Feeling respected and value	-
Social acceptance	-	Relationships—interactivity, teamwork
Access to opportunity	-	Positive emotion—empowerment, love of learning, happiness Engagement—learner autonomy, learner control Relationships—learner autonomy, learner control Meaning—self-monitoring, personal ownership, motivation Accomplishment—learner control, self-determination, motivation, mastery of goals/skills

Note. WIS = Workplace Inclusion Scale.

According to Ferdman (2017), "In inclusive organizations and societies, people of all identities and many styles can be fully themselves while also contributing to the larger collective,

as valued and full members" (p. 235). The concepts of workplace diversity and workplace inclusivity are relevant to the population of employees who occupy positions at the low end of the pay scale in higher education and beyond. For employees to participate in learning opportunities in the workplace, the culture needs to value and encourage learning that is relevant to the literature about organizations that learn.

Learning Organizations

The literature on the learning organization provides connections between organizations that learn and employees that are encouraged to learn. In learning organizations, employees collectively learn and continually develop their knowledge and skills which has a direct positive impact on organizational goals and culture (Senge, 1990). The Gallup (2022) *State of the Global Workplace* report stated, "employee well-being is the new workplace imperative" (p. 11) and global well-being and employee engagement are very low and inextricably connected. A learning organization by design is based on higher levels of employee engagement by practicing these five disciplines: (a) systems thinking, (b) personal mastery or personal growth and learning, (c) mental modes or reflective practice, (d) shared vision or an understanding of how actions contribute to the future, and (e) team learning or the ability to use the language of systems thinking (Senge, 1990).

Rana et al. (2016) did an extensive review of the literature on learning organizations and practices that promote self-directed learning, bringing together HRD scholars and practitioners to outline a set of recommendations for developing and implementing practices in the workplace. Their conceptual model provides an implementation strategy that seeks to provide the best conditions for self-directed learning in a learning organization. Nonformal learning opportunities fit well within the practices, specifically in the fourth practice—encouraging and providing

opportunities for continuous learning (see Figure 4). At the core of a learning organization is a

positive workplace culture and employees who occupy low-wage positions have much to gain

from increased access to opportunity, including nonformal and self-directed learning.

Figure 4

Practices Aimed at Promoting SDL in a Learning Organization
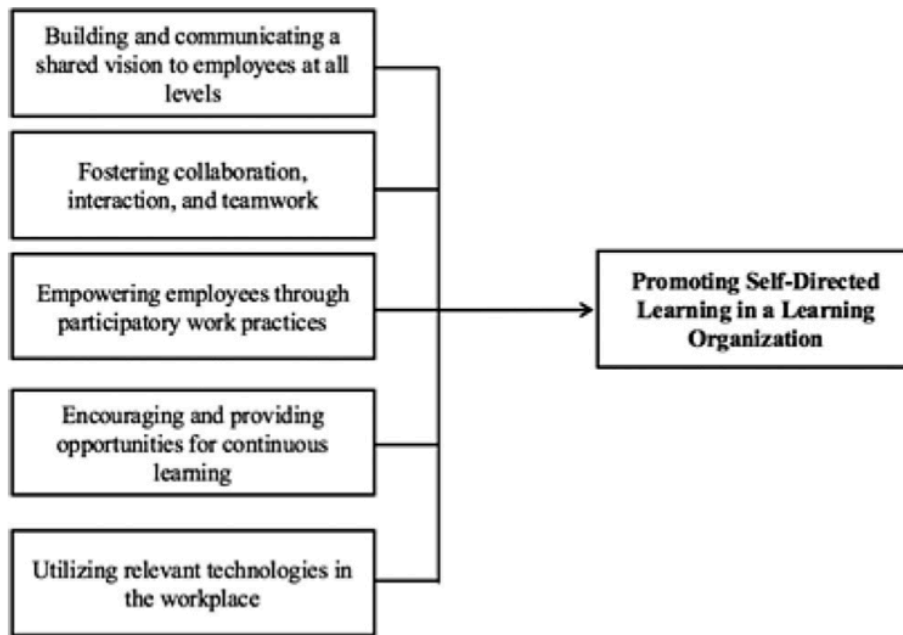
Note. SDL = self directed learning. From "Promoting Self-Directed Learning in a Learning Organization:

Tools and Practices," by S. Rana, A. Ardichvili, and D. Polesello, 2016, *European Journal of Training*

and Development, 40(7), p. 479 (https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-10-2015-0076). Permission to reprint by

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Workplace Learning for Employees in Low-Wage Positions

       The Lumina Foundation (2022) tracked educational attainment after high school for

adults aged 25–64, and at 51.9%, the United States will fall short of its 60% goal by 2025. The

report tracked degree completion or earned credentials beyond the high school diploma. The

average earnings of high school graduates with some college were more than 31% greater (close to $8,000 annually) than those with a high school education. For those who completed associate degrees, there was a $12,000 increase in annual earnings and 51% more than a high school graduate with no college (Trostel, 2016). These data make a compelling case for increasing access to degrees and short-term credentials. In the higher education context of this study and intervention, access to community college and other formal learning outside of the home institution was limited. No policy has invited employees to enroll in educational programs outside of the home institution. The intervention in this study increased access to nonformal learning programs, and a positive experience with nonformal learning opportunities could increase interest in degree programs or short-term credentials that lead to new skills and job opportunities.

Several scholars have connected the organizational leaders who model learning, and a manager's perceived support relates to participation in learning programs, especially to low-skilled employees (Billett, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2022). Corporate social responsibility and a manager's ability to appeal to ethically motivated employees as a motivating factor to encourage employee engagement explores the supervisor's influence even further (Godkin, 2015).

A systematic review of 56 studies on workplace learning found actual participation is related to firm size, employee education and efficacy level, support from managers, and opportunities within the organization (Kyndt & Baert, 2013). These studies, conducted in Belgium, examined workplace learning for low-qualified employees, defined "as employees with a low degree of educational background, or vocational track degrees that do not grant access to higher education" (Kyndt & Baert, 2013, p. 179).

In a mixed methods study (*n* = 652) on motivation, Kyndt, Govaerts, Claes, et al. (2013) concluded the content of the training offered must be considered useful and related to the job occupied by the employee. The study on learning intentions revealed the semi-structured interview design was challenging because participants were most familiar with formal learning and had difficulty discussing learning more broadly given the participants' previous negative experiences (Kyndt, Govaerts, Keunen, & Dochy, 2013). Studies also confirmed employees in higher-paying positions were perceived to have more support for workplace learning (González-Rico et al., 2018; Harteis et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2022). Jenkins et al. (2022) researched employees at a large midwestern university in the United States to explore employee health at work and perceptions across wage categories. Jenkins et al. (2022) confirmed a comprehensive health promotion program with top-level leadership support can be stymied by "organizational policies that provide work life balance are unevenly distributed across employees" (p. 169).

HRD

HRD has been defined as "a set of systematic and planned activities designed by an organization to provide its members with the opportunities to learn necessary skills to meet current and future job demands" (Werner & DeSimone, 2011, p. 4). HRD and workplace learning have a complimentary relationship given that workplace learning is also known as training and development. Because the nature of HRD spans a career and applies to employees across an organization, nonformal learning is an element deserving of examination within the workplace literature. Workplace learning within the context of HRD includes a spectrum of learning, from formal to nonformal to self-directed learning.

Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2008) reviewed existing literature linking self-directed learning to workplace performance and concluded individual self-directed learners are the lifeblood of the learning organization, stating:

Formal education and training are now only the beginning of learning; each individual must continue to learn in order to remain effective. Human resource developers and trainers can no longer expect to design and deliver instruction sufficient to keep the pace with learning needs. The extensive literature on learning organizations recognizes the need for all members of an organization to contribute to the acquisition of the new knowledge and skills required for the organization to remain competitive. (p. 294)

Studies by Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2008) relied on their Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale to build a case that connects self-directed learning to work performance for managers and nonmanagers, and as well as industry leaders in the United States. They also used the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale to study self-directed readiness and occupational categories, which compared nine occupational categories and found significantly lower scores in the nonprofessional job categories of manufacturing and clerical/administrative (Durr et al., 1996). Guglielmino and Gugliemino (2008) concluded HRD cannot ignore the evidence that organizational success lies in creating a culture of learning; they offered five guidelines for creating that culture, that align with the current study:

Respect your intellectual capital; encourage self-directed learning and a culture of innovation and growth through organizational communications; model lifelong self-directed learning throughout managerial levels; examine your training and development practices and revise if necessary; and provide support systems for self-directed learning. (p. 298)

Workplace learning is the connection between HRD and nonformal learning. Organized meaningful opportunities to learn in the workplace for employees who have had less access to formal learning and less practice and encouragement for self-directed learning is an area that needs further examination. This study connects the implementation of nonformal learning in the workplace as a missing component to a higher education institutions approach to support employee learning and defining educational benefits.

Higher Education Workforce Challenges

This study on workplace learning was situated in a higher education context; thus a review of higher education as an employer was essential. Holmwood (2016) stated, "A truly sustainable higher education system would be one that addresses its own role in the reproduction of inequality and, in doing so, finds its way back to values that define the university of the future" (p. 70). Although Holmwood was a sociologist and social policy professor in the United Kingdom, his words have meaning across higher education and cultural contexts. This review of literature uncovered the inequities of a higher education workforce in the United States and the relationship with the community surrounding the university as it relates to employees earning lower wages.

The Equity and Diversity Imperative

The stratification in higher education is unfamiliar to many and the lack of research about and with employees who occupy positions on the low end of the pay scale is an indicator that this population has been understudied. To advance goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion, colleges and universities must look inward and reflect upon the traditions, policies, and operations and how those support and exclude members of the workforce. D. G. Smith (2020) stated putting people together from diverse backgrounds does not guarantee success, and future research should

focus on answering this question: "What are the conditions under which positive outcomes emerge from environments in which diversity is present, and which forms of diversity are relevant in these situations?" (p. 21). A diversity plan can be found for many institutions of higher learning:

> Institutionalizing a diversity plan entail committed leadership; shared responsibility; a comprehensive scope of goals and activities; resources; focused educational development opportunities; a review of policies processes, and practices; and assessment of changes that are occurring, along with the development of plans for the future. (Stanley et al., 2019, p. 265)

Even with diversity plans and leaders who understand the value and competitive edge diversity gives a university, it has remained an aspirational goal for many institutions of higher learning.

Literature on diversity and inclusion in higher education has focused on the lack of diversity among faculty and managerial positions, institutional practices and policies serving barriers to access for students, and low-wages and unfair treatment of adjunct faculty and graduate students (Donnor, 2021; Kroeger et al., 2018; D. G. Smith, 2020). There is a dearth of literature about the uneven distribution of employee benefits and the wide distribution of educational qualifications and pay. Few studies have been related to employees occupying service and administrative jobs in higher education.

Magolda (2016) conducted an ethnographic study on the lives of campus custodians, which was published in a book that examined the trend toward corporatization and civic disengagement in higher education. The results of Magolda's (2016) final research project produced an in-depth look at "an invisible campus subculture" (p. 11) in which he attempted to reconcile how universities value education and exclude marginalized members of their own

community. Although the research was not conclusive, it was foundational to understanding the perspectives and contexts for operational staff and, more specifically, those who work in building services.

Another study at a large university in Spain used four distinct measurements: burnout, engagement, happiness, and satisfaction with life, to distinguish differences in well-being between teaching, research and academic employees, and the administrative and service employees (González-Rico et al., 2018). The results revealed well-being at work is distinct for each group based on engagement, professional efficacy, and cynicism. The administrative and service employees had higher levels of burnout and cynicism, which may be attributed to the lower levels of engagement (González-Rico et al., 2018). It is also possible low wages contribute to burnout and cynicism. A larger experimental study of British employees ($n = 16,000$) outside of higher education explored satisfaction and well-being levels relative to pay and found ordinal rank has a statistically significant effect on well-being and is connected to employee turnover (Brown et al., 2008).

The current study increased engagement by offering opportunities to learn during the workday for service employees who occupy positions at the low end of the pay scale—the same type of employees studied by Magolda (2016), similar to those found to have higher levels of burnout and cynicism by Gonzalez-Rico et al. (2018), and those subject to turnover and conditions that adversely affect employee well-being, according to Brown et al. (2008).

Labor Force Shortages

A CUPA-HR 2022 higher education workforce survey centered on employee retention was piloted in May 2022 to ascertain the vulnerability of nonfaculty employees (Bichsel et al., 2022). Of the respondents, 35% ($n = 3815$) were likely or very likely to look for employment

elsewhere in the next year, and 18.9% did not feel a sense of belonging. Bichsel et al. (2022) noted the following areas of dissatisfaction:

> Nearly half (46%) of higher ed employees disagree they have opportunities for advancement and a similar percentage disagree they are paid fairly (45%). Thirty-nine percent disagree that the institution is invested in their career development and one-fourth (24%) disagree that they are recognized for their contributions. (p. 15)

Salaries in higher education were the subject of another CUPA research report (Brantley, 2021) that examined the minimum wage issue. CUPA salary data from 2021 revealed 40% of nonexempt employees in the maintenance/service category made less than $15 an hour. At the institution in the current study, the minimum wage was increased to $15.50 beginning with the 2022–2023 academic year. Still, the study population remained steady at 159 employees between 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 for those earning less than $19 per hour or $39,450 annually. The crisis in higher education has been consistent with other industries and labor forces who have relied on individuals to fill jobs that require lower educational requirements and pay less. *Developing America's Frontline Workers* (Oakes & Martin, 2016), a report authored in response to President Obama's Upskill America initiative, recognized the need for educating frontline workers and job training for low-wage employees, stating:

> The importance of a highly engaged frontline workforce must not be overlooked and underestimated. As a result of being more aligned to the employer's purpose, culture and goals, common sense tells us that highly engaged workers are less likely to miss or quit work and are more likely to refer friends to the organization, the latter of which is often cited as the top source of a quality hire. (p. 7)

The inattention to the frontline worker is a costly, missed opportunity. According to a report by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (2016), the cost of replacing an employee making less than $50,000 annually was 20% of their salary and the median turnover of employees aged 20–24 was shorter than 16 months. The economy and labor force are driving changes in policies and culture related to recruitment, retention, and agility of the higher education workforce.

The U.S. Labor Shortage: A Plan to Tackle the Challenge, a nonpartisan report released by the Committee for Economic Development of The Conference Board (2022), outlined solutions in response to the decline in the workforce because of the aging population, less participation, and reduced immigration. The report was a call to action and called on "leaders in business, education, and public policy to collaborate to address the challenges of the tight labor market through initiatives focused on increasing Americans' participation in the workforce" (p. 2). With only 62.3% of working-age adults participating, there is urgency (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Higher education leaders have felt the pressure of the economic situation from all directions. University and college leaders are under pressure to produce skilled workers needed for the economy to thrive and are struggling with a lack of applicants for the jobs that support their operations (Zahneis, 2022). Even the most traditional colleges and universities have found it hard to ignore the success of some for-profit institutions and the lure of income that has resulted from nontraditional learner programs. Employees are also feeling the pressure and lure of competition to work elsewhere.

The relationship between the university and the local community is important as it relates to recruiting frontline employees—those who occupy administrative support and service positions. Gavazzi et al. (2014), creators of the Optimal College Town Assessment, analogized

the relationship of a university and the community to a healthy marriage and has written extensively on the benefits of communities and institutions of higher learning working together to achieve harmony. Alliances are built on mutually beneficial goals and the essential work of recognizing past harms, conflicts, and the need for healing as the university and community build a vision together (Gavazzi, 2018). Among the benefits to the university is the ability to recruit and retain a workforce for frontline positions that are seeing record-low applicants. Universities can leverage the lure of full-time employment and benefits to those in the surrounding communities. Although economic outcomes are undeniable, "participation [in learning] is also believed to increase adults' sense of citizenship, good health, and overall well-being" (Boeren, 2017a, p. 300).

Employee Well-Being

Employees who have had less access to learning and professional development are less likely to be encouraged as self-directed learners. Self-directed learning increases when employee engagement and understanding the field of positive psychology. Seligman (2011), the founder of positive psychology, outlined a theoretical framework for well-being: when a person has positive emotion, engagement, meaningful relationships, meaning in their life, and accomplishments, they will flourish and have greater well-being (Seligman, 2011). Positive education was defined as "education for both traditional skills and for happiness" (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 293).

The design of the current study recognized the influencing relationship between work and life and learning opportunities that offer knowledge for life skills in addition to knowledge for the workplace. Teal et al. (2015) linked positive psychology with self-directed learning by exploring the literature and comparing the fields of education and positive psychology and proposing a model of self-directed wellness as a framework for further study. Their self-directed

wellness framework was useful for coding and identifying themes in the qualitative data in this study (see Figure 5). Self-directed learning has been shown to be correlated with happiness for adults over 60 (Brockett, 1985). Brockett (1985) found older adults were happiest when they were independent, and self-directed learning was a strategy for increasing independence. However, the small ($n = 64$) homogeneous sample in Brockett's study was cited as a limitation of the study.

Figure 5

Self-Directed Wellness Model

Key:
Eye of flower – Elements of PERMA
Solid line petals – Self-directed learning concepts/terms
Dotted line petals – Positive psychology concepts/terms
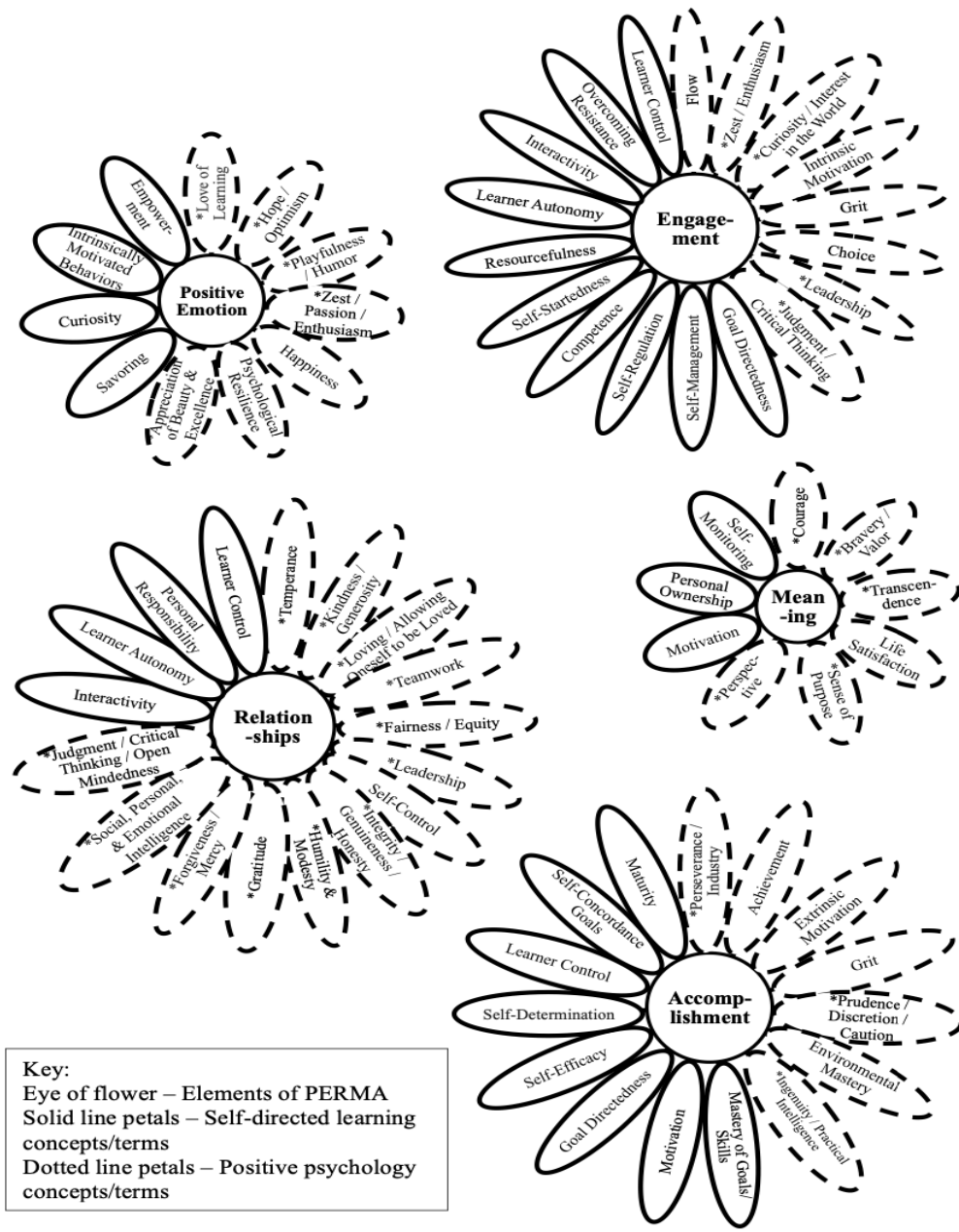
Note. From "Linking Positive Psychology With Self-Directed Learning: A Model of Self-Directed Wellness," by C. Teal, K. R. Vess, and V. K. Ambrose, 2015, *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning, 12*(1), p. 21. Permission to reprint by the International Society for Self-Directed Learning.

Summary

The review of the literature revealed there is an absence of research related to workplace learning for employees who have had less access to formal learning and for whom nonformal learning could have a positive impact. My study contributes to research on equity that is timely and a priority for educational institutions and the workplace more broadly. Chapter 2 provided an overview of adult education participation and lifelong learning, showed the potential for nonformal and self-directed learning in the workplace, and cited studies and recommendations about the benefits to the individuals and the organization when learning is prioritized in the workplace, especially for marginalized groups. Chapter 3 details a methodology for understanding the learning interests of higher education participants and for exploring the impact of a learn at work program for employees learning less $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, in a higher education setting.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

My goal in this study was to attempt to understand the learning needs of employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, at William & Mary. I used an action research approach to implement an intervention with a menu of classes, workshops, and tutoring for operational employees from a segment of the university during work hours. I approached this study from a constructivist world view, which, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018) is defined as follows:

> Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences-meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of the views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. (p. 8)

The constructivist paradigm embraces the partnership with the stakeholders and assumes the research process will evolve as the researcher engages with the participants. Open conversations and trust are crucial for eliciting responses during focus groups and interviews at the end of the program. I used participant meetings to facilitate direct conversations with participants, build community and trust, and offer time for reflection.

The design for this study included the collection of quantitative data by monitoring participation and qualitative data to know how participation affected participant work experience

and life as they relate to workplace inclusivity and belonging. Participants were invited to attend classes over the course of a semester, single session workshops, and tutoring during their workday in Fall 2022. The study addressed these questions:

1. What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting?

2. How does participation in classes, workshops or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants?

Rationale for Action Research

In 2020, a listening tour was conducted by new leaders in facilities and human resources at the institution of study. They consistently heard employees felt undervalued and overlooked. This study gave voice to university employees who were at the low end of the university salary structure and who often felt marginalized. It invited operational employees into the process of investigating a possible solution to a perceived lack of support for low wage employees in a university setting. Kurt Lewin, credited as the originator of action research, understood the value of sharing authority and engaging ordinary people in the process of reflective thought, discussion, decision, and action (Adelman, 1993; see also Marrow, 1977). I followed Stringer and Aragon's (2021) approach to investigation through continuous cycles of observation, reflection, and action. The design aligned with action research in the following ways—the research was:

- Action oriented and tied to local systems;

- A reflective practice for operational employees;

- Solutions focused by providing increased opportunities to learn; and

- Attentive to dynamics of community, organizational, and institutional settings.

Universities teach educational theories, and higher education institutions will benefit from additional time spent connecting theory to practice (Ardichvili, 2012). The stratification of the workforce presents challenges to workplace inclusivity, and there is limited research about how to achieve a greater sense of belonging within higher education organizations. Magolda's (2016) book, *The Lives of Campus Custodians,* was dedicated to "seeing" the most vulnerable employees in higher education workforce. My study was an opportunity to understand the work experience of operational employees at a research institution and identify possible solutions for addressing belonging and inclusivity. This research plan provided access to opportunity for employees and support structures and data collection in the form of voluntary participant meetings, focus groups, and participant interviews.

Description of the Action Research

The intervention for this study included the classes and tutoring services offered by the Literacy for Life program and university-led single workshops offered twice a month—planned at times to accommodate most facilities management (FM) employees. These offerings are described and referred to collectively as the Learn at Work program (see Table 2). Voluntary participant meetings were offered throughout the Fall 2020 semester as an added opportunity for those who (a) had questions about the classes and workshops, (b) were seeking community with their coworkers, or (c) wanted additional time for self-directed learning. The workshop topics were generated by me in partnership with human resources and information technology, the units that expressed interest in delivering or coordinating content in the university-led workshops. The result was six university-led workshops, promoted as LearnShops to the participants and the

broader university community. These were bite sized 90-minute sessions that overlapped some of the content covered in the longer classes on health, computers, and money.

Table 2

Learn at Work Program Offerings in Fall 2022

Details	Topic			Workshops
	Computers	Money	Health	
Length	6-week course	12-week course	10-week course	Single session
Frequency	Weekly	Weekly	Weekly	2x/month
Duration	90 minutes	90 minutes	90 minutes	90 minutes
Capacity	15	25	20	25
Purpose	Learn about computers and how to use them in life and at work. Lessons on reading and writing email, internet searching, Banner timesheet, annual leave, and Microsoft Word.	Learn how to read your paystub, introduction to money management and budgeting digital tools. Saving, budgeting, and setting goals.	Learn about healthy habits, tools for tracking food and exercise, and how to communicate with doctors and advocate for your health.	9/16 Intro to libraries 9/30 Intro to Teams/Banner 10/14 Resume in Word 10/28 Health benefits 11/18 Cybersecurity 12/2 Cornerstone learning
Meeting day and time	Wednesdays (Session 1: Sept.–Oct.; Session 2: Nov.–Dec.)	8:30–10 am, Thursdays	8:30–10 am, Tuesdays	12:00–1:30 pm, Fridays

Literacy for Life's Role in the Intervention

Literacy for Life employed instructors to lead finance, health, and computer classes, and they paired trained volunteers with participants who wished to be tutored. The course curriculum was developed previously and based on the needs of clients with low literacy. I approached this organization because they were accessible to university employees, the classes were established

and tested, and they had significant experience teaching adult learners. The content of the classes was secondary to increasing access to opportunity and understanding how it affects workplace inclusivity.

Literacy for Life's primary focus is to provide literacy services in the community, including preparation for general education diploma (GED) and trade certification exams, and improving life skills (e.g., parenting, personal finances, English language skills). Literacy for Life is a nonprofit organization funded by local grants and philanthropic support. The offices are located on the university campus within the School of Education. The founding of the adult skills program in 1975 began with university leaders, faculty, and concerned citizens intent on serving the needs of William & Mary employees (Literacy for Life, 2022). In 2022, the Literacy for Life organization served the broader community and reached 496 clients. Typically, fewer than 1% of their clients each year are employed by the university. At the time of this study, the organization had eight full-time employees, three part-time employees, and about 100 volunteers who worked directly with those who seek services.

University Libraries Role in the Intervention

The proximity to the participants made the campus library a convenient location for the participants. As the researcher, I was a librarian with easy access to classrooms and classroom support. All Literacy for Life classes, the university-led workshops and the voluntary participant meetings occurred in the library. Classroom spaces were recently renovated and flexible, allowing for small group discussions and the integration of technology for the instructors. The library and information technology (IT) staff procured computers for participants in the introduction to computers classes. The first LearnShop offered an introduction to the university

library and local public library to establish libraries as a friendly resource for university employees.

Participants

FM employees at William & Mary received an invitation to participate in the Learn at Work program. Recruiting and informing the participants about the opportunities to learn during the workday was vital to ensuring participants had the information they needed to decide if they would participate. To protect the confidentiality of the participants and their income, all learners in the classes and workshops were invited to sign a consent form. I identified participants making less than $19 an hour, and $39,520 annually, and these data were analyzed for the study. An overview of eligible employees as of November 1, 2022, is shown in Table 3. Most participants worked in building services, gardens and grounds, and postal services. Of the 272 full time FM employees, 58.4% met the criteria to participate. Among the targeted population of 159 employees, 51.6% were female, with an average salary of $34,186 and nearly 9 years of experience; 47.8% were male, with an average salary of $33,837 and nearly 6 years of experience.

Table 3

Eligible Full-Time Participants at a Glance by Role, Salary, Service, and Race/Ethnicity

Min. hourly wage/annual salary	Position classification	*n*	*M* salary	*M* years' service	% People of color
State classification system					
$24,960	01	18	34,957	25.8	94
$26,853	02	2	39,113	22.1	100
$29,772	03	1	38,807	20.0	100
University classification system					
$15.50/$32,240	U01	101	33,274	4.43	79
$15.50/$32,240	U02	22	34,270	5.41	73
$15.50/$32,240	U03	5	33,691	4.20	60
$15.50/$32,240	U04	9	37,843	6.82	55
$15.50/$32,240	U05	1	37,202	3.19	0
Total		159	34,007	7.44	78

Note. N = 159. All employees hired since 2009 are in the university classification system (William & Mary, 2023); 22 employees on this chart remain classified and governed by Virginia's human resources policies. These data capture eligible participants/employees working on November 1, 2022.

Recruiting Participants

I began establishing relationships with FM supervisors in Spring 2022 during a 6-week course developed for managers by the human resources (HR) department in partnership with FM leaders. I was introduced at the first session as an administrator and graduate student interested in workplace learning. I attended and participated in these weekly meetings that were a mixture of lectures, small and large group discussions. Simultaneously, I met directly with each senior leader and their managers to discuss a university program to encourage workplace learning and to gather input and suggestions.

I presented in August 2022 to FM employees—those who met the criteria for participation in the study and those who did not. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the concept of workplace learning and the specific opportunities that would be offered in Fall 2022.

A representative from Literacy for Life introduced the history of the program, their services, and provided information about the classes. The assistant vice president for business operations and the chief facilities officer gave remarks about workplace learning and encouraged participation. Employees were invited to sign up by adding their name to chart paper. Email communication with a copy of the presentation was distributed by the chief facilities officer's administrative assistant. Links to register for classes invited participants to rank their top two choices. I sent a second wave of communication to FM employees from by email and letter. The registration lists were monitored by Literacy for Life staff and me. Consent forms to participate in the study were distributed to all learners on their first day of class. The process of identifying participants who met the wage criteria was be done behind the scenes to protect confidentiality.

Monthly Participant Meetings

Participants were invited to attend monthly meetings in September, October, and November in Fall 2022. Meetings lasted 60 minutes and occurred in the library. The meetings were structured as informal gatherings for building community, reflecting, practicing, or self-directed learning. These meetings supported ongoing dialogue with participants and allowed for communication about the university-led workshops. Appendix B provides the agenda and outline. The HR director of training and I facilitated the conversations. Coffee and tea were served to set these meetings apart from the classes and to entice participation in these voluntary gatherings. I wrote fieldnotes following each session.

Data Sources and Data Collection

I used both qualitative and quantitative measures to explore how participants experience learning at work. The research questions were addressed by analysis of the following data sources: (a) sign-up sheets, (b) attendance records, (c) surveys, (d) focus group reports, (e) field

50

notes, and (f) interviews. An overview and alignment of the research questions with the data sources and the strategies for analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Research Questions Aligned With Data Sources and Analysis Method***s**

Research questions	Data sources	Data analysis
1. What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting?	Registration/sign-up sheets, attendance records, interviews	Analyzing the participation and attendance data for classes, workshops and tutoring with descriptive statistics, In Vivo and descriptive coding of the recorded interviews
2. How does participation in classes, workshops or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants?	Survey, field notes from monthly participant meetings; 3 focus group reports; 10 recorded participant interviews	Descriptive statistics of the survey, Descriptive coding of the focus group reports; In Vivo and descriptive coding of the individual recorded interviews

Registration for Classes, Tutoring, and LearnShops

Registration for the classes began August 2, a month prior to the first class, and included multiple ways to enroll. Employees signed up at the informational meeting, through a link distributed multiple times through email communication, and with the help of their supervisor. In late August, after reviewing the registration and interest in the Literacy for Life classes, FM leaders decided participants could take two classes. The Chief Facilities Officer's administrative assistant communicated with those who registered in person for multiple classes to ensure they were enrolled in their top two choices. Employees were notified by email the week prior to the beginning of classes. Employees were directed to call Literacy for Life to discuss personalized tutoring. Some employees expressed interest in tutoring on the online form for class registration and Literacy for Life staff followed up with those employees.

University-led workshops were meant to be less formal and did not require registration. They were announced at the beginning of the program, through weekly email reminders, and at the monthly participant meetings. Workshops were open to all university employees, with targeted promotion to FM employees.

Attendance Records

Participation was voluntarily and attendance was used for data analysis only. Attendance records were kept by Literacy for Life for the classes they taught and the tutoring sessions they offered. I relied on those records to track participation across all program offerings. With assistance from HR and instructors, I took attendance at the monthly participant meetings and the university-led single workshops. The aggregate records allowed me to see patterns of engagement for participants and classes and was kept confidential. Attendance records for the university-led workshops and voluntary participant meetings were initially kept on paper and then transferred to the aggregate record. Attendance records for the tutoring sessions were kept at the Literacy for Life office, shared with me in December 2022, and added to the aggregate record. Attendance records were analyzed by participant demographic characteristics and by class.

Surveys

Participant surveys were administered at the beginning and end of the classes that spanned 6, 10, and 12 weeks and once at the conclusion of the university-led workshops. The survey in Appendix C includes five statements with a 5-point Likert scale that asked participants to select a response to statements using *strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree,* or *strongly disagree.* Three of the five statements were borrowed from the bank of questions used in the development of the Workplace Inclusion Scale (Lennox et al., 2022) and are representative of

three of the eight dimensions for the Workplace Inclusion Scale: (a) feeling valued for individual skills and characteristics among a diverse workforce, (b) personal work engagement and the individual's connection to the whole, and (c) access to opportunity that relates to equal treatment of a diverse workforce. Two additional statements asked participants about their happiness to be present for the class and if they were having a positive work experience. The final question asked participants if they would recommend the class or workshop to a friend. This question used a 10-point scale, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being most likely to recommend the class. There was an open-ended question asking participants for suggestions about the class, or future classes; responses were coded and analyzed. For the six workshops, I received one survey from each participant at the conclusion of the workshop.

Field Notes

The observation protocol in Appendix D ensured consistency in the format and recorded observations and include descriptive notes (e.g., the number of participants in the room; the topic of the lesson; a description of the setting; and reflective notes for my speculations, impressions, problems, ideas, and prejudices; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These observations were from my perspectives as the researcher. I fulfill multiple roles including learning facilitator and coordinator of the Learn at Work program activities. I took field notes and observed at least two class meetings for each of the three classes offered by Literacy for Life and 3 of the 6 university-led single workshops. For these observations, I was a nonparticipant and observer. I cofacilitated the monthly participant meeting and used chart paper and index cards to capture the voices of participants. I completed the observation protocol form during and after the meetings. The chart paper and index cards became part of the field notes and record of meeting discussions. I kept the

handwritten field notes together in file folders—one for the Literacy for Life classes, another for the university-led workshops, and a third for the three participant meetings.

Focus Group

Guided group interviews were conducted by HR and me. The money and health participant focus groups occurred the week following the last day of class, at the same time and in the same room the class was held. The Computer A and B participants were combined into a single focus group at the conclusion of Session B, also at the same time and in the same room. Participants received notifications and reminders about the focus groups through email. Focus group participants received an incentive of refreshments and a university branded lunch tote. The focus group questions aligned with the study research questions (see Appendix E). The focus group protocol was reviewed by a colleague and trained facilitator to ensure the process maximized participant engagement. The recorded focus group provided data for me to code and analyze in preparation for the individual interviews.

Individual Interviews

I interviewed a convenience sample of 12 participants in person at the end of the semester, after the course offerings and workshops were complete. The people interviewed represented all the fall offerings available to participants:

- Introduction to Computers (2)
- On the Money (2)
- Health (2)
- Single Workshops (2)
- Tutoring Services (2)
- Registered and attended irregularly or not at all (2)

I conducted and audio recorded guided interviews in the library. I received permission to record the interview from each participant and reviewed the location, the time commitment, and the topics to be discussed prior to the interviews—individually or in small groups. The interview protocol and the alignment with the research questions is found in Appendix F. I treated the first interview as an opportunity to test and refine the interview protocol and specifically identified a person for this role. I informed them that they were first and that future interview questions and the process would be refined based on what I learned from them.

Data Analysis

Action Research Question 1

The first research question asked: What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting? I used descriptive statistics to analyze participation by individual and by engagement type—classes, workshops, and tutoring. An individual frequency count of participation in the activities and an analysis of attendance by activity type over time revealed patterns for the individuals and the menu of offerings in the Learn at Work program. I sought to understand patterns of engagement across the classes that spanned several weeks and months—versus single session workshops and individual commitments with Literacy for Life tutoring services. The frequency counts led to attribute coding that distinguished patterns of participation and informed the selection of participants to interview. For example, I used attribute coding to designate the following engagement groupings:

- Not engaged—registered for Literacy for Life course or tutoring and never attended;

- Minimally engaged—registered for Literacy for Life course or tutoring, attended less than 50% of class meetings, or did not persist through the semester for tutoring;

- Engaged—registered for Literacy for Life course or tutoring and attended more than 50%, or regularly met with tutor, or attended three or more single university-led workshops;

- Very engaged—registered for Literacy for Life course or tutoring and attended more than 70%, or regularly met with tutor, and attended at least three university-led workshops.

Further analysis relied on triangulation of the data sources. Responses to the research questions was possible through (a) comparison of the frequency counts; (b) analysis of the patterns of participation and attribute codes; and (c) further coding of fieldnotes, focus group, and participant interviews. Peer examination of the data sources and my analysis were ongoing. Bimonthly meetings with my dissertation chair were another opportunity to refine the data analysis and ensure the interpretation was accurate.

Action Research Question 2

The second research question asked: How does participation in classes, workshops or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants? Voluntary participant meetings, focus groups, and interviews provided data to answer this question. I used descriptive statistics to track individual and group responses to the survey distributed in the classes and workshops. The survey took two snapshots at the first and last class and asked questions that yielded data points about workplace inclusivity. For workshops, the data were collected at the conclusion of the session. I examined changes in the descriptive statistics over time.

Participant meetings were the largest gatherings because learners from all three classes, workshops, and tutoring sessions were invited to attend. Field notes from three participant meetings were reviewed by the HR professional, the cofacilitator in the room, with opportunity to respond and add her own observations and suggestions to my summary and identified emerging themes. The community building nature of the participant meetings was meant to offer a casual and comfortable setting for group sharing. Transcripts of participant meetings were coded, and I looked for emerging themes for each of the three classes. My field note observations from the classes and workshops were also analyzed for themes and elements to provide insights into any differences between the offerings and the participant learning experiences.

The focus groups were also a setting for group sharing and had fewer participants because they were conducted at the conclusion at each of the Literacy for Life classes. Facilitated focus groups allowed for member checking in the moment and the process employed methods to ensure maximum participation and encourage new and diverse insights. Like the participant meetings, I relied on the HR professional to cofacilitate the sessions and assist with the written summary report. The summary report was shared by email with all class participants, even those who did not attend the focus group. Every learner was invited to comment or add new and different perspectives to the focus group summary.

For the individual interviews, summaries of the transcriptions were sent back to the participants. Member checking allow me to touch base with interviewed participants and to ask if they had additional information or changes to ensure the accuracy and completeness of their story. Descriptive coding or "topic coding" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102) was applied to the focus groups and individual interviews because it is appropriate for all qualitative studies. However, descriptive coding is sometimes limiting in its ability to provide deeper insights. Process or

action coding may offer new insights and capture the observable activities and more general concepts related to how they experienced the integration of learning at work.

Saldaña (2016) suggested *in vivo* codes "derived from the actual language of the participants" (p. 77) as appropriate when working with marginalized communities so their voice is present in the data. Emotions or values coding are possible second phase coding strategies that could provide additional insight into the feelings, values, attitudes, and beliefs present in the stories participants tell about participation and the impact it had on their daily life. I used "Tesch's eight steps in the coding process" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 196):

1. Get a sense of the whole and read the transcriptions carefully.

2. Pick one interview and go through it carefully, asking, "What is this about?" and write thoughts about the underlying meaning in the margin.

3. Once this task is completed for three interviews, make a list of the topics and cluster them into major, unique and leftover topics.

4. Now return to the interviews and abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the text and see if new codes emerge.

5. Find the most descriptive wording for topics and turn them into categories, looking for ways to reduce the list of categories by grouping like topics and drawing lines between categories that show interrelationships.

6. Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize codes.

7. Assemble the data belonging to each category and analyze.

8. Recode the interviews with second cycle in Vivo coding.

I identified an experienced researcher and former practitioner as a mentor. The mentor assisted me and provided guidance throughout the process of my data analysis and coding. I used

qualitative data analysis software to fully provide answers to the question that addresses how workplace learning impacts workplace experience and life outside of work.

Role of the Researcher

My experience as a teacher, librarian, and higher education administrator has shaped my views. I worked at a comprehensive regional university for 13 years before working at a selective research university for 11 years. I have had numerous occasions to interact with the people who maintain library facilities and to understand how the general state of a library facility influences the usage and popularity of the library. Recognizing the role of a facility, and those who maintain them, has influenced my priorities and actions over my 24 years working in academic libraries. Academic libraries are focused primarily on supporting teaching and research for faculty and students. Libraries can support university employees and contribute to feelings of belonging and workplace inclusivity by encouraging workplace learning within the library. I am enrolled in a graduate program and have benefited from the university's tuition assistance program that has made pursing an advanced degree possible with minimal out of pocket expenses. As a student and lifelong learner, I have taken full advantage of library collections and services to increase my knowledge and save money on course materials. I have noted uneven access to workplace learning across the university, which sparked interest in the topic of workplace learning and workplace inclusivity.

As a member of the president's cabinet, I have been involved in top level cabinet activities, including the development and implementation of the strategic plan and modeling a culture that embraces shared values (e.g., belonging and flourishing). I collected and analyzed the data, which included interviews and focus groups. I have been influenced by my role at the institution and my values. For example, as part of the study methodology, I brought participants

to the library for the classes, university-led workshops, participant meetings, and interviews. To help me minimize bias, capture data accurately, and plan for future cycles of action research and increased access to opportunity, I partnered with the director of leadership, learning, and performance, a role situated within human resources. This person cofacilitated participant meetings and focus groups, coauthored the focus group reports, and reviewed fieldnotes that come from those data.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Delimitations

The university had many employees who met the criteria for operational employees in positions that are compensated less than $19 an hour and $39,500 annually. The sample for the study included employees who work in FM because they could be served by the seats available in the Learn at Work program. Although race and ethnicity of this population was noted, it was not the focus of the study. It was known from a recent equity report authored by an external consultant that minorities were overrepresented in occupational roles within FM, in contrast to occupational roles outside of FM that met the same compensation criteria.

Limitations

The data for the Learn at Work program were limited to three established classes and tutoring services offered by Literacy for Life and single university-led workshops. The offerings did not meet the needs and interests of all participants. There were wide-ranging attitudes and beliefs among supervisors and managers about workplace learning. Although they were mostly supportive of the program that increases access to opportunity, some voiced concerns about the practicality of having the participants away from the tasks listed in the primary responsibilities in their job description. They noted their customers (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) might see a

decline in service and complain. The FM budget model was cited as inflexible and could have been a disincentive to participation and interest in training and development. The study relied primarily on email communication, which is challenging because FM employees read and respond to email less than other segments of the university workforce. Less access to computers and less exposure to digital readiness training is one possible explanation for this limitation. Although digital readiness and computer access is a limitation, it was not the focus for this study.

Assumptions

For this study, I assumed participants would want to engage in workplace learning and the offerings would be of interest to some employees. The qualitative data sources used in this study relied on participants to be open and honest with the facilitators. I assumed they would share their experiences with other participants at the participant meetings and with me during the interviews. The survey assumed participants could read or would ask for help taking the survey. I was dependent on administrators to address the labor rate issue and remove barriers to access for those who met the criteria and wanted to participate.

Ethical Considerations

Positionality

My positionality was cause for caution because of the power, real and perceived, people assume I have because of my title and influence as a senior administrator. I was transparent during my introductions to explain that I was a student pursuing my doctorate and this project was the subject of my dissertation. I explained the library as a resource for the university workforce—a place for accessing technology and finding information and staffed by employees who are happy to assist all members of the university community, including the workforce. I sought collaborators in human resources and IT knowing the needs of the participants would

continue after my research concluded—in hopes that this study will inform plans and policies related to workplace learning and university workforce development.

The chief information officer and I had a shared interest in supporting the university workforce—specifically, development and learning related to digital literacy, which is a common thread for all three classes offered by Literacy for Life. Through strategic planning, we prioritized access to hardware and increasing digital proficiency for the university workforce. This study was an opportunity to deploy hardware to participants who are not required to use it in their daily work. Access to a computer for participants registered in the computer course made it possible for them to practice outside of class and develop increased proficiency. This benefit for some of the participants is possible because of my role and influence as an administrator and my access to funding sources.

Institutional Review Board and Participant Consent

I gained approval to conduct the study from the William and Mary education institutional review committee (EDIRC). The consent form in Appendix G gave participants an overview of the study, the expectations for participants, and my pledge to treat the data they provided with care and confidentiality.

Protecting Participants

Participants in the study were invited to participate in a program that had administrative support; however, there was undoubtedly some risk that immediate supervisors and managers could intentionally or unintentionally discourage participation by scheduling meetings or changing work assignments that conflict with the classes. For the protection of the participating employees, already in a vulnerable position given their current level of compensation and lack of

learning support previously, there was a process in place to report problems they encountered

accessing classes, workshops, meetings, and tutoring.

Accuracy, Credibility, Dependability

The constructivist paradigm required me to be aware of my own values and reflections

and how they influenced the process and outcomes of the research. Because it is not possible to

alleviate bias, it was important to factor in steps that allowed me to recognize and minimize bias

in the interpretation of the results. Participation in the study was voluntary and any actions that

looked like coercion to participate or attend activities would have invalidated the results of the

study. I used reflective journaling as a secondary data source, separate from the observational

field notes, to gather my thoughts and process feelings and observations throughout the study.

Keeping a self-reflective journal allowed me to monitor personal assumptions and clarify my

beliefs (Choi, 2020).

Sharing Results and Data Disposal

At the conclusion of my study, I will write a summary report and deliver a verbal

presentation of the research findings to participants and other stakeholders. Participants will be

invited to share stories in person or through video recordings, which is consistent with action

research and provides the possibility for personal testimonials. Personal stories of how the

program was experienced by coworkers may generate interest in workplace learning in future

cycles of action research. The data sources and analysis will be archived and consulted as needed

to support ongoing research and publications related to the findings. The final dissertation will be

archived in an open access institutional repository and indexed by ProQuest.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the action research process of this study, which was done to improve the work experience and lives for operational employees by increasing access to workplace learning. The research methodology provided a menu of learning opportunities for employees making less than $39,520 annually and $19 an hour. Data collection included quantitative methods such as surveys that measures workplace inclusivity and record keeping for the menu of offerings implemented as the intervention. Focus groups, participant meetings, and individual interviews were used to gain deeper insights into the impact of those experiences. These qualitative methods elevated the voices of participants and ensured the research questions were answered with direct responses from the people who participated in the workplace learning and who could speak about belonging and inclusivity—the problem addressed in the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this action research was to address workplace inclusivity by increasing opportunities for operational employees to learn in a higher education context and to gain an understanding of how these opportunities impact the employee experience and lives of the participants. The intervention consisted of a menu of learning opportunities presented to 159 potential participants who worked in jobs managing and caring for facilities. The opportunities included classes, workshops, and individual tutoring. To address the research questions, quantitative data in the form of attendance records and pre-post surveys were collected and analyzed. Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews were analyzed for further insights about the impact of workplace learning. In this chapter, I present the data collected to address the two research questions that guided this study:

1. What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented with a menu of options in a higher education setting?

2. How does participation in classes, workshops, or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants?

The findings for this first cycle of action research reveal the population's interests and how the program impacted their work experience and lives and give voice to those who participated. The study provides data for future cycles of action research and shows a statistically

significant change ($p = .01$) in the work experience for a small sample of study participants ($n = $ 24) enrolled in Literacy for Life classes.

Overview of the Study

Population Profile

The population of employees who met the criteria for the study on November 1, 2022, was 159. Criteria for identifying the population included full-time university employees working in facilities who earned less than $19 an hour and $39,520 annually. Demographic details provided to me by the office of institutional research included annual salary, hourly wage, university classification (i.e., Ucode), gender, race and ethnicity, length of employment, and department.

Race and ethnicity categories for the population were provided by institutional research: 68% Black or African American, 13.2% White, 5.7% Hispanic or Latino, 1.9% Asian, 1.3% were two or more races, .6% American Indian or Alaska Native, .6% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, .6% nonresident alien, and 8.2% of unknown race and ethnicity. Institutional research used nonresident alien as a descriptor in the data, which is an inaccurate descriptor for race or ethnicity. There were more women ($n = 82$) than men ($n = 76$) in the dataset, which is consistent with the total population of FM employees. The average annual salary for the population was $34,005. The average annual salary was $34,186 for women and $33,838 for men. Women averaged 3 more years of experience than the men.

Table 5 shows the population demographics for the targeted intervention. The vast majority ($n = 148$, 93.1%) of the population targeted for the intervention worked in building services, followed by gardens and grounds ($n = 9$), and plant operations ($n = 2$). Building services had 85.2% ($n = 69$) of the women participants identifying as a person of color.

Table 5

Population Race and Gender for Full Population

Race	Department								
	BLD			GRD		PLT		Total	
	f	m	u	f	m	f	m	n	%
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.6
Asian	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	1.9
Black/African American	61	43	0	0	3	0	1	108	67.9
Hispanic/Latino	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	9	5.7
Multiracial	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1.3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.6
Nonresident alien	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.6
Unknown	5	6	1	0	1	0	0	13	8.2
White	6	9	0	1	4	0	1	21	13.2
Total by gender	81	66	1	1	8	0	2	159	100.0
Total	**148**			**9**		**2**		**159**	**100**

Note. $N = 159$. BLD = building services, GRD = gardens and grounds, PLT = plant operations, f = female, m = male, u = unreported.

Study Participants

Of the 159 people who met the criteria for the study, 32.7% ($n = 52$) participated in some aspect of the Learn at Work program intervention. I used Excel spreadsheets (a) to track attendance across the menu of offerings, (b) to record survey responses, and (c) for the descriptive analysis of the demographic data for the study participants. This process resulted in (a) a profile for each of the three Literacy for Life classes, (b) a group profile for the 28 individuals who participated in workshops, and (c) a group profile for the 10 individuals who expressed interest in tutoring services. For the targeted population, 78% ($n = 124$) were people of color; for the study participants, 77% ($n = 40$) were people of color. Table 6 shows a comparison of study participants and the total population in terms of race and ethnicity.

Table 6

Race Comparisons for Study Participants and Full Population

Race and ethnicity	Participants		Population	
	n	%	*N*	%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0	0	1	.6
Asian	0	0	3	1.9
Black/African American	34	65.4	108	67.9
Hispanic/Latino	5	9.6	9	5.7
Multiracial	0	0	2	1.3
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	1.9	1	.6
Nonresident	1	1.9	1	.6
Unknown	2	3.8	13	8.2
White	9	17.3	21	13.2
Total	**52**	**100**	**159**	**100**

n = 52 study participants, *N* = 159.

Focus Groups Participants

Ten study participants attended focus groups at the conclusion of the classes offered by Literacy for Life. The purpose of the focus groups was to receive feedback specific to the classes. I excluded three voices from learners who did not meet the criteria for the study. A review of the focus group participants revealed the following:

- No study participants attended the health literacy focus group.

- Six study participants attended the computer literacy focus group.

- Four study participants attended the financial literacy focus group.

The protocol used to facilitate the focus groups is found in Appendix E. Transcripts of the focus group were coded with descriptive or topic codes that provided themes that responded to the research questions about the interests of the study participants and the effects of the program. In the following section, I integrate the qualitative data from the interviews and the focus groups.

Interview Participants

I emailed 12 study participants to request interviews. They were selected because they were involved in various aspects of the program, had varying levels of engagement, and represented the sample population demographically. Ten responded, and interviews took place over a period of 2 weeks. I recorded the interviews on my personal phone using Otter.ai, an online application that recorded and transcribed each interview and archived them in the cloud where I could access and edit them. Seven of those interviewed took two Literacy for Life classes, two took a single class, four attended at least one workshop, and five pursued or had engaged in tutoring services. Tables 7 and 8 provide a comparison of the interview sample to the 52 participants who participated in at least one of the three activities—classes, workshops, and tutoring—that comprise the Learn at Work program.

Table 7

Demographic Data for Interview Sample

	Interviewees		Study participants	
Race	*n*	%	*N*	%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0.0	0	0.0
Asian	0	0.0	0	0.0
Black/African American	7	70.0	34	64.7
Hispanic or Latino	2	20.0	5	9.8
Multiracial	0	0.0	0	0.0
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	1	10.0	1	2.0
Nonresident alien	0	0.0	0	0.0
Unknown	0	0.0	2	5.9
White	0	0.0	9	17.6
Total	10	100.0	52	100.0

Note. n = 10 interviewed participants, *N* = 52 study participants.

Table 8

Wage and Experience by Gender

Variables of interest	f	m	f	m
Gender	60.0	40.0	51.6	47.8
FM annual wage	35,382	35,655	34,186	33,873
FM work experience in years	10.4	7.4	8.9	5.9

Note. FM = Facilities Management, f = female, m = male.

I used a convenience sample and purposely tried to recruit interview participants with varying levels of participation across the program. Minimally engaged interviewed participants were not engaged in many aspects other than tutoring or attended 50% or less of their classes. Moderately engaged study participants attended between 67%–83.3% of class sessions. Very engaged participants took two classes and had attendance that exceeded 84%, and some attended multiple workshops. Table 9 lists pseudonyms for the interviewed participants by engagement along with gender, race, and experience relative to the data.

Table 9

Interview Participant List

Participant #	Engagement level	Gender	Race	Years of experience
Tina 14	Minimal	f	B	6
Matias 63	Minimal	m	H	4
Monique 1	Moderate	f	B	14
Javier 11	Moderate	m	H	3
Richard 15	Moderate	m	B	20
Gizela 40	Moderate	f	B	3
David 8	Very	m	W	2
Brenda 17	Very	f	B	21
Jocelyn 19	Very	f	B	16
Angela 24	Very	f	B	2

Note. n = 10 interviewed participants, f = female, m = male, B = Black, H = Hispanic, W = White.

Nonparticipants

The study was designed to be inclusive of all FM employees and to examine data for a specific population. Because the Learn at Work program was promoted beyond the targeted population, class rosters, workshop rosters, and tutoring records were cross-checked against the names provided by the office of institutional research. I removed data corresponding with people who participated in the intervention who did not meet the criteria for the study. Because of the drop-in format of the workshops and the diversity of topics, the decision was made to broadly promote them to the entire university community. The instructors had already committed to teaching the session, and the size of the room could accommodate up to 40 employees, likely more than would attend from the study population. Fourteen of the removed participants attended the workshops, and they worked in departments across the university, including human resources, the center for conservation biology, institutional research, department of mathematics, studio for teaching and learning innovation, the Reeves Center for International Studies, and FM. Six of the removed participants attended the Literacy for Life classes and were FM employees (classes were only promoted to the FM unit). Having 20 employees from outside the study population included in the activities demonstrated interest in workplace learning employees beyond the immediate targeted community.

Participant Meetings

Three voluntary participant meetings occurred in Fall 2023 and provided a safe place for dialogue and conversation among class participants and me. These three meetings allowed me to build rapport with those enrolled in the classes and for them to hear from their peers who attended classes they did not. These meetings achieved community building and helped me recruit for interviews at the conclusion of the intervention. Because participant meetings were

not exclusive to study participants, the summary notes from these meetings were not coded as a data source. I took observational notes at the meetings and only included content from my notes when I knew comments were made by study participants, which were used in the triangulation of the data.

Adjustments to the Study

I administered workplace inclusivity surveys in the workshops and excluded these results from the analysis because the data were irrelevant to the research questions. Offering the workshops provided data on the appeal of the 90-minute format and the topics. This format did not lend itself to a comparison over time for the participants.

One of the interviewed participants was not proficient in English, and I relied on a summary provided by the translator because the transcription software was not capable of transcribing Spanish. The translator was a university employee who was a native English speaker, did graduate work in Hispanic studies, and offered to assist me. I was in the room for the interview and observed and recorded the conversation. The recording served as a reminder to the translator of what was discussed, and we sat together immediately following the interview to summarize what was said. I sent the recording and interview summary to her for member-checking, and she had no additions.

Findings Related to Research Question 1: Interests of Participants

In this section, I examine the data related to Research Question 1: What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented with a menu of options in a higher education setting? This question relied on descriptive statistics for the three activities (i.e., classes, workshops, and tutoring). I begin with an overview of the population, the demographics of the study participants

and their participation in the Learn at Work program intervention. I continue with findings in the

qualitative data and triangulation of all the data sources for a summary analysis and direct

response to Research Question 1.

Classes

Three classes offered by Literacy for Life (i.e., health, computer, and financial literacy)

were included in the Learn at Work program. Classes required a significant investment of time,

ranging from 6–12 sessions. From the study's targeted population ($n = 159$), 22% ($n = 35$)

participated in at least one Literacy for Life class; of those 35 participants, 57.14% ($n = 20$)

signed up for two classes. Building services employees were the primary participants in the

classes with 34 participants; there was a single participant from plant operations. Table 10 shows

63% of participants enrolled in the classes were women, 11.3% more than the full population.

Table 10

Gender of Class Participation and Full Population

Gender	Participants		Population	
	n	%	*N*	%
Unknown	0	0	1	1.7
Female	22	62.9	82	51.6
Male	13	37.1	76	47.8
Total	35	100	159	100

Note. n = 35, N = 159.

Descriptive data in the form of class rosters provided insight into the interests of the

population and the participants' continued interest over time. The initial interests of the targeted

population were as follows:

- Computer literacy was of interest to 15.7% of the population and 71.4% of the class participants.

- Financial literacy was of interest to 12.6% of the population and 57.1% of class participants.

- Health literacy class captured the interest of 6.3% of the population and 28.6% of the class participants.

Analysis of the attendance records provided additional insight in participants interest over time:

- Participants in the health class attended 72% of the 10 class sessions.

- Participants in computer class A attended 78.7% of the six class sessions.

- Participants in computer class B attended 67.8% of the six class sessions.

- Participants in the financial literacy class attended 65.8% of the 12 class sessions.

Computer Classes A and B were taught consecutively, one starting in September and the other in October, and both were taught by the same instructor. For Computer Class B, three participants were signed up by their supervisor. Those participants missed the first session, attended the second session, and never returned. If those three participants were removed from the class, the participation rate for Class B would have been 81.7%. All classes occurred between September and December and aligned with the semester student calendar at William & Mary. Many participants had accumulated vacation time and some absences could be attributed to taking earned personal leave. A Thanksgiving and winter holiday break also occurred in the final month of the study when classes were coming to an end and focus groups were scheduled. Table 11 gives an overview of the study participants engaged in the classes and shows the range of work experience for these participants. There were new employees in their 1st year at William & Mary to those nearing retirement with 31 years of experience.

Table 11

Demographic Data for Literacy for Life Classes

Race	Participants								Population	
	HEAL		COMP		FNLT		ALLCL			
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*N*	%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.6
Asian	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	1.9
Black/African American	5	50.0	21	84.0	17	85.0	27	77.1	108	67.9
Hispanic/Latino	1	10.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.9	9	5.7
Multiracial	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	1.3
Native Hawaiian/ or other Pacific Islander	0	0.0	1	4.0	0	0.0	1	2.9	1	0.6
Nonresident alien	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.6
Unknown	1	10.0	2	8.0	2	10.0	3	8.6	13	8.2
White	3	30.0	1	4.0	1	5.0	3	8.6	21	13.2
Total by race	10	100.0	25	100.0	20	100.0	35	100.0	159	100.0
Total by class	10	28.6	25	71.4	20	57.1	35	100.0	159	100.0
Other variables of interest										
PoC	6	60	22	88	17	85	29	83	159	78
RANGE years experience	.44–14		.06–28		.19–31		.06–31		.06–34	
M experience	7.89		7.65		8.67		7.9		7.42	

Note. n = class participants by topic, *N* = 159. Topical abbreviations: HEAL = health literacy, COMP = computer literacy, FNLT = financial literacy, ALLCL = unique individuals participating in classes, PoC = Person of Color.

Workshops

Six workshops on various topics led by university employees were included in the Learn at Work program intervention. Workshops were held Fridays at noon and were communicated directly to the targeted study population through email and additional verbal communication occurred for class participants. There were two workshops during September and October, and one was offered in both November and December. These topical 90-minute instructional sessions were advertised as LearnShops in the university's daily digest and open to the study population and the entire university community. The digest was an emailed communication sent each day to all university employees. The workshop format attracted 29 participants or 18.2% of the targeted population ($N = 159$). Tables 12 and 13 provide an overview of the demographic data for the study participants who attended the workshops.

Table 12

Demographic Data for Workshops

Race	Workshops		Population	
	n	%	*N*	%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0.0	1	0.6
Asian	0	0.0	3	1.9
Black/African American	18	62.1	108	67.9
Hispanic/Latino	2	6.9	9	5.7
Multiracial	0	0.0	2	1.3
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	0	0.0	1	0.6
Nonresident alien	1	3.4	1	0.6
Unknown	1	3.4	13	8.2
White	7	24.1	21	13.2
Total	29	100.0	159	100.0

Note. n = workshops participants, *N* = 159.

Table 13

Wages and Experience by Gender

Wages and Experience	f	m	f	m
Gender percent	44.8	55.2	51.6	47.8
FM annual wage	34,697	34,483	34,186	33,873
FM years of experience	8.8	5.0	8.9	5.9

Note. f = female, m = male, FM = Facilities Management.

Among the targeted population, 29 people, or 18.2%, of the population ($N = 159$)

attended at least one workshop. Attendance records from the workshop format were analyzed

and relayed insights about the topical interests and the workshop format.

- 19 people attended one workshop, five attended two workshops, four attended three

  workshops, and one individual attended four workshops.

- Workshops were the only activity selected by 15 people who represented 28.8% of the

  study participants ($n = 52$).

- Of the participants in the workshop format, 55.2% were men.

Table 14 shows workshop attendance by topic. Cybersecurity and university benefits

workshops were most popular. The cybersecurity topic attracted the most participants and it was

the only workshop that filled a requirement for mandatory training for all university personnel.

This information may indicate employees preferred in-person training to online training, which

was an added benefit of the Learn at Work program intervention. The workshops that highlighted

university systems (i.e., Microsoft Teams, Banner, Cornerstone) were of moderate interest with

five participants each. There was little interest in the libraries and resume workshops among

participants according to the attendance record.

Table 14

Workshop Participation by Type

LearnShops	Participants
Introduction to the University and Public Library	1
Banner and Teams (university systems)	5
Benefits-Retirement, Health, Wellness	8
Cyber Security Training (mandatory training)	22
Creating a Resume in Microsoft Word	1
Documenting Learning in Cornerstone (university systems)	5

Note. n = 29 workshop participants, Participants = no. of employees from the study population at the workshop.

Tutoring

Individual tutoring was offered in the Learn at Work program intervention. Ten participants, or 6.3% of the population, expressed interest by initiating contact with the Literacy for Life, the organization who manages tutoring services. Seven of the employees were Black or African American and three were Hispanic or Latino. With a Hispanic or Latino population of 5.7% in the study, a 30% participation rate was high for this offering. Hispanic or Latino employees who opted for tutoring signed up for the English as a second language (ESL) program (see Table 15). Women accounted for 90% of the tutoring participants (see Table 16). The tutored women averaged 5 more years of work experience and higher salaries than the male participants. I compared the race and ethnicity data provided by the office of institutional research to the Literacy for Life data that was recorded during the intake process, which is lengthy and personalized. I changed the race code for two individuals of Hispanic or Latino origin who were coded as White within university systems.

Table 15

Demographic Data for Tutoring

Race	Tutoring		Population	
	n	%	*N*	%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0.0	1	0.6
Asian	0	0.0	3	1.9
Black/African American	7	70.0	108	67.9
Hispanic or Latino	3	30.0	9	5.7
Multiracial	0	0.0	2	1.3
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	0	0.0	1	0.6
Nonresident alien	0	0.0	1	0.6
Unknown	0	0.0	13	8.2
White	0	0.0	21	13.2
Total	10	100.0	159	100.0

Note. $n = 10$ tutoring participants, $N = 159$.

Table 16

Wages and Experience by Gender

Other variables of interest	f	m	f	m
Gender	90.0	10.0	51.6	47.8
FM annual wage	35,259	33,460	34,186	33,873
FM years experience	9.2	4.1	8.9	5.9

Note. f = female. m = male, FM = Facilities Management.

Due to the continuum of engagement with tutoring services, it was difficult to quantify the data. I counted any interaction with employees who met the wage criteria and worked in facilities, without regard to previous engagement with Literacy for Life. Two signed up for a tutor and were still in process of being assessed and matched at the time of this writing, two others requested a single consultation related to personal finances, five met regularly with tutors, and one had not followed up with their assigned tutor. When looking across the offerings for the Learn at Work program intervention, seven among this group participated in two classes, one

attended a single workshop, and two were solely engaged in tutoring. These data suggest a

positive correlation between those enrolled in the classes and those who pursued individual

tutoring. I reviewed the list of William & Mary employees engaged with Literacy for Life

tutoring with the person at Literacy for Life who manages tutoring services, including the

management of their data. We worked our way through the list comparing her list to the targeted

population to my list of the targeted population. I made the following additional notes about the

10 study participants who expressed interest in tutoring services:

- Three employees began tutoring for the first time during the Learn at Work program
  intervention.

- Four employees qualified for the English as a second language program and only one
  of those participated in the classes offered in the intervention.

- One employee logged 50 hours with an ESL coach during the 4-month intervention.

Although 6.3% of the population participated in tutoring, the qualitative data associated

with the personal attention between study participants and tutors was deeply appreciated and

impactful for those who chose this offering. Half of those interviewed participated in tutoring.

Triangulation and Data Analysis

Qualitative data in the form of two focus groups and 10 interviews provided insight and

specificity related to the areas of interest for the study population. Triangulation of the

descriptive statistics in the previous sections and the qualitative data were necessary to fully

respond to the first research question.

Recordings of the focus groups and interviews were uploaded to Otter.ai, a web tool that

transcribes voice-to-text. The transcripts were then moved to Dedoose, a qualitative coding

software. I coded for evidence of workplace inclusivity according to two frameworks—Lennox

et al.'s (2022) eight dimensions of workplace inclusivity and Shore et al.'s (2018) inclusive

organizations model. Most importantly, for the purpose of answering Research Question 1, I

coded for themes and insights directly related to the interests of the employees. I followed the

eight-step procedure for coding data (Creswell, 2014) outlined in Chapter 3. This process led to

grouping codes into themes, which developed into a narrative about the Learn at Work program

driven by the voices of participants.

The first round of a priori codes (see Table 17) provided insight into the workplace

experiences of study participants. In vivo codes in the second round captured the phrases and

words used by participants as they touched on their workplace experience and the program.

Although the a priori and in vivo codes helped me gain an understanding of workplace

inclusivity for those interviewed, they lacked specificity related to the intervention and my

research questions. A third round of descriptive or topic coding allowed me to move from codes

to themes that were direct responses to my research questions (see Table 18).

Table 17

A Priori Codes for Interviews

Workplace inclusivity themes	Code *f*	Interview *f*
PWE/Involvement in the Work Group/Influence on Decision Making	44	10
Access to Opportunity	33	9
Fair Rewards	10	10
Respect/Feeling Respected and Valued	35	10
Trust/Psychological Safety	33	8
Social Acceptance	7	4
Cultural Responsiveness/Recognizing Honoring and Advancing Diversity	9	5
Value Individual Attributes/Authenticity	9	5

Note. n = 10, PWE = personal work engagement.

Table 18

Descriptive Codes for Interviews

Research question	Topic codes and themes	Code *f*	Interview *f*
RQ1: Interests	Ambition-Career Coaching	45	7
	Individual Help & Tutoring	31	7
	Computer Literacy	21	8
	Financial Literacy	9	6
	Health & Wellness	24	4
	Leadership & Personal Effectiveness	5	4
RQ2: Impact	Relationships at Work	38	9
	Curiosity and Desire for Increased Learning	30	6
	Family	4	3
	Positive Emotion Classes	14	7
	Learning With Coworkers	12	7
	Confidence	13	3

Note. n = 10.

Six findings emerged from the focus groups and interviews in response to the interests of the study participants: (a) Career Coaching for Advancement, (b) Individualized Help and Tutoring, (c) Financial Literacy, (d) Computer Literacy, (e) Health and Wellness, and (f) Leadership and Personal Effectiveness.

Career Coaching for Advancement. Opportunities to advance, within the university and elsewhere, were discussed in the focus groups and seven of 10 interviews. Participants asked if classes would increase their opportunities to advance and be considered for other jobs. Ambition was used as a descriptive code 45 times, and "challenge of advancing" was coded 15 times across the interview transcripts. Participants shared stories about their failed and successful attempts to find new roles. Participants expressed feelings similar to those of Jocelyn, who said, "When you are a housekeeper, they don't believe you can do anything else." Jocelyn's response

ties to respect and feeling valued in the inclusive workplace literature (Lennox et. al, 2022; Shore et al., 2018).

Angela's interview included this story about moving from part-time food service to full-time housekeeping:

> I think they kind of frown down on housekeeping. I guess because they're scrubbing toilets or whatever . . . I can tell because when I made the switch a lot of people was like, you're doing what? Like it was a downgrade, and I explained to them that I don't get all the perks . . . the benefits, the time off and stuff like that. It was a step up for me, even though I took a little pay cut. But now I'm making more money . . . the benefits was more important than the money.

Richard was proud and frustrated that he was quickly promoted in his second job, as compared to his primary job of 20 years. Richard shared, "The difference in being in a leadership role here and there is I got that position within 6 months after being there . . . [the other job] pushed me." From observing the classes and participant meetings, I heard many participants discuss their desire to broaden their skills and be considered for new roles and opportunities.

Individual Help and Tutoring. Participants were quite interested in individualized help and tutoring. Tutoring was mentioned in 7 of 10 interviews and was a descriptive code for 31 excerpts across the transcripts. Participants expressed gratitude for caring tutors and university personnel and shared stories about individual help they received during the program from university employees and Literacy for Life tutors. Participants mentioned their previous experiences and future needs for tutoring in a wide range of topics—personal finance; math; learning English; and becoming better readers, writers, and speakers. Monique wanted to improve her English, as she said, "English is hard to speak . . . I try so hard, and I get tangled

up." Monique had a personal finance tutor who came to her building for weekly meetings. Her tutor helped her understand her retirement benefits and sat with her while she accessed the state retirement portal. Monique explained:

> I can go home and tell my husband all about it because I'd be excited. I'd never had anybody really to help me because I am scared to ask for help. I don't want people to talk about me when I need the help that I need. . . . [My tutor] has made me comfortable with it. Got my notebook. Just like going to school.

Jocelyn talked about turning to Literacy for Life for a specific business question for her husband related to their small business and for help acquiring a business license for tax purposes. Jocelyn said, "He thinks I know everything which I don't . . . It's good that I can call someone now and ask them how should I do this . . . what's the next step?" Literacy for Life connected Jocelyn by phone with someone who had small business experience.

Financial Literacy. Financial literacy was a useful and relevant topic for the participants. During the focus groups and interviews, people reflected on topics taught in the financial literacy class. Financial literacy was discussed in both focus groups, and 6 of 10 interviewed participants shared stories about what they learned in the class or their need to learn more about personal finances. Highlights included (a) learning how to budget and save money, (b) understanding credit and the dangers of credit cards, and (c) planning for retirement. Gizela spoke about the role of women in her culture related to personal finances, stating:

> Class is helping me so much about . . . saving you know. I don't give that much attention before working even I didn't check my balance. I don't believe everything is done by my husband. I didn't check. I want to do something. But I don't. I don't give attention. It is hard. Is heavy like that. But when I take this class, I give some ideas; I notice it has

changed my mind. And then the saving. I want to know I am saving. I didn't know what was going on.

When asked about how the financial literacy class affected her life, Brenda shared:

I love the class because I learned my check, learned how to save, and how it's best to save at this time and age, and I got kids, so I got to try to budget my money. Even though I work two jobs, I still got a lot with kids, rent, car payment, health insurance. Need I say more?

Five of the 10 employees interviewed spoke about working a second job to make ends meet, which also came up in the focus groups. Jobs included part-time custodial work for a local school, night desk and other duties as needed at a local hotel, and overtime opportunities for sporting and alumni events at the university. Participants were confused about their paycheck and university benefits (e.g., the cash match program and their retirement benefits). After 16 years of employment, Jocelyn finally signed up for the cash match program and expressed triumph that she completed paperwork to enroll. This equated to $7,680 of missed income for Jocelyn given the university would have contributed $20 a pay period over the 16 years she was not enrolled. The financial literacy class was a safe place to ask questions. It provided comfort because they were not alone in their knowledge gaps, and they were encouraged to make progress toward financial goals. Many of the issues raised in the financial literacy class were connected to the lack of understanding about the benefits available to them as university employees.

Computer Literacy. Participants learned computer skills and they commented in the focus groups and interviews that they gained skills requiring additional time to learn and practice. Eight of 10 interviewed participants talked about the need to strengthen their computer

skills, and 21 excerpts were coded for computer literacy across all 10 transcripts. Taking advantage of opportunities requires time to read emails and talk to coworkers. There was debate about whether participants were permitted and encouraged to be on the computer during work hours. Larry explained some staff cannot read so coworkers felt responsible for passing the information along to people. Larry said, "There are generational gaps. The older people who work here, some of them are motivated to read the email and others are unable to comprehend what's going on. They want somebody else to explain it to them."

Communication was deeply embedded into conversations related to digital literacy given the lack of literacy skills for some employees. Some people asked for a slower-paced introduction to computers class and others urged the university to offer advanced classes as well. Jocelyn spoke up in the focus group about the pace of changes at work when she said:

> We have evolved a lot since I've been here at William & Mary with technology. When I first started, it was paper checks and then we went to direct deposit and we have Famis, Banner, Zoom, Teams . . . You always learning new things, and it's good that they give us the opportunity to have classes to learn more about it.

Study participants were open and self-aware about the need for computer literacy skills, and they expressed technology skills were necessary for their current job and to meet the requirements for other positions at the university.

Health and Wellness. Health and wellness, including mindfulness and stress management, were of interest for participants. These topics came up in 4 of 10 interviews and in the focus groups. The topic of health and wellness was coded 24 times across the transcripts, and 11 of those instances related to being stressed or overworked. Health and wellness conversations were present in the financial and health literacy classes. Participants talked about the quality and

cost of health insurance and university benefits related to health and wellness. A general lack of information about university benefits was observed in multiple settings.

Eight participants attended the workshop about health and wellness benefits, and it was the second most popular workshop offered after cyber security, which was mandatory training for all employees. During the health literacy class, participants had many questions about benefits, and I observed a general lack of understanding about what resources were available. Monique was in the health literacy class for the second time and said she talked about learning about food portions this time, specifically mentioning a sense of accomplishment because she was eating less fast food. Monique went on to say she now knew she could talk to a nurse by phone and save $34 per month. She said, "My nurses helped me a lot with my medication. I get my medication free by talking to the nurse . . . and I met all my goals with myself."

In his interview, David reflected on the death of his uncle and how the health class prepared him to speak to his family about having a medical power of attorney. He also spoke about a mindfulness workshop offered outside of the Learn at Work program, but David said he was uncomfortable there because few people were present—unlike the Learn at Work program where there was a larger group and familiar faces. Another participant, Richard, talked about the university's increased attention to mental health and well-being since the COVID-19 global pandemic and expressed gratitude for the change regarding the importance of taking accrued leave and earned sick time.

Leadership and Personal Effectiveness. Leadership and development of personal effectiveness emerged across interviews and focus groups as people talked about their work experience. Leadership was coded in four of the interview transcriptions, and those participants spoke at length about the need for more training related to leadership and supervision. Angela

said this about future opportunities of interest: "I don't plan on going anywhere . . . I want to

expand my supervision. That's my next goal and I feel like I can do it. I think I am a good

candidate, so that is what I'm pushing for." Jocelyn gave this example of a recommendation she

made to her superiors when asked how the university should be preparing custodians for lead

positions:

> They have to know how to separate themselves from their coworkers because you are no
>
> longer [part of the group]. You can still be okay and cool, but they don't look at you the
>
> same because now you have to say, "No, that's not right." Or, "No, you have to clean and
>
> that is not the proper procedure, that is not the right chemical." You have to separate
>
> yourself [from the group].

Tina offered an observation of her supervisor who recently completed training when she said,

"She will tell me from time to time I am doing a good job. She has gotten better . . . when they

sent them to management classes, it helps them you know."

Participants were interested in development of leadership and personal effectiveness

skills for themselves, and participants recognized positive changes in others who had attended

training and professional development. Participants in the focus groups spoke about the need for

skills related to working with people across cultures, generations, abilities, and life experiences.

Tameka suggested, "It would be nice to take Spanish so we can talk to our coworkers." Brenda

offered the following about her coworkers who need help reading: "You got so much to do, and

you just can't sit there all the time with them."

Findings Related to Research Question 2: Impact of the Program

The second research question asked: How does participation in classes, workshops, or

tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants? Findings

related to impact were present in the workplace inclusivity surveys and in the qualitative data findings coded into themes. The interviews and the focus groups point to six themes that transcend the boundaries of work and life. These themes provide insight into ways learning at work impacted the study participants: (a) Sparked Learning and Hope for the Future; (b) Changed Behaviors and Habits; (c) Developed Independence, Confidence, and Agency; (d) Strengthened Personal Relationships and Community; (e) Expressed Gratitude and Growth for Investment; and (f) Offerings Did Not Meet the Needs of All Study Participants.

Workplace Inclusivity Surveys

Although the findings of the pre- and post-surveys revealed a statistically significant change in the way study participants in the classes rated their work experience at the beginning and end of the program (see Table 19), the sample size was small ($n = 24$). Surveys were administered at the first and final class for all four classes. When post-surveys were administered to the same student twice, I combined scores for a single score. The first question addressed if they were happy to be participating in the class, which was of interest to understand if participants were being pressured to attend the classes. The following four items related to workplace inclusivity measures: (a) People are valued as individuals by the organization; (b) I feel connected to the organization as a whole; (c) I have access to new opportunities at work; and (d) I am having a positive work experience.

Table 19

Workplace Inclusivity Survey for Classes

Variable	Presurvey M	Postsurvey M	Diff	n	t	p
Happy	5	4.86	-0.14	25	2.064	0.05
Valued	4.04	4.08	0.04	25	-0.225	0.82

Connected	4.04	4.24	0.2	25	-1.109	0.28
Opportunity	4	4.32	0.32	25	-1.801	0.08
Positive experience	3.958	4.375	0.417	24	-2.586	0.017*

Note. *p < .05.

The statistically significant finding in the pre-post data was the change in the final

question: "Are you having a positive work experience at William & Mary?" With a Likert scale

range of 1–5, a presurvey mean of 3.95, and a postsurvey mean of 4.38 ($p = .02$), the participants

made statistically significant gains in their positive feelings about work while participating in the

classes. One participant did not answer the final question, so this participant's pre- and post-

surveys were removed for the *t*-test analysis for the question.

The assumptions associated with the paired *t*-test are the observations from the two

populations are drawn from continuous probability distributions that are normally distributed

with possibly unequal variances. These assumptions are violated in the analysis that uses the

paired *t*-test, so the *p*-values given are approximate. Larry Leemis, a math professor at William

& Mary, sat with me as I ran the analysis of my paired *t*-test data. He then then followed up by

email suggesting I send him the raw data so he could run a bootstrapping analysis as a secondary

method given the small sample size. Bootstrapping is a statistical procedure that simulates many

more samples from a single set of data, allowing for increased confidence from a smaller sample

(Frost, 2023). He shared the pre- and post-test values associated with *opportunity* and *work*

experience yielded similar results with this additional analysis. The *p*-value dropped to .07 for

opportunity and .01 for *work experience*.

The positive presurvey results indicate participants were generally feeling happy, valued,

connected, with opportunity, and having a positive experience. This can be taken at face value as

the true feelings of class participants. Given what is known about the population from climate

surveys and recent focus groups, it is important to consider the participants may not have been comfortable sharing negative responses with me. Although I was the researcher, they were also aware of my role as an administrator. Another consideration is participants did not read the questions carefully or could not read the survey.

Survey results showed a statically significant change in the work experience of those enrolled in the classes. Although the participants reported a more positive work experience at the end of the classes, the sample size ($n = 24$) was small.

Triangulation and Data Analysis

Although the surveys provided some evidence that learning at work had impacted the participants' work experience, the richest and largest data set came from the 10 recorded interviews after the classes and workshops ended. The interviews were the data source that best relayed personal stories related to impact; they provided privacy and included additional voices that were not part of the focus groups. Triangulation of the data allows for consideration of the practical significance the study. The sample size for the pre-post surveys was small ($n = 24$); however, the additional findings from interviews and focus groups provides additional evidence that workplace learning had a positive effect.

Focus groups confirmed the themes and provided additional stories told in the group context. Observation notes from the classes, workshops, and participation meetings allowed further reflection and triangulation between data sources. A fourth round of coding by hand was necessary to see the impact themes with increased clarity. Table 17 shows the descriptive codes by frequency and occurrences across the 10 interviews. For this final round of coding, I used Excel and color coded by impact theme across the interviews and focus groups.

Sparked Learning and Hope for the Future. Participants had a desire for additional opportunities to learn and expressed hope for the future. Topic and in vivo codes for this theme included "hope for future," "sparked a desire to learn," "gave me more (opportunity)," and "met my goals." These codes appeared in six interviews and focus groups. The a priori code "access to opportunity" had a frequency of 37 excerpts. In the focus group, Janet said:

My work experience here is good and it's even better now since we are being given room to grow, you know. It is better for me right now . . . It makes me feel important to go to class . . . It's lifted my spirit, and I tell myself, "You can do it, girl, you can do it!"

In her interview about how the program affected her desire to learn, Brenda said, "I need education. I need to do something for me . . . I do a lot for everybody, but I stopped doing stuff for me . . . sometimes I feel like I get left behind." Angela spoke with enthusiasm about leaning in Literacy for Life when she saw an opportunity for advancement and needed help with her resume. Looking across the data, there was evidence of an interest in learning—given the positive learning experience provided by this program—and a hope for the future.

Changed Behaviors and Habits. Participants changed their behaviors and habits during the program. Topic codes for this theme included "change of habit" and "access/practice technology." Participants shared stories during the focus groups and interviews about practicing what they learned from class and the changes they made with their acquired knowledge.

Tameka shared this statement in the focus group: "I stayed on a budget for Christmas this year . . . I got an envelope and kept my receipts in there, and I did not use a credit card." Jocelyn spoke about retirement savings, stating, "I started the cash match. It's something I say I'm gonna do every year . . . I went on and got it done. I'm happy about that." In her interview, Monique shared:

I want to pick up a habit of doing emails more and get into the computer because I just don't mess with it. Because, you know, I don't have that confidence in myself. I don't, because when I'm writing I keep erasing because I don't think it can sound right. That's how I do. So, if I get some encouragement with me, I think it will strengthen me.

Gizela talked about how, since taking the computer literacy class and having the tablet, she had developed a routine of checking email daily. Two examples of changed habits were noted in the previous section about participants' interests in health and wellness benefits. Jocelyn finally signed up for the cash match program offered as a university benefit, and Monique began speaking to a nurse about her medications. Participants' learning in the classes, along with having access to tablets and computers, greatly impacted the work routine and habits of participants.

Developed Independence, Confidence, and Agency. Participants spoke about gaining more independence, developing confidence, and having more agency in their workday. Topic codes for this theme included "increase knowledge and independence," "organization and choice," and "sharing knowledge with family." These codes appeared in the focus groups and in five interviews.

Participants told stories about how they made decisions about their day and shared their newfound knowledge with others. Larry said, in the participant group, "The classes set me back on the days that I had classes. But you know, that's expected . . . It helped me learn to organize my day, you know, to get things done effectively. Problem solved." Tameka told this story about sharing lessons learned with family: "I wish my sister could have had [the class]. She has a really bad spending problem . . . We had a good conversation when we were out shopping. I told her what I'd learned. Not to try and make her feel bad, just put it out there." Another example

Jaqueline shared in her interview demonstrated increased confidence in asking for help, personally and as a supervisor. She said:

> I learned that I don't have to stop [seeing the people at Literacy for Life] and that I can reach out to Literacy for Life when I need help in the future . . . I can call someone now and just talk with them or ask them how should I do this . . . and HR people have been very helpful. Just me learning my role [of supervisor] and the procedures I have to follow . . . It's still a learning process for me so just having people there to guide me to the right way.

Observation notes from the classes, participant meetings, and focus groups provided further evidence that participants developed independence, confidence, and agency over the course of the learn-at-work program.

Strengthened Personal Relationships and Community. Learning with coworkers strengthened personal relationships and helped participants feel an increased sense of community. This impact theme included these topic and in vivo codes: "learning with coworkers is interesting/new perspectives," "shared stories and learning from each other," "meet new people/see new faces," "it was fun," "caring tutor," and "support from people outside the department." Nine of the interviewed participants spoke about the social nature of the program and ways their learning was enhanced by being with others. The a priori code "relationships/interactivity" had a frequency count of 38 excerpts.

When asked during the focus group about learning with coworkers, Tameka said, "It was fun!" and then went on to mention a coworker and participant by name and to reflect on how much she enjoyed learning from him. Participants met new coworkers, asked questions, and

shared stories. They listened with interest as their coworkers offered new perspectives. David offered this statement in the focus group:

> I used to shut down around people and not speak or anything . . . but with classes . . . you have more people there that think differently than you and they'll ask questions for you . . . I'm not the only one thinking about that either . . . it was better for me.

The Literacy for Life teachers and tutors came up in the focus groups and interviews—their patience, kindness, and the comfort they felt learning with them. Javier said, "The teacher made me feel like I was part of a family . . . and we share different stories . . . so it was very interesting, and I learned a lot from it." In his interview, Matias shared he worked with two Hispanic or Latino colleagues, including his supervisor. He was happy in his job and appreciated having coworkers of the same ethnic group on his team. Mary's comment captured in my observation notes at a participant meeting was simply stated and encapsulated the spirit of this theme; she said, "I am shy, and this [program] helped me meet people." Across the data sources, evidence showed participants' learning was enhanced because of the interactions they had with each other.

Gratitude for Growth and Investment. Participants expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to learn, which led to stories about feeling valued. The in vivo and topic codes for this theme included "it helped me at my job," "increased self-awareness about limitations," and "institution cares for me." These codes and this theme were present in the focus groups and in four interviews. The a priori code "valued individual attributes" appeared 9 times across the interviews. Conversations about feeling valued were also present in the focus groups. Janet said, "I felt like part of the university, not just cleaning, but learning."

Classes allowed participants to rest their bodies and engage their minds. Tina said, "I know I'm getting older. My body is telling me to sit down, so I want to get behind the desk and behind the scenes . . . in an office." Providing support to learn during the workday showed the participants the institution cared for them personally. Along with appreciation, the participants had a strong work ethic and a sense of pride in their work. The sense of pride and responsibility for getting their work done conflicted with the program sometimes. Five interviewed participants shared it was not always possible to attend class or participate because their supervisor resented their absence, or they worked in a job that did not have coverage or a plan for them to step away from the work and learn. Richard shared:

> It's kind of hard for me to get out of here . . . just to get away from the hustle and bustle of what this day may be . . . I might just take a walk across campus to see the wildlife and get fresh air just to breathe for a minute.

> Some participants talked about support from students and coworkers who provided encouragement. In a focus group, Larry shared how students noticed he was not present in the building and had questions about where he was, saying, "They were shocked to know I was in class . . . and they were like, 'That's good they are looking out for the employees.'" The learners felt respected, valued, and seen by those who led the classes and encouraged them to participate. Gratitude among participants was also noted in my observations of classes, focus groups, and participant meetings.

Offerings Did Not Meet All Needs. Sixty-eight percent of the population did not participate in the Learn at Work program and chose not to engage in any of the learning activities. Topic and in vivo codes for this theme were "communication is lacking," "feelings of

fear or nervousness," and "moved too fast." The codes that comprised this final theme were present in the focus groups and in seven interviews.

Participants described communication as a challenge for those who were unable to read and write English because the university relied on email as a primary communication source. In a focus group, Tameka said, "I was told we cannot be on [a computer] unless we are on break." There was a lack of understanding about when FM employees were permitted to check their email and if it was appropriate during their workday. Brenda shared an experience from someone on her team who attended the first class but never returned because the instructor moved too fast and he became frustrated, as she said, "He definitely shuts down; he will do nothing and won't talk unless I'm there . . . The whole class made him really, really nervous." Focus group participants shared some staff relied on their supervisors for all communications because they could not read, and, even for those who read, it was difficult to stay informed because there was a high volume of emails.

Matias suggested the university offer some of the classes and training in Spanish, and Gizela shared the following about her experience:

> When you take class here with people who are not at the same stage, you know, yes, some people they go fast. They know everything. That's their life system. You know, I'm new. If I want to ask, I have to go slow . . . There is no confidence, you know, and I'm scared to speak to many people around.

Most of the population did not attend the activities offered as the intervention through the Learn at Work Program for unknown reasons; I did not collect data from nonparticipants.

Conclusion

Study participants (*n* = 24) had a statistically significant improved work experience during a semester intervention that provided increased opportunities for learning during the workday. Triangulation of the qualitative data demonstrates the practical significance of the data for a small sample size. Nearly 33% (*n* = 52) of the 159 employees who made less than $19 an hour participated in the Learn at Work program: 22% participated in classes, with the most popular being computer literacy—followed by financial and health literacy. Workshops attracted 18.2% of the population, with the most popular topic being cybersecurity and health and retirement benefits. Just over 6% of the population reached out to Literacy for Life for individual tutoring; 9 of those 10 were women of color, and 40% qualified for the English language program.

The quantitative data revealed the participants' interests through their participation in the activities and measured workplace inclusivity during the time these activities were offered. The qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews provided color and texture to the data story. Six findings related to the participants' interests (RQ1): (a) Career Coaching for Advancement, (b) Individualized Help and Tutoring, (b) Financial Literacy, (c) Computer Literacy, (d) Health and Wellness, and (e) Building Leadership and Personal Effectiveness Skills. Learning during the workday impacted the work experience and lives for operational employees in several ways. Six themes emerged related to impact (RQ2) on participants' lives. The program or program participants: (a) Ignited a Spark for Learning and Hope for the Future; (b) Changed Behaviors and Habits; (c) Developed Independence, Confidence, and Agency; (d) Strengthened Personal Relationships and Community; (e) Expressed Gratitude for Growth and Investment; and (f) Offerings Did Not Meet the Needs of All Study Participants.

Workplace inclusivity is a relevant issue across higher education and beyond, and it is more urgent for those who are paid less and have had less access to education and training opportunities. Multiple cycles of action research are needed to understand and respond to workplace inclusion as it relates to increasing opportunities for employees in positions that pay less than $19 an hour. This study, a first cycle of action research, provided data to inform future cycles. This first cycle provided data on the learning interests of the population and the impact learning and training can have on this segment of the university population. In Chapter 5, I reflect on the study, refine and make meaning of the data, connect findings to the research, and make recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Workplace inclusivity is an important concept for the higher education workforce. At a time when universities and colleges are prioritizing diversity and inclusion in admissions, practices that prioritize education and learning for employees who work at colleges and universities are timely. The inclusive workplace model (Mor Barak, 2017) "accepts and utilizes the diversity of its own workforce—while also being active in the community" (p. 7) and collaborating beyond organizational boundaries to address needs of the disadvantaged. This is a critical strategy for higher education in which employees at the lower end of the pay scales could easily leave in an economic climate in which only 62.3% of working-age adults in the United States are participating in the workforce and competition for labor is fierce (Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey, 2022).

Regarding lifelong learning participation, Boeren (2017b) stated, "For those who have little to start with (e.g., educational level or money), the costs might be too high and the benefits too unclear to positively decide on taking part" (p. 165). With one third of the 159 employees in the department of facilities management (FM) participating in the opportunities presented, it begs the question of how to build momentum for delivering increased opportunities for training and learning for operational employees.

The purpose of this study was to address workplace inclusivity by providing increased access to learning and training during the workday for a segment of employees at William & Mary. In this chapter, I flesh out the literature and the findings from Chapter 4 to make meaning

of the data, present recommendations, and suggest future research. A summary of the findings is organized by research questions, followed by a discussion of additional insights from the data, recommendations or implications for practice, and suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Major Findings

Given action research is practical and contextual, one cannot assume these findings would be the same at another institution. This study provides leaders at William & Mary an opportunity to reflect on current policy and practice and helps institutional leaders in their practice of creating an inclusive workplace to realize organizational excellence and achieve the stated values of belonging and curiosity more fully.

Action Research Question 1

The first research question asked: What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented with a menu of options in a higher education setting? With 33% of the targeted population ($n = 159$) participating in the Learn at Work intervention, interest in learning and training during the workday was established among the FM employees. The following sections contain the major findings as determined by the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings with the research literature.

Variety in the Program Offerings—Time, Topic, Group, and Individual Learning. The menu of learning opportunities included those that spanned many weeks and some that offered bite size learning in a single session. Group and individualized learning were also present in the menu of offerings. Across the class options, the highest participation ($n = 35$) was in classes focused on a single topic over the course of 6–12 weeks with a cohort of coworkers. Learning in the group offered many advantages, including strengthened relationships and

community and safety in numbers to stop their work and go to class. The workshop format ($n = $ 29) attracted 15 people who participated in no other aspect of the Learn at Work program. Likewise, tutoring ($n = 10$) met a specific individual need for those participants, and two people participated solely in tutoring.

Training in future cycles cannot rely on one strategy alone. Offering a variety of learning and training options is necessary to meet the community's needs. It is important to note offerings in the intervention were not based on a needs assessment and, instead, were built around the programs that had been previously designed by the Literacy for Life organization based on their expertise and knowledge. The additional workshops were simply assumed to be relevant. Noe (2023) explained a needs assessment is a "critical first step" (p. 231) in planning workplace training programs. More planning and future cycles of action research would allow for a needs assessment, which is discussed in the recommendations.

Pathways to Promotion. Qualitative data analysis led to the following themes related to the participants' interests: (a) Career Coaching for Advancement, (b) Individualized Help and Tutoring, (b) Financial Literacy, (c) Computer Literacy, (d) Health and Wellness, and (e) Building Leadership and Interpersonal Skills. Triangulation with the quantitative data provides further evidence related to participants' interests in financial literacy, computer literacy, and health and wellness. Although there is nothing extraordinary about the themes on their own, the qualitative data presented in Chapter 4 provided stories and context for each theme and make a compelling case for continued programs and opportunities for learning and training at work for this population. Future cycles of action research should be transparent about how the offerings will lead to new opportunities at work and improvements in life.

The ardent desire of employees to participate in learning programs that advance their career is consistent with the Kyndt, Govaerts, Claes, et al. (2013), who concluded training offered must be considered useful and related to the job occupied by the employee. Even so, it is important not to overlook the participation data in the health and financial literacy classes that were not related to the jobs employees occupied and align, instead, with personal growth. Even when the class was focused on personal finances—and less on learning that could be directly connected to a job skill—Brenda described how it could have an impact on her employability: "I would love more of this class. It will help in many areas, especially for better jobs." Brennan (1997) suggested nonformal education is a reaction to the "limitations and failures" (p. 187) of formal education and made a compelling case for nonformal education and learning skills that may have been missed in a formal education setting. Brennan's ideas are compatible with the offerings provided by the Literacy for Life organization that address immediately useful practical life skills. Study participants were interested in pathways to promotion, and pathways sometime include personal development and basic life skills.

Educating Employees About Benefits. The workshop on benefits was attended by eight study participants, second most popular after the university-required cyber security workshop. The classes on financial and health literacy were dominated by conversations about health benefits and retirement savings. There was a clear gap in knowledge among study participants related to their employment benefits. Furthermore, 2 of the 10 employees who sought individualized help from Literacy for Life's tutoring services needed help understanding their benefits. Participants almost mentioned benefits in 4 of 10 interviews. Although benefits education may seem like a stretch for workplace learning, the data point to an unmet need at William & Mary. The university must not assume employees in the study population are alone in

their knowledge gap. The benefits workshop was attended by many people who did not meet the criteria for the study, more than any other workshop offered.

As cited in the literature review, only 11% of higher education employees use employee education benefits (Fuesting et al., 2020). In Fall 2022, 2.6% of operational employees at William & Mary used the education assistance benefit, according to data provided by institutional research, which signals the policy did not achieve its desired purpose of "enhancing an employee's education, training, and professional development and growth" (William & Mary, 2019, para. 2) for operational employees. Study participants had many questions and conversations about health and retirement benefits. They did not have questions about the employee education assistance program, which points to a lack of awareness or desire to use the benefit. New interest and awareness about the education assistance program could result by modifying the policy to expand the qualifying educational institutions and nondegree programs as discussed in the recommendations section of this chapter (William & Mary, 2019).

Action Research Question 2

The second research question asked: How does participation in classes, workshops, or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants? A small sample of participants ($n = 24$) had a statistically significant positive change in their workplace experience between their first and final Literacy for Life class. Six themes emerged across the qualitative data about ways participation in the Learn at Work program impacted their work experiences and lives: (a) Sparked Learning and Hope for the Future; (b) Changed Behaviors and Habits; (c) Developed Independence, Confidence, and Agency; (d) Strengthened Personal Relationships and Community; (e) Expressed Gratitude and Growth for Investment; and (f) The Offerings Did Not Meet the Needs of All Study Participants. In the following section, I further

describe the meaning of the themes and make connections between major findings and the literature.

Participating Provided Intentional Time for Community and Dialogue. Strengthened personal relationships and community was a theme present in 8 of 10 interviews and both focus groups, and it was also apparent in the field notes during my observations. Participants learned from their teachers and tutors and from each other. The data revealed opportunities to learn together provided a sense of community and increased communication and dialogue, which contributed to participants' desire to be in class. Attendance ranged from 66%–79% across the four classes. When participants were asked what they enjoyed most about the opportunities to learn at work, they consistently pointed to making new acquaintances and learning with coworkers. The data further revealed the study population had uneven access to computers and phones during the workday and unequal support for reading emails and participating in university-wide activities that would increase their understanding of university-wide goals and how their work contributes to the mission. Consequently, there is a huge deficit of information and connectivity for some study participants, which affects workplace inclusivity. Team learning is a core discipline of the learning organization where dialogue and discussion are necessary, reflection is encouraged, and action follows (Senge, 1990).

During the classes and meetings, participants asked questions and shared stories. The increased opportunity to engage in dialogue with coworkers and teachers led to a deeper understanding of university benefits and more connections with university staff who could help them navigate the processes and hurdles that hinder their fuller participation in the community. For example, on her postsurvey, Janet wrote, "I am so elated and excited and totally appreciate

all of you who contribute to these amazing opportunities . . . I feel more connected and more of value."

Participating Was a Positive Learning Experience. Study findings show participants had a positive learning experience. According to Sanders et al. (2015), positive learning experiences contribute to learning self-efficacy for lower-educated workers. A positive workplace learning experience will have a positive effect on the decision to participate in future opportunities. Although the sample was small, the workplace inclusivity survey showed a statistically significant positive change in workplace experience for study participants ($n = 24$).

With two thirds of the targeted population at William & Mary choosing not to participate in the intervention, this finding deserves further reflection. The full menu of learning opportunities gave a variety of nonformal learning options from which to choose, and it is unclear if participants realized the nonformal nature could yield a more positive experience. Kyndt, Govaerts, Claes, et al. (2013) discovered "low qualified employees" (p. 317) had negative experiences with learning activities that influenced their desire to engage in other learning experiences, an important finding in the context of this study. Previous negative learning experiences were likely a factor for nonparticipants in the study.

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data provides evidence of a powerfully positive learning experience—an important finding for study participants and one that could have a direct impact on future cycles of action research and the interest in employees who have heard good reviews from their coworkers about the workplace learning experience. One participant said it best when asked about her learning experience, "The classes have made me feel more confident in my work and in my life as a whole."

Discussion and Insights

In this discussion, I expand on two ideas that emerged from this action research study from the data analysis and my observations and interactions with participants. Both insights do not directly correlate with the questions, but they provide important context for the recommendations that follow.

It Is a Good Job, and I Work Two Jobs

Nine of the 10 participants I interviewed commented they had a "good job," and 5 of 10 employees interviewed worked two jobs to make ends meet. Holding the tension between the belief that one's job is good and the reality that a second job is necessary is an important dichotomy. Participation in learning outside of the workday is improbable for participants in the study who work two jobs in addition to other responsibilities outside of work. Workplace learning is perhaps the only option for some employees who aspire to know more and do more, with the added benefit of achieving a more inclusive workplace.

Following the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Urban Institute attempted to define "good jobs" and reviewed the evidence linking good jobs to worker well-being (Congdon et al., 2020). Congdon et al. (2020) developed a framework that classified job quality elements into five categories: (a) pay, (b) benefits, (c) working conditions, (d) business culture and job design, and (e) on-the-job skill development, and then they compared 11 popular definitions of job quality. Three of five elements in the framework had aspects related to workplace learning and career advancement:

- Benefits that included educational benefits like tuition assistance;

- Business culture and job design that included clearly defined career paths; and

- On-the-job skill development that included cross training, advancement training, and education.

Congdon et al. (2020) found pay and working conditions were the most common elements of job quality, and only half of the definitions included career advancement elements. In their review of literature, Congdon et al. linked job training and educational benefits to positive outcomes like higher wages. This perspective was certainly the perception for the population in my study who spoke often about the desire to assume new responsibilities and increase their pay.

According to Shook et al. (2020), 38.1 million people in the United States live in poverty, and 40% of the U.S. workforce earns less than $15 per hour. According to a wage report by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), as of November 1, 2020, 23% of nonexempt higher education employees in the U.S. earned less than $15 per hour (Brantley, 2021). To ensure workplace inclusivity for those employees, Upskill America's recommendations are useful and align with the systems approach presented in this chapter (Aspen Institute, 2023). The Aspen Institute's (2023) motto for long-term business success is "doing well by doing good" (para. 1), and they recommend "employer-supported education and training, recognition of work-based learning, and environments for talent" (para. 2). These are useful recommendations in the context of higher education, which has the equivalent of frontline workers, some of whom would appreciate the opportunity to participate more fully in the educational enterprise with the help of their employer.

The category of business culture and job design is also relevant to this study, which examines the relationship between learning and workplace inclusivity. Data from this study show participants' perceptions that they had a good job were tied more to the institution's mission and

pride by affiliation and reputation than to a feeling of inclusion. Participants referred to their

health benefits during the interviews and focus groups when they talked about their "good job,"

which is consistent with Garthwaite et al. (2014), who found low wage employees were

motivated to work for health insurance. Participants who had a second part-time job spoke about

the need for additional income.

On July 1, 2022, months prior to the beginning of the Learn at Work program, William &

Mary raised the minimum hourly wage from $12 to $15.50, a positive trend seen across higher

education (Brantley, 2021). The time between the pay increase and this study likely influenced

the perceptions of the participants about their "good job." Study participants were both grateful

to have a job at William & Mary and worked two jobs because the compensation was not enough

to support themselves and their family.

Support and Encouragement Matter

Supervisors and leaders have a significant role to play in providing encouragement,

linking learning to university values, and checking in with people across the institution to make

sure there is consistency of support. The Learn at Work Program was introduced in the presence

of senior leaders and targeted participants. Workplace learning was pitched in the context of

institutional values and the university strategic plan. Leaders connected university aspirations

and personal stories to the program of opportunities. This meeting set the stage for voluntary

participation that would impart new knowledge that could benefit them at work and in their

personal life. Encouragement from senior leaders was observed at the meeting and continued

through direct emails throughout the program. Even so, there were a variety of possible

disruptions to an employee's intention to participate. Tina said, "You may have to let [managers]

know for sure that employees are able to [take classes, attend workshops, or be tutored] . . . because I think they may have been a little conditioned that [the employees] can't do it."

Sanders et al. (2011) showed the connection between workers' intentions to participate and the influence of managers and coworkers. These issues emerged during the focus groups and interviews. Some participants said their supervisors frowned upon participation in activities that took them away from their work responsibilities and tasks, even though supervisors knew senior leaders encouraged participation in the program across the unit. Decision making about participation, and employee persistence and attendance in the classes, workshops, and tutoring were most influenced by the supervisors who interacted daily with the participants.

This issue needs careful attention given what is known about adult learning. Most people who participate in learning across the spectrum of nonformal and formal learning are White, middle-class, employed, younger, and better educated than nonparticipants (Boeren, 2017a). A strong network of support is essential for higher education employees who fall outside the groups that have historically participated in learning to feel welcomed and to understand there is a benefit to themselves and their employer when they are full participants in the community.

Sanders et al. (2011) were the first to present clear ideas about ways to stimulate interest in workplace learning among lower-educated pockets of the workforce. Influential factors include developing interventions that strengthened their future position in the job market and being attentive to the individual, the organization, or group. These factors are consistent with the findings of this study that showed participants focused on knowing how participation in the Learn at Work program would open future career paths and the recommendations presented in this chapter. According to Booysen (2014), managers and leaders in a learning organization

prioritize the development of their people, and inclusive leaders are essential to an inclusive culture:

> A culture of inclusion can be institutionalized by weaving inclusion into the everyday operation and fabric of the organization through translating the values of inclusion into its mission, vision, strategies, policies, structures, and processes as well as its leadership practices. It is thus important to put systems in place that hold everyone, especially management, accountable for achieving inclusion goals and upholding inclusion values. (pp. 308–309)

Booysen (2021) posited responsible leaders model inclusion, and, in this study, findings demonstrate a supervisor's support is influential. Employees are more likely to participate when they can see evidence that it matters to their individual success, is viewed positively by their direct supervisor, and has value to the organization. For leaders at William & Mary, attracting and retaining a diverse workforce hinges on their ability to create an inclusive workplace, which requires practicing responsible leadership.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The discussion in the previous section paves the way for implications for policy and practice to ensure the university workforce has equitable access to opportunity and employees feel an increased sense of workplace inclusivity. William & Mary's leaders have embraced values consistent with workplace learning (i.e., curiosity) and workplace inclusivity (i.e., belonging), and the policies and practices need care and attention to ensure they align. Action research, as the name implies, requires action. In this section, I put forward five recommendations for William & Mary based on my findings and the literature. Table 20 gives an overview of the findings, recommendations, and the supporting literature.

Table 20

Recommendations Related to the Findings of the Action Research

Findings	Related recommendations	Supporting literature
RQ1: Variety in program offerings Pathways to promotion Benefits education RQ2: Participating provided intentional time for community and dialogue Participating was a positive learning experience	1. Create a workforce development unit and conduct a needs assessment 2. Appoint a workforce development advisory council 3. Build a career ladder structure and use career recycling 4. Deliver benefits programs in English and Spanish 5. Integrate learning goals into the performance process 6. Create a plan for ongoing climate assessment	Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2008)—self-directed learning and a culture of learning Werner and DeSimone (2011)—Human resource development Kyndt, Govaerts, Keunen & Dochy (2013)—Low-qualified adults; Intention to participate connected to career Noe (2023)—Employee training & development Deggs & Boeren (2020)—Access, participation, and support of adult learners Billett (2001)—workplace learning influenced by the guidance afforded by the workplace Sanders et al. (2011)—supervisors influence on participation; Career goals positive influence Sanders et al. (2015)—positive learning experiences as lever for lifelong learning Mor Barak (2017)—workplace inclusivity

Note. RQ = Research Question.

Recommendation 1: Create a Workforce Development Unit and Conduct a Needs Assessment

The first recommendation is to create a workforce development unit in the office of human resources and to conduct a needs assessment. A needs assessment is the first step in designing a successful learning and development program (Noe, 2023). Three new professionals should be hired to join the current director of training and development to make an intentional shift toward human resources development practice in which employees are supported to learn new skills to meet current and future needs in the workplace (Werner & DeSimone, 2011). The new positions will attend to career development and upward mobility training programs for operational employees and coordinate performance management. Harvard's Center for Workplace Development (2023) and the University of Virginia are models to emulate (University of Virginia Human Resources, 2023).

This new unit will be responsible for employee learning and development and oversee related policy development. They will be charged with the revision of the educational assistance program (EAP) policy and write a new policy for a tuition reimbursement program for programs offered by organizations, colleges, and universities other than William & Mary. They will collaborate with the incoming chief people officer and chief operating officer to operationalize the policies and motivate educational providers to respond to the needs of William & Mary's workforce. For example, the current EAP has many internal program exclusions (e.g., business, education, geographic information systems' certificate) because these programs cannot thrive with a high ratio of nonpaying internal customers, which demands a creative solution.

The development of a tuition reimbursement program will require high level conversations with external education providers that have offerings unlike those at William & Mary such as the Virginia Peninsula Community College (2023) and Literacy for Life. Articulated agreements between educational institutions should benefit all parties, providing identified programs that address workforce needs for William & Mary. The university has influence and power in the larger community, and relationships can be tapped to address workforce development and training needs and support educational goals more broadly. This recommendation also increases capacity for relationship building with internal experts. The findings in this study revealed study participants feel stuck and unable to piece together a plan for upward mobility, and this recommendation and the next two recommendations address human resources and structural changes to address this need.

Recommendation 2: Create a Workforce Development Advisory Council

The second recommendation is to create a workforce development advisory council comprised of employees who advise the workforce development unit. The council membership

should be reflective of the William & Mary's workforce and include professional and operational employees. The starting place for their understanding of workforce development should include a presentation and overview of the first cycle of action research and the findings of this study. The council's roles and responsibilities will ensure policies are aligned with university values and should include:

- Create a workforce development philosophy that informs policies and procedures;

- Ensure the workplace learning and development program is responsive to the needs assessment conducted in the first recommendation;

- Advise workforce development on policies related to learning and development; and

- Advocate and influence workplace learning and personal growth for the workforce.

The findings in this study showed a positive learning experience. According to Sanders et al. (2015), "A cycle of lifelong learning may be started by providing low-educated workers with positive learning experiences aimed at increasing their learning self-efficacy" (p. 251). The council will be the caretakers of the workforce development program, providing a critical lens on inclusivity and leadership growth for supervisors. In their discussion of barriers to participation, Deggs and Boeren (2020) urged institutions to lower barriers and "to not rob the adult learner of their personal agency and autonomy and important opportunities for personal growth" (p. 102). There is a fine line between being a supportive supervisor and taking away an employee's decision to participate; the council will assist with rolling out the workforce development philosophy and educating managers about the crucial role they play modeling and encouraging workplace learning.

The next cycle of action research will benefit from a diverse group of employees in this advisory role, contributing ideas and advocating for robust opportunities and programs for

operational employees. Given the findings of the study, it is critical to remember opportunities to engage in programs affect the community in two primary ways—community building and learning. This council will want to keep these primary findings front and center as they monitor the emerging program, practices, and policies that shape behavior. A learning organization encourages a continuum of learning activities in the workplace and acknowledges the value of conversations across a community and team learning (Senge, 1990). A culture of self-directed learning requires commitment from the top and acknowledges there are other ways to learn in the workplace besides putting the teacher up front with the learners passively receiving the information (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 2008).

Although the study did not point to high demand for formal educational offerings for the population in this study, modifying the EAP and tuition reimbursement program policies is necessary to prepare for diverse offerings that meet a range of needs not currently available given the limitations of the current policy that limits educational opportunity to William & Mary. The findings pointed to the desire for career coaching and advancement, and individual career goals will require new skills and programs situated within the larger context of Virginia's workforce development initiatives in partnership with the Virginia Community College System (2022) and beyond. This recommendation leads to the third recommendation.

Recommendation 3: Build a Career Ladder Structure and Use Career Recycling

The findings from this study point to the need for clear pathways to promotion for study participants. According to Noe (2022), "Providing career paths and making sure employees understand them is especially important because lack of career opportunities ranks after pay as the major reason employees leave" (p. 457). With a newly invested team dedicated to workforce

development, human resources (HR) staff can focus on outcomes of the program that track learning and advancement for individuals.

For this approach to be successful, a comprehensive plan and career ladder structure is needed. This recommendation includes an intentional push for "career recycling" (Noe, 2022, p. 81), a term used to describe the internal recruitment of employees with an opportunity to retool and train for hard-to-fill jobs. The Aspen Institute's Upskill America (2023) began communicating the value of frontline workers in 2015 and advocated for organizations to look inward and recognize the potential in frontline employees. Their agenda urged a systematic approach in advocating for employer-supported education and training by convening stakeholders, employers, policy makers, businesses, and community organizations to design solutions that provide career advancement opportunities. This recommendation (a) prepares William & Mary to support front line workers, (b) is consistent with recommendations from the Aspen Institute, and (c) recognizes a university workforce ladder needs to be holistic and inclusive of operational and professional positions.

By designing a career ladder structure and promoting stories of individuals who have engaged in workplace learning offerings and services in the workforce development unit, employees will have greater success advancing at William & Mary. This recommendation is findings by Kyndt, Govaerts, Keunen & Dochy (2013) and Sanders et al. (2011) that show a positive correlation between learner intention and employees who are working toward career goals. Billett (2001) suggested participation is influenced by the guidance afforded by the workplace. This recommendation makes the guidance easily accessible, consistent, and visible for employees, and it is helped along by the first recommendation that calls for a new

professional in the workforce development unit responsible for career development and upward mobility.

Recommendation 4: Deliver Employee Programs About Benefits in English and Spanish

The fourth recommendation directly addresses the study participants' lack of knowledge about benefits. Not only do some employees lack knowledge about their benefits, but there are also few opportunities to ask questions and get individual help. Increasing programs that bring employees together to learn about a major part of their compensation package will offer several advantages for employees. It will allow them to take full advantage of the benefits that are partially responsible for their belief that their job at William & Mary is a good job. It also brings employees together around common questions, so they feel connected to the larger community. With regular programs, HR staff members establish a routine of engagement with employees who may be struggling to enroll in the cash match program, for example, or for employees whose personal situation has changed and who may not understand that a change to their elected benefits could result in higher disposable income.

The most important benefits as measured by the cost to the employer and the employee are health and retirement benefits, and understanding those benefits is understandably complex (Society for Human Resource Management, 2023). The Society for Human Resource Management (2023) and their research on benefits trends is a resource for the university as they develop a fuller understanding of the role of benefits in employee relations, retention, and recruitment. This understanding will be necessary to execute a regular program that educates William & Mary employees about their benefits. Because Spanish is the second most common language after English, the recommendation includes offering benefits programs in Spanish as one of the study participants suggested in his interview. Furthermore, offering benefits programs

in Spanish aligns with the study population data at William & Mary (see Table 5) and national

trends (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Recommendation 5: Integrate Learning Goals into the Performance Process

Two study participants mentioned the newly implemented mid-year conversations that

were built into the annual performance review. These participants clearly valued intentional time

to discuss work issues, and they appreciated feedback and attention from their supervisor. This

recommendation ensures the annual performance review is guided by questions that lead to a

deeper understanding of the employees' career goals and learning aspirations. The integration of

learning goals into the annual performance conversation will allow leaders and supervisors to be

attentive to the continuum of formal learning opportunities (e.g., formal education, certifications,

and trade school) and nonformal opportunities (e.g., self-directed learning).

Leaders will need to be trained on strategies to identify resources to support their

employees' learning goals. For example, the university could invite budget managers to look to

vacant lines and salary savings for reinvestment in training and development. In recent years,

there has been a renewed interest in a central fund for professional development, but this limits

the supervisor's role and connection to the learning goals outlined in the annual performance

process. Also, departments with desirable employee programs need the ability to generate

internal revenue for employees accepted into their programs. Establishing viable financial

models—for investment in employees and investment in internal and external programs—is

necessary to create a climate ripe for learning.

For models, the university should look at The Association for Talent Development

(ATD), the world's largest association for professionals who develop talent in the workplace.

ATD's talent development capability plan is a resource for human resource professionals and for

employees who are developing a learning plan (ATD, 2023). Another resource is the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR, n.d.); however, the narrow focus of CUPA-HR limits networking and learning across industries. The benefit of CUPA-HR is access to professionals, programs, and research highly relevant for the higher education context for workforce development.

Recommendation 6: Create a Plan for Ongoing Climate Assessment

The final recommendation is to conduct a climate self-study for inclusion and diversity and then regularly monitor progress and changes to the data. Workplace inclusivity was the goal of the Learn at Work program intervention. William & Mary's leaders will not be able to measure the full effect of the first five recommendations without having data that directly correlate to the workplace experience. The study revealed participants in the Learn at Work program had a statistically significant positive change in their workplace experience. Although the sample was small ($n = 24$), the qualitative data suggest there is practical significance because lives were impacted in significant ways at work and home. As one participant said, "The classes make me feel like I am somebody." Another participant shared she was invited to a secret society dinner several years ago when she wrote a poem for a student who was stressed out during finals. Being included in a university ritual made a memorable mark on her time being employed at William & Mary.

Inclusion and diversity require continuous attention from leaders and followers across the university at all levels, and survey scales and measurements are integral to continuous assessment and learning. According to Mor Barak (2017), organizations that strive to be inclusive need to be engaged in a continuous four-stage process:

1. A self-study/assessment of climate for diversity, and, of its climate for inclusion;

2. A strategic plan of action relevant to the organization's mission and goals;

3. Implementation—actions and corrective actions that address conflicts or dilemmas;

4. Feedback—collecting information regarding diversity and inclusion across the organizational levels. (p. 301)

Understanding employee perceptions will allow the university to monitor change over time. The Mor Barak Inclusion Exclusion Scale (Mor Barak, 2017) and the Diversity Climate Scale (Mor Barak et al., 1998) are two examples for consideration. Assessment is a critical step to knowing if the organizational structures and people are aligned.

Recommendations for Future Research

Workplace learning is a growing field of research in the larger research body of adult learning. Current adult learning is situated in a world that has evolved in significant ways. Global economy and technology have enabled increasing choice and flexibility for adult learners, which includes learning in the workplace. Higher education finds itself in a competitive market jockeying for a diverse workforce, pledging to be inclusive, and needing new strategies to attract promising new talent. Two recommendations for future research follow.

Initiate Future Cycles of Action Research

Action research is an iterative process and requires cycles of continuous learning where those guiding the process look, think, and act. Through planning, implementation, and evaluation, action research addresses a problem of practice through action informed by scholarship (Zambo & Isai, 2013). Addressing workplace inclusivity through a lens of support for workplace learning in a higher education context is highly relevant given the risks and challenges of managing a diverse workforce. Understanding the learning needs of vulnerable pockets of the workforce is of universal interest. Workplace culture and inclusivity impacts

town–gown relationships and the reputation of the employer, an issue of importance for all institutions of higher learning.

A delimitation of the study was the exclusion of employees outside FM and those who made above $19 an hour. The scope of the study intentionally targeted employees in positions that paid under $19 per hour. However, it is likely people outside of the study population would have an increasingly positive work experience when they have additional time and support for workplace learning.

Study Workplace Learning Outcomes in a Higher Education Context

Given study participants' interests in being promoted or qualified for new jobs at the university, a future study exploring the advancement of operational employees as it relates to workplace learning would be useful. This area of future study directly relates to the recommendation to create a career ladder structure. Observing the participants' pride as they received certificates at the conclusion of the Literacy for Life classes indicates tracking workplace learning may have a positive effect on an employee's sense of accomplishment, even when they are satisfied in their current position. Recognition also provides record keeping that could assist in identifying organizational outcomes. The following related questions come to mind as I consider future studies related to outcomes:

- Is there a correlation between participation in workplace learning and employee self-efficacy? This question builds on the work of Sanders et al. (2015) who proposed a positive experience caused a positive chain reaction and interest in life-long learning.

- Do those who participate in workplace learning have a higher rate of promotion or movement to new roles?

As a library administrator, I remain curious about how academic libraries can serve as a bridge builders and knowledge centers for workplace learning. Questions could address the following:

- When university libraries become centers for workplace learning, how do collections, space, and library staff impact self-directed learning?

- What can be learned from a case study where human resources and academic libraries work as partners to build a workplace learning strategy that takes full advantage of the expertise of library staff, the collections, and the facility?

These are potential research questions for future studies at William & Mary, and the findings may be of interest across U.S. higher education and in workplace contexts more broadly.

Conclusions

The highlight of the research process for me was time spent with coworkers who were not immediately in my orbit or professional pathway. Senge (1990) named "working with the other" (p. 309) as a strategy for building a learning organization. The literature has clearly shown there is a creative advantage when organizations tap into the diversity present in the workforce (Kossek et al., 2006). Placement within the organization, life experience, educational attainment, race, ethnicity, and gender are among the attributes that distinguish people and allow them to be authentic contributors who are appreciated for these unique attributes. Shore et al. (2011) addressed this phenomenon of feeling distinct and part of the group and all the complexity it entails. Ferdman and Deane (2014) offered organizations a road map for the ongoing practice of inclusion for organizations. Employees at the low end of the pay scale are an untapped resource for making contributions that are uniquely theirs, and I would reason higher education leaders have a responsibility to be attentive to their desire to learn and improve their lives.

As for next steps in the immediate future, clear direction from the university about the value of Literacy for Life and the services they provide employees is necessary or future cycles of action research are at risk. The university will need to invest resources to ensure their employees are served at times, and in locations, that are convenient for the employees who want to participate. Literacy for Life is not the sole solution for providing opportunity. The workshops series deserves focus and attention with input from stakeholders about their needs. Likewise, leaders across the university (e.g., office of diversity and inclusion, William & Mary libraries, information technology, HR) should come together with training and learning offerings that are responsive to the needs of William & Mary's workforce and attentive to the needs of the university.

The ninth edition of *Employee Training and Development* (Noe, 2023) dedicated Part 4 of the book to "Social Responsibility and the Future" (p. 429), and the final chapters tackled managing diversity and the future of training and development, which is instructive for William & Mary's practice of inclusivity. According to Noe (2023), "Companies have a social responsibility to take actions and create conditions to help all employees grow, develop, and contribute to company goals regardless of their background" (p. 431). There is significant risk if the university is not intentional in providing opportunity based on the learning needs and interests of operational employees. It is my hope William & Mary—the second-oldest institution of higher education in the United States and where I have both worked and studied—will embrace the opportunity to model and practice inclusivity and create conditions that support and celebrate the growth, development, and contributions of their workforce.

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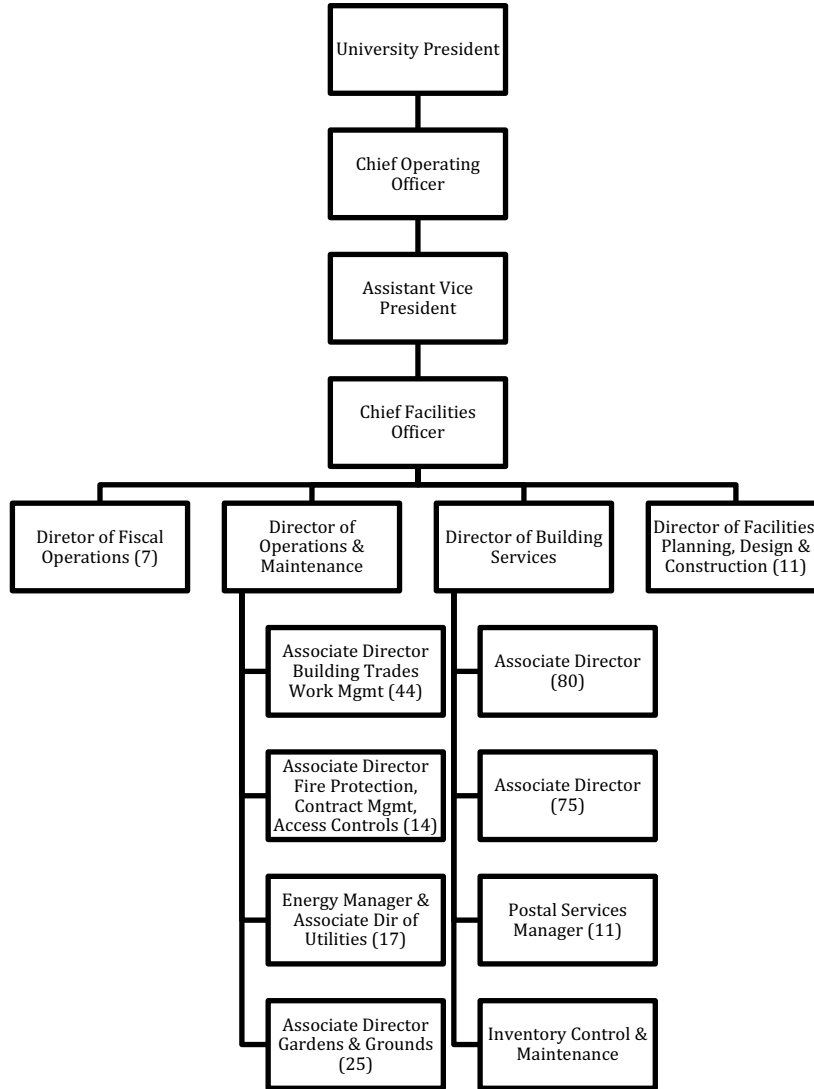
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APPENDIX A

DEPARTMENT OF FACILITIES ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

```
                        ┌─────────────────────┐
                        │ University President │
                        └─────────────────────┘
                                  │
                        ┌─────────────────────┐
                        │   Chief Operating    │
                        │       Officer        │
                        └─────────────────────┘
                                  │
                        ┌─────────────────────┐
                        │   Assistant Vice     │
                        │      President       │
                        └─────────────────────┘
                                  │
                        ┌─────────────────────┐
                        │   Chief Facilities   │
                        │       Officer        │
                        └─────────────────────┘
```

| Diretor of Fiscal Operations (7) | Director of Operations & Maintenance | Director of Building Services | Director of Facilities, Planning, Design & Construction (11) |

| Associate Director Building Trades Work Mgmt (44) | Associate Director (80) |

| Associate Director Fire Protection, Contract Mgmt, Access Controls (14) | Associate Director (75) |

| Energy Manager & Associate Dir of Utilities (17) | Postal Services Manager (11) |

| Associate Director Gardens & Grounds (25) | Inventory Control & Maintenance |

AGENDA VOLUNTARY PARTICIPANT MEETINGS

Facilitators: Babs Bengtson (HR) and Carrie Cooper (Librarian/Researcher)

Notes: The voluntary participant meetings will occur three times throughout the program on Fridays, September 30, October 21, and November 11 at Swem Library from 8:30–9:30. The purpose of these meetings is to provide time for reflection, practice, and community building. Light refreshments will be served, and participants will gather at 8:30 AM and sit at tables of 4–5. The meeting will begin at approximately 8:40 AM, with time for socializing before the welcome.

Meeting Agenda:

I. Welcome (Babs)

    a. Introductions of the Facilitators and Participants

    b. Stated Purpose of the Voluntary Meetings (see text above)

II. Checking In on the Program (Carrie)

    a. What questions do you have about the program and my research?

III. Questions Presented to the Participants (Babs)

    a. What are you most enjoying about the program? (whole group brainstorming)

    b. How has this program impacted your experience working at William and Mary? (time to write in journal and reflect independently)

        i. Pair up participants to share

        ii. Ask if anyone wants to share with the entire group

        iii. What do you want us to know about this experience that hasn't been shared yet?

    c. What other topics or classes are of interest to you in the future?

IV. Announcements and Community Building (Carrie)

    a. Share upcoming LearnShops and other campus opportunities of Interest

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT SURVEY

1 2
No.

Learn at Work
Course & Workshop Survey

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
I am happy to be in this class.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
People are valued as individuals by the organization (W&M).	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I feel connected to the organization as a whole (William & Mary).	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I have access to new opportunities at work.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I am having a positive work experience at William & Mary.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

HOW LIKELY ARE YOU TO RECOMMEND THIS COURSE OR WORKSHOP TO A FRIEND

👎 ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ❤️
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Not Likely   Very Likely

What comments do you have about this class or future opportunities for William & Mary employees?

....

....

....

....

Questions adapted from the Workplace Inclusion Scale
http://hdl.handle.net/10713/18577 (Lennox et al., 2022)

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Time and Date: Observer: Place: Weather/Mood:	

Research Questions
   1. *What training and learning opportunities are of interest for low wage employees in a higher education setting?*
   2. *How does participation in classes, workshops and tutoring during the workday impact the lives of the participants?*	

Descriptive Notes: What do I see, smell, touch, hear and feel? Draw a picture or write a narrative/	**Reflective Notes: Are there any problems, issues, or concerns?**
How many learners are in attendance? How is the room set? What is their response to the content and instructor/ Who is sharing and listening? What are their stories?	
Circle Checklist On the Money _____attendance record Computers _____reminder was sent to attendees Health Y N refreshments/food served Voluntary Monthly Meeting University Workshop/ Learnshop (topic)_____	

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Greeting the Participants
As the participants arrive, I will check that the informed consent form has been signed. Learners will select a seat in a horseshoe seating arrangement and help themselves to library-provided refreshments. Each table will have markers, pens and colored half sheets for recording ideas and reflections.

Introductions
The Facilitator will lead introductions and share the purpose of the focus group: To understand how the participants have experienced the course and how it has impacted their lives at work and at home. I will be compiling a summary report that includes shared responses from the participants.

Questions
The facilitator will use a variety of methods to elicit responses and engage the participants:
- Think/Pair/Share
- Individual Responses- Grouped at the front of the room by facilitator
- Table Conversations

RQ1: What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting?
  a) Why did you sign up for (insert name of course)?
  b) Who encouraged you to participate in the course?
  c) What additional opportunity do you wish for?

RQ2: How does participation in classes, workshops or tutoring during the workday impact the work experience and lives of the participants?
  d) How would you describe your work experience at William and Mary?
  e) Tell me how participating in this class has impacted your work and life this semester.
  f) What stands out from this experience?
  g) Talk to me about learning with your coworkers.
  h) What questions do you have?

At the end of the session, a small gift of an insulated lunch box will be offered to the participants as they are thanked for their participation in the study and the focus group. They will be reminded that a few participants will be asked to be interviewed and recorded at the conclusion of the program.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Overview of implementation

Individual interviews will be conducted with 10–12 participants who signed up for fall offerings, with representation from all three Literacy for Life classes, Literacy for Life tutoring services, and the university-led single workshops.

Administration

One-on-one interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreeable time and location between the researcher and interviewer in December 2022 or January 2023, at the natural conclusion of the semester and there is a break in offerings. For participants who signed up for tutoring services, those individual sessions may still be occurring. All sessions will be audio recorded. The participants will have a chance to review the previously signed copy of the consent form before the interview formally begins.

Introductory script

"Thank you for participating in my study and volunteering to be interviewed about the Learn at Work offerings this fall. The purpose of my study is to find out how access to opportunities in the Learn at Work program impacted your work experience and life. This interview will be recorded with results being used for my dissertation at William and Mary, and to provide the institution information about ways to expand access to opportunity for operational employees. Your participation is voluntary, and you may elect to end the interview at any time. Throughout the interview, we will be talking about your experience participating in the learning offerings. Do you have any questions or concerns before we get started?"

The Interview

Introduction to the Participant: 1. Tell me about yourself. How long have you worked at William and Mary, what is your job here, and what obligations do you have outside of William and Mary?   2. Describe a typical day at work.   3. Tell me about your work experience at William and Mary?
*Subquestion 2***: How does participation in classes, workshops, and tutoring impact the work experience and lives of the employees?**   (Questions based on Dimensions II, II IV of Lennox et al., 2022)
Values Individual Characteristic (II)   3. What skills and talents do you bring to your job? How does your supervisor recognize your contributions?   4. What other contributions do you make to the team?
Personal Work Engagement (III)   5. Tell me about a time when you were asked for your opinion at work?   6. When do you talk and interact with people outside of facilities at William and Mary?   7. Have you recommended William and Mary as an employer? What do you tell friends about working here?
Access to Opportunity (IV)   8. How do you learn about new and different opportunities at William and Mary? What other kinds of opportunities would you like to explore at William and Mary, or elsewhere?   9. Who encourages you at work?

Question 1:
What training and learning opportunities are of interest for operational employees earning less than $39,520 annually, and $19 an hour, when presented a menu of options in a higher education setting?

10. Talk to me about the class(es) you attended and why they were of interest.
    a. How has the class helped you?
    b. Who encouraged your participation?
    c. What additional support would help you feel more connected to the institution?

11. OR, Will you share your experience with Literacy for Life tutoring services?
    a. Are you working with a tutor during the workday?
    b. What are you learning?
    c. How is it helping you in your job? How is it helping you outside of work?
    d. What additional support would help you feel more connected to William and Mary?

12. Or/And, You attended X LearnShops, can you tell me why?
    a. What classes or workshops you would suggest in the future? Did you miss a workshop that you wanted to attend?

Other:
13. What else would you like to share about this program and how it has influenced your work experience?

APPENDIX G

RESEARCH CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

Interview Consent for An Action Research Approach to Workplace Inclusivity for Operational Employees in Higher Education

The Study
The study is designed to understand the learning interests of employees and how learning at work impacts the employee experience and lives of the participants. Participants in the study are employees at William and Mary working in the Department of Facilities Management and Operations and earning $19 or less an hour as of September 1, 2022.

Why Participate
Increased access to opportunity is part of feeling included at work. Studying which opportunities are of interest for operational employees helps the researcher make recommendations for future programs. The interviews will allow the participants to speak directly about how accessing opportunities impacted their work and life. The study will provide useful information about the relationship between access to opportunity and workplace inclusion.

The Request
Allow the researcher to track your participation in the Literacy for Life courses and tutoring, the LearnShops, and the voluntary monthly participant meetings on September 30, October 21 and November 11; and, consider being interviewed in December 2022 or January 2023 about your experience in the program and how it impacted your work experience and life in fall 2022.

Additional Information
- Participant confidentially of identifying information will be protected.
- Participant responses and attendance will be used for the purpose of this study and individual records and responses will not be shared with anyone.
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time by notifying Carrie Cooper in writing. Withdrawal from participation will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the department in which I work, or William and Mary.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Carrie Cooper, the researcher at ████████ or clcooper@wm.edu, or Dr. James Barber, her dissertation chair at ████████ or jpbarber@wm.edu.

I understand that I may report any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this investigation to Thomas Ward, Chair of the Education Protection of Human Subjects Committee by telephone at ██████████████ or via e-mail at tjward@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participating in this research study.

Sign if you give your consent to participate in the focus groups and interviews.

_____**Date** _____

THIS PROJECT WAS APPROVED BY the W&M PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757–221–3966) ON 2022–09–13 AND EXPIRES ON 2023–09–13.

VITA

Carrie Lynn Zebrowsky Cooper

Education

The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA	January 2024

Doctor of Education in Educational Policy, Planning and Leadership. Concentration in Higher Education Administration

The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS	August 1997

Master of Library and Information Science

The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL	December 1992

Bachelor of Science, Elementary Education

Professional Experience

William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA

• Dean of University Libraries	2011-Present

Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY

• Dean of Libraries	2006-2011
• Interim Dean of Libraries	2005-2006
• Coordinator of Research & Instruction	2002-2004
• Learning Resources Center Team Leader	1998-2001

St. Johns County Public Schools, St. Augustine, FL

• Librarian, Allen D. Nease High School	1996-1998
• Teacher, 4th-grade, Osceola Elementary	1992-1994

Pinellas County Public Schools, St. Petersburg, FL

• Teacher, 5th-grade, Bay Point Elementary	1994-1995