

ASU Literacy Center

According to the official website of the ASU Literacy Center over 4,000,000 adults in the US read below an 8th grade level, with 64,000 such adults in the Augusta area alone. As I was surprised to learn, not all of these literacy challenges can be attributed to the usual suspects – underfunded schools with poor learning environments, broken families, chronic drug abuse, etc. Many, if not most, of the functionally illiterate are people who have learning disabilities that were never noticed and/or addressed and others may be new immigrants whose native tongue isn't English.

The ASU Literacy Center was conceived by and is run by Professor Paulette Harris. The center is non-profit and relies on donations and grants to support it. Since it is a non-profit, the services are free of charge and no one in need is turned away. All that is asked is that those who are tutored obey a few basic rules and show a dedication to the process. In this way Equity is achieved. A file is kept on each individual that details attendance and what they are studying and who has tutored them. If a student misses two sessions in a row, they go back on the waiting list. The waiting list typically includes 50 or more potential students.

Supply and demand is high for the services that the center provides. The Center tutors @ 1000 students per month. In order to meet this demand 17 students are tutored per hour on the hour from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday. The market value of private tutors is on average \$40.00 per hour. By this we can estimate that the Center provides about \$40,000 worth of tutoring per month for those who would probably not get it otherwise. A certified teacher is always on hand to oversee the process. Two people usually fill this role: one is a retired local high school teacher who has mentored 3 nights a week for 12 years and the other is a retired English teacher from the Citadel. Most of the volunteers come from ASU's Education Dept., but Business, Nursing and other majors also volunteer. This is especially valuable to the Education Dept., however, because some tutors realize that they aren't suited for a career in teaching or simply develop different areas of interest as a result of their mentoring experience. For the volunteers, this may be the most beneficial indirect economic service the Center provides. If a student/tutor isn't suited for teaching they won't waste government loans and man-hours on a profession they ultimately won't practice. For those who do enjoy the process, it can look good on a resume where practical work experience is scarce. Other direct economic benefits are available to student volunteers, as well. A future teacher will get certified to teach Special Education after three semesters. A student whose specialty will be pre-school/ K-12 will also be certified in that area after three semesters. All of this counts towards their degree program. Volunteers may work up to 20 hours per week. This high level of organization and

record keeping can be thought of as a *technology* and is the Center's measurable Production Function.

The tutors are given a criminal background check before they are "hired", and they are trained for a few hours. Also, a file details the strengths and weaknesses of each tutor as each tutor is monitored by a mentor. For example, some may work better with those whose native language isn't English while some may be better adapted to working with Special Needs students. The tutors usually volunteer for the whole semester and many continue on for the entirety of their career at ASU. This helps keep the turn-over rate low and saves the Center time in training new tutors.

Monetary donations may be made through the ASU Foundation. Until recently, the Augusta Chronicle donated 30 papers a day to the center (@ \$90.00 per week), but it's well known economic woes have forced them to cut back. The Augusta Chronicle also used to co-sponsor plays at ASU that raised funds for the Center. When the primary literary publication for a community is no longer supporting future readers, it's a sure bet that they have reached a situation in which the company's total revenue is less than its total cost, including all implicit costs. This is the definition of Economic Loss and a firm that operates too long in this way will exit its industry. Another firm that has made mentionable contributions is Comcast. Comcast donated the furniture in the building. They also donated the picnic tables in the back and built the deck. It would not be out of order to assume that they acted in their *self-interest* and took a tax write-off of some kind or advertised the fact that they donated these goods. This isn't selfish behavior because according to Adam Smith the key to understanding why a large company would deliver and install furniture when it would be cheaper for them to simply throw it away is the assumption that individuals (and a corporation is treated legally as an individual) act in a rational and self-interested way. In fact, simply throwing out sturdy, but to them obsolete, furniture would have been selfish. In this way, everyone wins.

Let's focus on an actual volunteer and see in what ways the community is economically benefited. Linda Comstock is a retired teacher and principle who moved to the Augusta area to be closer to her family. She has been a volunteer for 7 months and decided to do so because she wanted to do something productive with her time. She recalls with a palpable joy helping a woman from Ghana attain American citizenship. The woman was a special needs student since she wore a hearing aid and her English was marginal, at best. She had failed the test once before and was worried about losing her Green Card when she came seeking help. Ms. Comstock honed in on the fact that the woman needed to pass the test and that is all they worked on. For the test the woman needed to read 100 sentences and write 80 words. After some weeks of tutoring Ms. Comstock received a letter from the woman stating that she had aced the test and thanked her for her help. Ms. Comstock decided that she especially enjoyed

working with ESL students and is currently working with a woman from India whose daughter attends ASU. She works using phonetics to sound out the words and is teaching her the days of the week and the holidays. Also, she builds her core teaching experience around the 220 most commonly used words in the English language. This way the student has a grasp of the basics.

By helping someone who was eager to obtain citizenship Ms. Comstock was able to add another potential tax-payer to the workforce. Before hand, she may have had to function in the Underground Economy since she may not have been legally entitled to work (I don't know if she was or not). The second lady was a doctor in her native land and hopes to enter the nursing field in this country, but of course can't be schooled until she speaks the language. Until she can do so we may think of her as being structurally unemployed because she has the basic medical skills and know-how to be in the service industry, but is for now a stay at home wife, though she wants to work outside the home. The GDP doesn't measure leisure time and how it's spent, but Ms. Comstock, by seeking her own self-interest by helping others is contributing to the economic well-being of herself and the community she serves. Numerous studies indicate that those who are engaged with others in their retirement tend to need less medical care and live longer. Certainly, both of these help the economy, especially in this difficult time when health care is so expensive.

The best way to sum up the work of the Literacy Center is to point out that it is a positive externality. The social benefit is the private benefit to the volunteers (and these benefits may vary and overlap) plus the external benefit of reducing illiteracy in the community. As a matter of fact, Professor Harris mentioned that reading has economic benefits because it helps reduce crime. It also adds people to the workforce who may otherwise have stayed on the margins. Because of these benefits and many more, let us hope that the ASU Literacy Center will operate for many years to come.