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## **The Potential Barriers to Adult GED Transition**

Casheena Stephens  
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## **The Potential Barriers to Adult GED Transition**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of General Education Development (GED) students' matriculation into college. More specifically, the study will attempt to identify potential barriers that affect adult GED student transition into college in order to allow for the development of effective transition programs. There are potential barriers that affect the transition of GED students into college. Some barriers have been identified throughout literature, however, a need still exists to transform the knowledge gained from those barriers into strategies to help GED students overcome them and meet their long-term education goals.

### **The Potential Barriers to Adult GED Transition**

The Evaluation and Developmental Center (EDC) is a direct client service component of the Rehabilitation Institute of Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). SIUC and the Department of Human Services/Office of Rehabilitation Services jointly fund the EDC Rehabilitation Services Programs. According to the Evaluation & Developmental Center (2009) mission statement:

The purpose of this center is to provide basic educational opportunities and necessary support services for eligible persons, which will allow them to reach their highest level of competency, enhance opportunities for employment, meet their obligations as citizens, and improve the quality of life for them and their families. (para 1)

According to the Adult Education Program Manager, the program serves approximately 200 students from the local community (Dr. K Humphreys, personal communication, February 2, 2009). These students come from an array of family structures, with varying household incomes and levels of education. The students served are at least 16 years of age, not currently enrolled in a public high school or postsecondary institution, and are in need of a GED (General Education Development) or desire to upgrade their basic education for the purpose of attaining or retaining employment.

In serving as a GED Instructor at the Evaluation & Developmental Center – Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) the privilege of assisting underprovided individuals with the opportunity and knowledge to improve their quality of life is incredibly rewarding. Many students have different reasons for pursuing their GED; however, they all experience the same joy when they achieve that goal. Creating new and innovative ways to encourage students to set short-term and long-term goals, especially regarding continuing their education, is one of the challenges instructors face. In the role of a GED Instructor, observations of the need to identify potential barriers that interfere with GED transition begin to surface. The students display attitudes of disdain and candidly expressed their individual concerns in knowing what realistic opportunities are available after receiving their GED. These discussions triggered questions that evolved into a legitimate need to be explored and addressed.

Beyond these challenges, GED programs are responsible for meeting state and national mandated requirements. The effectiveness of GED programs is measured in several ways. Some programs are required to meet the National Reporting System (NRS) standards. According to Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) Provider Manual (Illinois Community College Board Manual, 2009, p. 71), “NRS for Adult Education is an outcome-based reporting system for the state-administered, federally funded adult education program”. The five-core outcomes that NRS measures consist of: educational gains, entered employment, retained employment, receipt of a secondary school diploma or GED, and finally placement in postsecondary education or training. In addition to NRS standards, most programs measure effectiveness based on passing GED exam scores, increases in reading on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) test, along with the rate at which students obtain and retain employment. Although, obtaining and maintaining employment is a good measurement of program effectiveness, college matriculation is also reviewed. Discovering the rate at which GED student’s transition

into college, the challenges they face, and ways educational institutions can help guide their transition would be extremely useful information.

People who receive GED certification continue their education in a variety of ways and some research suggests that many of them go on to postsecondary education. Postsecondary education is an important stepping stone for GED graduates. “A 2003 Bureau of Labor Statistics report, *Tomorrow’s Jobs*, found that 60 percent of the fastest growing occupations require a bachelor’s degree or associates degree” (Appelt, 2007, para 1). Brown (2000) agreed with this statement claiming, “The road out of poverty and into economic security is linked to continuing education” (p. 3). Research suggests that achieving postsecondary credentials is beyond a good idea and imperative for the economy.

Students enrolled in GED programs are comprised of various backgrounds, family structures, income levels, and parental levels of education. “Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have fewer resources to make successful high school to college transitions” (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005, p. 531). Lew (2007) indicated that low-income minority students attending poor urban schools with limited resources may receive poor treatment from teachers, counselors, etc. (p. 384). This information suggests that there is a need to create access to resources for GED students presented with upmost respect and concern for them as human beings.

Adult education programs that offer GED preparation courses desperately need to understand what some of the potential barriers are that its students deal with. This is vital in order to properly assist them as they plan to move to the next level on their career path. It is imperative that GED programs take initiative and play an active role in addressing these barriers. If the barriers are not identified, understood, and assessed to make necessary changes, GED students will become GED holders without future direction. The students may have a plan that can not be executed due to unpreparedness for barriers that present themselves after the student has received their GED certificate. The programs are in a unique situation due to the amount of face time instructors and coordinators have with this population and could be very influential if taken seriously. Conducting additional research to gather specific data regarding the socioeconomic status of current GED students along with the effect it has on transitioning GED students into college is critical. This study will address the barriers of GED students and provide intervention methods that will ensure matriculation and successful postsecondary achievement.

### **Significance of the Study**

Identifying the barriers that negatively impact the number of GED students who are able to matriculate into college is important in a variety of ways. According to Bosworth (2008), “Unless the United States makes some fundamental adjustments in its national strategies for the education of adults, labor force attainment will stagnate, productivity will lag, and economic growth will suffer” (p. 73). These barriers have the ability to affect society due to the lives of people not being invested in and no economic value is expended. Education is one of the key components that add value to life, hence yielding one’s ability to contribute to the economic system that our society is built upon. Education not only has a direct impact on economic payoffs but also affects many other aspects of personal life and society as a whole.

### Summary of Literature and Research

The literature implies that GED students are faced with difficulties based on variables contained within an individual's socioeconomic status. For example, some GED students come from single parent, low income, and low level of education attained homes. This situation is thought to have an impact on whether students transition to college, or not. Many GED students have unique family structures that require more time and energy to fulfill. Some of these obligations include parenting and balancing family, work, and school. The literature also addresses the benefit that financial assistance can provide in helping this population choose higher education as well. The literature reviewed did not specify definite distinction of the socioeconomic status of GED students as a whole. However, it is implied that the greater majority of GED students fall within or below poverty line.

Other findings describe the resources and treatment of GED students both domestically and internationally. The literature also addresses the wage earnings of non-degree holders, high school graduates, and GED graduates. According to Bracey (1995), "acquisition of the GED credential is not a powerful strategy for escaping poverty" (p. 257). This indicates that a portion of GED students are currently impoverished and suggests that just a GED is not the solution to their economic challenges. Bracey also reports wage expectations of GED holders versus those that have no degree or educational certification. GED holders are considered better off than the other group; however the financial benefits were not exponential. This information suggests that the GED is to be viewed as a stepping stone for GED students if a change is desired in their socioeconomic status. Chaplin (as cited in Brown, 2000) reports, that "most studies show that individuals earning a GED instead of a high school diploma earn substantially lower earnings long-term" (p. 3). Unfortunately, this is not the happy ending that GED students anticipate.

"The life goal is (tacitly) assumed to be income maximization, but for disadvantaged students, later monetary payoff from educational investments is not the only issue" (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004, p. 1182). The hope is that obtaining additional education will meet the needs to overcome other issues that GED students encounter. However, finances play a major role in whether or not GED students see continuing their education as an option. Transition entails more than one's ability, but also access to resources.

The literature review expressed the academic and non-academic obstacles GED students face when attempting to transition into college. The majority of information displayed indicated that GED students are not matriculating into college, in spite of their initial plans. Questions are being posed as to why this transition is not occurring, however many probable causes have been revealed. Some believe that GED students are not adequately prepared for the transition due to lacking math, writing, and computer skills that are necessary to complete postsecondary education. Others believe creating special transition programs will help motivate, encourage, and prepare GED graduates with the academic tools along with exposure to college bureaucracy and life as a college student to be successful.

### Research Questions

1. What is the socioeconomic status of GED students?
2. How often do GED students plan to transition into college?
3. What are the factors that impact the ability of GED students to transition effectively into college?

### Methods & Procedures

A single method quantitative research approach was utilized to conduct the research. Quantitative research designs emphasize objectivity using numerical descriptors. A non-experimental descriptive research design was used in the process of collecting the quantitative data since they investigate the current status or relationships rather than causal effects. Descriptive research describes the current status of a variable of interest i.e. potential barriers and GED transition. The research data was gathered through the use of a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of questions related to demographics and barriers highlighted from literature that could potentially affect college transition.

The population for this study consisted of current GED students enrolled in adult education programs that provide instruction covering the following subject areas; math, science, social studies, reading, and writing. These GED students were recruited from two adult education programs in southern Illinois. All of the GED program students were asked to volunteer in the study. The sites that participated in the study include Operation Rebound Carbondale Community High School and The Evaluation & Developmental Center. Twenty-eight of the students met the participatory criteria, which required the student be 18 years of age and not be a resident in a group home.

### Data Analysis & Results

From the 30 questionnaires delivered, 28 were returned, representing a 93% return rate. The genders of the respondents were primarily female at 61%, and 39% were males. The data collected from the survey questionnaire was analyzed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007. The data were entered into an Excel spread sheet. Percentages were calculated for each survey question.

#### *Research question 1: What is the socioeconomic status of GED students?*

Sixteen (57%) GED students were between the ages of 18-21. Approximately 43% of the other students were 22 years of age or older. Age, although not a factor in socioeconomic status was included as a population descriptor. Seventeen (61%) of the respondents completed the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 14% completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 11% completed 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> grade, while 7% completed the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Twenty-one (75%) respondents reported that their yearly income was less than \$10,000. Six (21%) students indicated that they received income within the range of \$10,000 and \$19,999 per year. Sixteen (57%) respondents reported that their total household income was less than \$10,000.

Twenty-one (75%) of the GED students indicated that they were currently unemployed, 7% were employed full-time, and 14% were employed part-time both groups working only one job. One (4%) student indicated “other” on the labor force question without disclosing any specific information. Fifteen (54%) respondents had anywhere from one to five or more children and thirteen (46%) did not have any children.

The majority were white at 54% and 36% were African American. Twenty-two (79%) of the GED students were single, never married, and 36% had parents that were still married.

*Research Questions 2: How often do GED students plan to transition into college?*

Analysis of the responses for question 13 indicates that all but one of the respondents had plans to continue their education beyond the GED certification. Twenty-five percent had plans to attend a 2-year college, 32% planned to attend a 4-year college, and 32% aspired to enroll in a certificate program.

Twenty-six (93%) of the respondents believed that having assistance with the transition from a GED to college would be helpful. Many believed that help with completing financial aid forms (43%) and having pre-college entry tutoring (46%) would be beneficial. Others were interested in walking through the college application process (25%); attending college recruiting events (11%), childcare referral information (11%), mentoring programs (7%), and transportation options (7%).

*Research Question 3: What are the factors that impact the ability of GED students to transition effectively into college?*

Thirteen (46%) of the respondents believed that there were potential barriers that would prevent them from continuing their education beyond the GED. Seventeen (61%) of the students believed that their current annual income would prevent them from entering a higher education institution. Only eleven (39%) felt that their current family structure would impact their ability to continue into college. These students believe that time to study and complete coursework, family commitments, daycare expenses, balancing work and school, and money would be factors that could affect their transition. The students who stated felt that they had definite barriers to overcome in order to continue their education listed them as the following; uncertainty of program options (11%), not enough knowledge about application process and procedures (14%), lack of confidence (11%), lack of knowledge of financial aid and scholarships (25%), transportation (11%), childcare (4%), or feel unprepared (29%). The majority of those that felt unprepared attributed it to academic challenges that they would have to overcome and a couple felt that they needed to solidify their long term career goals.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding of General Education Development (GED) students' matriculation into college. More specifically, the study attempted to identify potential barriers that affect adult GED student transition into college in order to allow for the development of effective transition programs.

A review of literature indicated that both academic and non-academic obstacles exist for GED students when attempting to transition into college. The majority of the literature agreed that GED students are not matriculating into college, in spite of their initial plans.

According to the data analysis, race and gender implied that the majority of the students were female and predominately white and African American was the majority races. However, "the 2000 report on high school dropout rates from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) asserts that both Hispanic and black students

experience higher than average dropout rates” (Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005, p. 313). “Unfortunately, the majority of the GED students’ individual and household income is beneath the poverty line for the State of Illinois, which is currently \$21,200 for a family of four” (Social IMPACT Research Center, 2009, p. 2). This is a potential barrier if these students are unaware of the resources that he or she could take advantage of due to their individual or household income. Sixty one percent of the students surveyed indicate that their income would affect their transition.

The data also suggests that the majority of the students, although single, come from single parent or broken homes, whether by divorce, separation, or widowed. This could have a detrimental impact on the student’s transition due to a lack in their support system, especially since most students were between the ages of 18-21. Chaplin (as cited in Brown, 2000) indicated that “of the 500,000 people currently receiving GED’s each year, 200,000 are under the age of 20, and 50,000 are 16-17 years old” (p. 3). Thirty-nine percent of the students indicate that their family structure involving anywhere from one to five children may affect their transition. This may be easily remedied if the students are placed in touch with the right people and programs that could help with transportation and childcare needs.

### **Conclusion**

According to the data, more than half of the GED students did not believe they have potential barriers that would hinder their transition into college. Unfortunately, literature and the results from the survey questionnaire report otherwise. This population has become so accustomed to lack in their lives that blatant barriers are unrecognizable. The needs of this population have been overlooked and if the trend progresses it will continue to negatively impact the workforce due to a lack of education and professional achievement, currently resulting in a 75% unemployment rate. A solution is in dire need or a disastrous situation awaits the economy as a whole.

According to Goodall (2009):

Many ethnic minority students are either first-generation or first-time college students and thus face the challenge of not having a reference to navigate the higher education system. This situation becomes even more challenging when these same students left high school early and did not have sufficient opportunities to gain awareness or develop a level of confidence that could have resulted from continued interaction and participation in the educational setting. (p. 13)

The data collected indicated the majority of GED students are completing eleven years of high school prior to dropping out, while previous research indicated the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Approximately 40% of both the father and mother of this group of GED student’s did not complete high school nor receive a GED certificate. Although all but one of these students plans to continue their education the odds, are against them unless divine intervention is made.

### **Recommendations**

First, due to the fact that sixty-one percent of the students completed the 11<sup>th</sup> grade high schools should play an active role in educating high school students on the statistics if they choose not to stay in school. High school administrators should provide

support to guidance counselors to ensure that each student set goals and develop an execution plan prior to graduating. Gewertz (2009) supports this recommendation by stating:

The heightened rhetoric around college-going reflects a growing consensus among policymakers that some form of postsecondary education is crucial to students' success after high school. That view implicitly changes high schools' mission from simply graduating students to ensuring they are prepared for the next tier of study, whether it is in two- or four-year colleges, or in technical or career coursework. (p. 6)

Educating the GED population on what barriers they may face is also critical if successful transition is to occur.

Adult education programs should spend ample time researching current barriers and educating their students on these obstacles along with committing to develop strategies to overcome them. This will provide much needed encouragement, peace, and assurance to this population, hopefully increasing the number of students who successfully transition into college. These programs should also invest in staff specifically trained and skilled in transitioning this population into post-secondary institutions. The staff should be responsible for educating the students on college program options, the college application process, financial aid procedures and scholarship opportunities etc.

Community colleges also must elect to play a role in the transition of GED students. Harrington (2000) suggested the following categories be included in their transition program at Rio Salado College: “academic advising, tutoring, career and personal counseling, educational and personal goal setting, finding and applying for financial assistance, scholarships, and instructional aides & materials” (p. 4). More importantly mentoring students, while helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses academically and non-academically is critical to their success. For example, teaching good study habits could make a world of difference in the life of a single mother.

Adult education programs should also provide college preparatory courses to GED students prior to entering college to set the stage for excellent performance. Advocating for funding is the key to the success of Adult Education in Illinois and the future of the GED population.

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**APPENDIX A****Basic Demographics  
&  
General Education Development Transition Survey Instrument**

1. Are you Male or Female?
  - Male
  - Female
  
2. What is your age?
  - 18-21
  - 22-25
  - 26-30
  - 31-40
  - 41-50
  - 51-60
  - 61 or over
  
3. What is the grade level you have completed?
  - 4<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 5<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 6<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 7<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 9<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 10<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 11<sup>th</sup> grade
  
4. What is your own yearly income?
  - Less than \$10,000
  - \$10,000 - \$19,999
  - \$20,000 - \$29,999
  - \$30,000 - \$39,999
  - \$40,000 - \$49,999
  - More than \$50,000

5. What is your total household income, including all earners in your household?
- Less than \$10,000
  - \$10,000 - \$19,999
  - \$20,000 - \$29,999
  - \$30,000 - \$39,999
  - \$40,000 - \$49,999
  - \$50,000 - \$59,999
  - More than \$60,000
6. What is your marital status?
- Single, Never Married
  - Married
  - Separated
  - Divorced
  - Widowed
7. How many children do you have?
- None
  - One
  - Two
  - Three
  - Four
  - Five or more
8. What is your race?
- White
  - White, non-Hispanic
  - Black
  - Hispanic
  - Asian-Pacific Islander
  - Native American
  - Other

9. What is your labor force status?
- Employed Full-time/One Job (persons who usually work 35 hours/week or more)
  - Employed Full-time/Multiple Jobs (persons who usually work 35 hours/week or more)
  - Employed Part-time/One Job (persons who usually work less than 35 hours/week)
  - Employed Part-time/Multiple Jobs (persons who usually work less than 35 hours/week)
  - Armed Forces Member
  - Unemployed
  - Other
10. What is your parents' marital status?
- Single, Never Married
  - Married
  - Separated
  - Divorced
  - Widowed
11. What is the highest level of education your mother/female guardian has completed?
- Less than High School
  - High School/GED
  - Some College
  - 2-Year College Degree (Associates)
  - 4-Year College Degree (BA, BS)
  - Master's Degree
  - Doctoral Degree
  - Professional Degree (MD, JD)

12. What is the highest level of education your father/male guardian has completed?

- Less than High School
- High School/GED
- Some College
- 2-Year College Degree (Associates)
- 4-Year College Degree (BA, BS)
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree (MD, JD)

13. Do you plan to continue your education beyond the GED certificate?

- Yes
- No

14. If you answered yes to question 12, which selection best describes your action plan?

- 2-Year College
- 4-Year College
- Certificate Program (i.e. CNA, LPN, Cosmetology, Automotive Technology)

15. Do you believe that there are potential barriers that would prevent you from continuing your education beyond the GED certificate?

- Yes
- No

16. Do you believe your annual income will prevent you from entering a higher education institution?

- Yes
- No

17. Do you believe that your family structure will impact your ability to continue your higher education?

- Yes
- No

18. If you answered yes to question 16, which selection best describes the way you would be impacted? (check all that apply)

- A. Not enough time to study and complete course work
- B. Too many other family commitments
- C. Unable to afford daycare
- D. Unable to go to school and work
- E. My reason is not listed. (please fill in below)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

19. If you answered yes to question 15, which of the following best describes those barriers? (check all that apply)

- A. Uncertainty of program options
- B. Not enough knowledge about application process and procedures
- C. Lack of confidence/overwhelmed by work load expectations
- D. Lack of knowledge of financial aid and scholarships
- E. Transportation
- F. Childcare
- G. I feel unprepared for college level work.
- H. My barrier is not listed. (please fill in below)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

20. If you selected option G to question 19, which selection best describes your reasons for feeling unprepared? (check all that apply)

- A. I have academic challenges to overcome. (i.e. math, writing skills)
- B. I have not set a long term career goal.
- C. I am unfamiliar with the rules and regulations of colleges/universities.
- D. My reason is not listed. (please fill in below)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

21. Do you believe that having assistance with the transition from a GED to college would be helpful?

- Yes
- No

22. If you answered yes to question 18, which type of assistance would be beneficial?  
(check all that apply)

- A. Help with completing financial aid forms
- B. Walking through the college application process
- C. Attending an event displaying different colleges and showcasing their programs
- D. Childcare referral information
- E. Pre-college entry tutoring
- F. Information about transportation options
- G. Mentoring programs
- H. My need is not listed. (please fill in below)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_