

COLLEGE EXPERIENCES FOR GED STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The White House College Completion Agenda encourages higher education institutions to increase the number of students completing an undergraduate degree by the year 2025. Given the external context of economic uncertainty and limited resources, these tasks are daunting for associate's colleges with a history of low retention and completion rates and with an enrollment primarily of non-traditional students. GED students are among the collection of non-traditional students who face challenges of retention and completion in postsecondary education. Over the past decade, this body of students has increased enrollment in two-year associate's colleges. Thus, understanding how GED students experience postsecondary education can increase the retention and completion rates of American college students.

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the experiences of students who completed a GED and then enrolled at a two-year associate's college in the Southeastern region of the United States. Qualitative research methods were carried out by conducting individual interviews and document analysis. This study used qualitative inquiry to address the following research questions grounded in Astin's I-E-O model:

1. How do GED recipients experience the academic demands of an associate's college?
2. What role do student involvement and personal characteristics have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?
3. What role does the college environment have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?

After analyzing the study's data, three themes (Preparedness, Involvement, and Location) and four subthemes (Family, Time, Small Settings and Distractions) developed. In conclusion, the college experience of GED recipients can be improved by enriching academic learning prior to college enrollment and responding to financial, family, and employment obligations.

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CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION

GED Students and Accountability in Higher Ed

Adult education has become increasingly important over the last few decades as educational and governmental officials seek avenues to improve retention and completion rates across higher education institutions in the U.S. (Ashburn, 2007; Glenn, 2010; Hoover, 2008). As America recovered from the 2008 recession, federal and state governments searched for ways to improve the economic status of the country and keep higher education from facing its own collapse (Kenny, 2011; Reynolds, 2010; Skinner, 2011). A change in government also shifted the structure of higher education in America (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; Lincoln, 2009; National Center for Public Policy & Southern Regional Education Board, 2010) in terms of educational attainment. The actions of President Obama shed light on the role and importance of associate's colleges and their contribution in helping the United States educate its growing population and workforce (White House Summit on Community Colleges, 2010). In addition, the Lumina Foundation, in conjunction with several educational partners, pushed to increase the number of graduates from associate's colleges through the Achieving the Dream Initiative (Achieving the Dream, 2012). This initiative addresses the low retention and completion rates in the American community college system by providing funding and offering strategies to improve educational attainment.

Although many efforts addressing retention and completion at two-year associate's colleges are currently underway, education officials have failed to address the retention and completion of students who enter into postsecondary education after earning a GED (Paterson, Song, & Zhang, 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). In addition, little empirical research exists regarding the perceptions of GED students as learners or their educational experiences more broadly (Barbatis, 2010; Golden, 2003).

Some general education development students enroll in GED courses due to personal or academic barriers that caused them not to be successful in the traditional classroom setting (Kist, 2003; Tokpah & Padak, 2003). Researchers have addressed many of these barriers and introduced ways of addressing these issues in order to decrease the number of high school dropouts. Although education practitioners and public officials seek ways to improve the number of students completing traditional high school diplomas, the number of students enrolling and obtaining GEDs continues to rise (American Council on Education, 2010; Quigley, Becker-Patterson & Zhang, 2011). Therefore, the importance of understanding the academic experiences of adult education students is vital in order to reduce the recurrence of non-completion as they continue into postsecondary education. Although researchers have made progress in this area, further research is needed regarding postsecondary GED students, who despite their academic and personal barriers, seek to successfully persist in their educational pursuits (Barbatis, 2010; Golden, 2003).

The persistence of GED students, specifically in associate's colleges, should not go unnoted. Rural postsecondary institutions face many challenges and barriers especially during times of national economic hardship. Rural areas, such as the Black Belt region of Alabama, are known as one of the most underdeveloped and impoverished regions in the United States. The

Black Belt's economy, healthcare, and education continue to fall behind the rest of the United States and local officials struggle to improve this region's economic woes (Alabama State University Center for Leadership and Public Policy, 2011). The lack of educational progress in rural communities such as these has frustrated educational practitioners and officials. However, researchers continue to study the area in hopes of improving social and economic conditions. Conversely, some students from rural impoverished areas persist academically despite their public image, educational historical reputation, and negative education statistics. More importantly, GED recipients from the Black Belt region who persist despite these challenges should be studied in order to provide practitioners with an enhanced understanding of this population. In addition, understanding how GED recipients persist enhances knowledge in terms of non-traditional students at two-year institutions, and brings more understanding to postsecondary educators and policy makers in impoverished areas. It is imperative that educators capture the academic experiences of GED recipients in rural underdeveloped regions. These students face an unprecedented number of issues that educators need to address in order to truly improve the overall completion rates of students at associate's colleges.

The overall number of students earning a GED and the low community college completion rate has drawn local and national interest from public officials. Moreover, a recent study regarding economics, healthcare, and education illustrated that areas like the Black Belt are more negatively impacted in terms of education and economy of scale as compared to other counties within the state (Alabama State University Center for Leadership and Public Policy, 2011). Counties within this region are known as some of the poorest areas in the United States. The need for student success and growth are significant in these underprivileged, impoverished

regions. Thus, more rigorous educational research is needed to better inform educators and public officials about the needs of these communities and schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the experiences of GED recipients who go on to enroll in a two-year associate's college. This dissertation documents the experiences of GED recipients from rural communities who have entered into a community college and whose educational background is defined through a non-traditional path towards postsecondary education. This dissertation adds to the extant literature in understanding the experiences of GED students from a rural area of the Southeastern part of the United States. The following questions were explored in this dissertation:

1. How do GED recipients experience the academic demands of an associate's college?
2. What role do student involvement and personal characteristics have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?
3. What role does the college environment have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?

This chapter is structured to highlight the significance of this research topic. The first section discusses relevant key terms that will be referenced throughout the study. The following sections discuss the pursuit for accountability in higher education and how GED students can contribute to this effort. Next, I address non-traditional students and the origin of the GED. Afterwards, I discuss the two-year associate college's role in the American postsecondary system before concluding the chapter.

Definitions

Before I begin to discuss the extant literature associated with this topic, I identify and define key terms that are highlighted within the study. The key terms are: GED students, adult learners, non-traditional students, adult education, community colleges and associate's colleges. Similarity exists in how researchers define GED students and adult learners. First, each term takes on several meanings based on how a particular state or governmental entity utilizes each word. For instance, the American Council on Education and the Adult and Family Literacy Act of 1998 defines adult learners as the following: "an *adult* is someone aged 16 or older in the United States and the insular areas" (American Council on Education, 2009, p. ix). Conversely, GED students are defined as individuals who did not complete high school and have earned, or are earning the General Education Diploma. Additionally, the age at which a student can receive a GED varies by state. Students are typically eligible to take GED preparation courses and the GED exam by the age of 16. Thus, by definition, all GED students are defined as adult learners.

According to Hensley and Kinser (2001), adult learners are people who assume one or more of the following roles: "a parent, working, attending college part-time, being a high school dropout, or delaying college enrollment for at least 1 year" (p. 88). This definition is similar to the definition of non-traditional students. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (2013, para. 1) states non-traditional students consist of "adult students who often have family and work responsibilities." Additionally, rather than defining non-traditional students by their age or demographics, NCES identifies non-traditional students based on their graduation status, such as a GED recipient. For the purpose of this dissertation, GED students are identified as adult learners and non-traditional students given their similarity in characteristics and the literature supporting the likeness of the three subpopulations.

More supporting evidence on the similarities between these subpopulations are explained by Ritt (2006), who revealed several important findings regarding the education of adults within the United States. Over 59 million people have no education above their high school diploma, and more than 26 million adults did not complete high school. She suggests that educators and legislators must seek non-traditional and re-entry students in order to become globally competitive by the year 2025.

Next, I define the use of the term, adult education. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education refers to adult education as a division of education that supports Adult Basic and Secondary Education (ABE & ASE) programs throughout the U.S. (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2013). Specifically, these programs support basic literacy for reading, English, and math skills for adults (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2013). In addition, adult education programs provide training for students seeking the GED. Finally, I explain the use of technical colleges and associate's colleges throughout the study. I use the terms interchangeably considering most academic institutions offering technical programs are classified as two-year institutions.

The Focus on Retention and Completion in Higher Education

The 2008 recession forced governmental officials to seek new avenues for boosting the United States economy. The housing collapse caused many educational officials and researchers to fear the possibility of a collapse in higher education (Kenny, 2011; Reynolds, 2011; Skinner, 2011). Rising tuition costs, low retention and completion rates, and numerous unemployed college graduates are factors contributing to the expansion of the higher education bubble (Cronin & Horton, 2009). Federal and state governments can manipulate tuition costs for most public institutions (Desrochers, Leniham, & Wellmam, 2010); however, improving retention and

completion rates appears to be a local institutionalized effort. Each institution's environment is unique in terms of culture and student demographics. Therefore, implementing successful retention strategies can be challenging for postsecondary institutions especially when utilizing existing practices as guides to improving student persistence. For example, the retention rate in American open admission four-year institutions in 2012 was 61% for full-time students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The percentage drastically declines for American two-year institutions. In 2012, American two-year public institutions had a retention rate of 58% for all full-time students; the rate was 60% for private two-year institutions and 66% for private for profit institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). During this time, graduation rates at all types of institutions were much less. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that graduation rates for all types of four-year institutions were 59% and 31% for all types of two-year associate colleges respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Researchers such as Tinto and Astin have developed popular theories and conceptual models addressing student persistence and retention (Astin, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987). These theories can offer initial guidance to all institutions in understanding student retention and development. Moreover, four-year and associate's colleges must profoundly and strategically assess their retention efforts in order to meet and maintain governmental accountability standards (Bragg, Kim & Barnett, 2006; National Center for Public Policy & Southern Regional Education Board, 2010; Olson, 2010).

Over the years, governmental and accrediting agencies have increased accountability measures on retention and completion requirements for all types of higher education institutions (Blumenstyk, Sander, Schmidt & Wasley, 2008; Hoover, 2008; Vedder, 2008). Additional

pressures from the economy (such as national and state proration) have also called for higher education to increase efficiency by cutting ineffective programs and resources. Educational and governmental officials have addressed low retention and completion rates and their effect on governmental spending, particularly at associate's colleges where some students receive a federal Pell Grant (United States Department of Education, 2012), yet drop out within the first month of classes (Ashburn, 2007). In addition, governmental retention interest sparked some controversial bills introduced by Congress. For instance, in effort to increase retention rates, legislation was passed to stop Ability-to-Benefit (ATB) students (students without a high school diploma) from receiving federal Pell Grants (United States Department of Education, 2012). Additionally, recent changes to Title IV funding require students in certain technical programs to complete a set number of contact hours before they can receive a refund for money unexpended from their Pell Grant. Moreover, the institution cannot be reimbursed by the federal government for the courses in which students who are receiving federal Pell Grants are enrolled if the college does not report and maintain a log of student contact hours.

Perhaps one of the most influential efforts to improve retention and completion rates at two-year postsecondary institutions began in 2004 with the Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count Initiative. The Lumina Foundation's objective is "to help people achieve their potential by expanding access to and success in education beyond high school" (Lumina Foundation, 2011). According to the Lumina Foundation, its goal is to increase the number of Americans with quality degrees or certificates by 60% (Lumina Foundation, 2011). The Achieving the Dream website suggests the AD reform initiative is the largest "non-government" movement in the history of higher education (Achieving the Dream, 2012). The Initiatives focuses on student success in community colleges across the United States by: "1)

transforming community college practices, 2) leading policy change, 3) generating knowledge, and 4) engaging the public” (Achieving the Dream, 2012, para. 2).

Overall, the federal government has placed tremendous energy in improving retention and completion efforts. Recently, Vice-President Joe Biden presented a college completion tool-kit that addresses low cost measures and initiatives aimed at improving college completion rates. In an article covering Biden’s announcement, one observer stated, “Seventy percent of students go on to pursue some kind of postsecondary education after high school, but less than half actually get a degree or certificate within 6 years” (Levin, 2011, p. 1). Two-year associate’s colleges can help close the gap between enrollment and completion. The colleges’ role is vital in meeting President Obama’s goal of having the “highest proportion of college graduates” by 2020 considering almost half of all college aged students are enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Levin, 2011, p. 1).

Shaping Postsecondary Institutions and its Students

As the structure of higher education system has evolved over the years, so has the demographic and economic make-up of the students it encompasses. Associate’s colleges represent an extremely diverse student body, especially in terms of minority, adult learner enrollment. GED students represent nearly every description of the non-traditional, adult learner. According to Gohn and Albin (2006), non-traditional students include those who attend college with a GED. Adult learners are students who did not attend college directly after earning a high school diploma or bring skills they have obtained from the workforce or general life skills (“experiential learning”) with them to college (Brown, 2002).

This unique body of student has grown exponentially within the last five years. According to the American Council on Higher Education (2011), 757,000 individuals took the

GED in 2010. It is no surprise that many GED students gravitate towards the two-year associate's college structure to fulfill their educational goals. Patterson, Zhang, Song, and Guison-Dowdy (2010) found that 77.8 percent of GED recipients enrolled in two-year associate's colleges. Moreover, GED students have shared a connection with two-year associate's colleges from the beginning of its existence. The GED was created as a response to the overwhelming number of veterans and individuals who had increased access to college after World War II and needed to complete a high school diploma (American Council on Education, 2011; Thelin, 2004). Together, two-year associate's colleges and the General Education Development Diploma were thought to fill the gap in unemployment across the country and put American citizens back to work. The two-year associate college's open admissions structure provided alternative educational options for the country's GED recipients. Today, community and technical colleges continue to offer an opportunity for many GED recipients to pursue postsecondary education.

Although enrolling in a two-year associate's college is an avenue numerous GED credential holders take, many of these students are unsuccessful in completing their goal of obtaining a degree. According to a study conducted by Patterson, Song, and Zhang (2009), GED graduates are often unsuccessful in the postsecondary setting and for some, earning their degree can take almost twice as long compared to peers who completed a traditional high school diploma. In addition, their findings illustrate that 77 percent of GED graduates who attended a public community or technical college withdrew at the conclusion of the first semester (Patterson, Song & Zhang, 2009). Retention and completion of GED students in associate's colleges becomes even more difficult, given recent enrollment hikes at community colleges and reduction in funding and resources.

Enrollment at two-year associate's colleges has increased by record numbers over the last 50 years. The recent enrollment increase left many two-year associate's college administrators short of faculty and classroom space to accommodate the growth (Bushong, 2009). Some researchers and governmental officials attribute the unusual increase in enrollment to the 2008 recession that left many adults unemployed (Desrochers & Wellman, 2011). Numerous unemployed workers flocked to American two-year colleges to learn new skills and trades in order to find jobs in new careers. Technical institutions were a viable option for many adult learners and unemployed job seekers during the recession given its short-term degree programs and accessibility.

Background: The GED and Adult Education

The General Education Development (GED) diploma is the alternative high school diploma for students who do not complete the traditional high school. The GED's initial creation began after World War II to help veterans and other individuals gain essential general education skills and enhance their opportunities in gaining employment after the War (Tyler, 2005). The GED exam was created as an equivalency diploma and assesses students on general core curriculum in five subject areas: Math, Reading, Science, Social Studies and Language (Tyler, 2005). The Math, Science, Reading, Language and Social Studies portion of the exam consists of multiple-choice questions in addition to a required short essay.

The format of the GED exam has changed since its original creation in 1942. According to Tyler (2005), the initial exam was aimed at providing veterans with a credential equivalent to the high school diploma in order for veterans to take advantage of postsecondary opportunities provided by the GI Bill. However, as the traditional requirements for the high school diploma became more rigorous, so did the requirements for the GED exam.

The American Council on Education (ACE) is responsible for overseeing the GED assessment. However, in the United States, each state is charged with managing, grading, and storing GED examinations (Tyler, 2005). Each state education department is responsible for selecting GED testing sites in addition to allocating state funds for GED programs. GED test sites range from two-year associate's public institutions to private colleges and churches (Tyler, 2005).

In 2014, the format of the GED exam changed yet again. The assessment became computer based, in addition to other content changes made to the GED curriculum. For example, testers saw more short answer questions as well as a more in-depth writing section. Additionally, the examination costs increased. The state of Alabama increased the cost from \$50.00 to \$150.00 for the entire test. Currently, the GED testing fee across the country ranges from \$0 up to \$150. In the past, students enrolled in either of Alabama's Community College System's Adult Education GED program could take the assessment for free, provided enrolled students have met course requirements such as academic preparedness and attendance. Currently, Alabama GED programs offer a waiver for students enrolled in GED programs. However, all assessment costs are not covered by the program.

GED Students in Numbers

There has been a steady increase in the number of GED credentials and test takers over the last decade. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (2009) noted that in 2008, 479,000 people earned a GED. The figure does not include the 269,000 individuals who took the GED exam, but did not pass (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Each year that number continues to grow. In 2009 and 2010, ACE recorded that over 700,000 people took the GED exam (American Council on Education, 2010). Moreover, a large percentage of

test takers pass the exam. For instance, the American Council on Education (2011) noted that 69% of test-takers passed the exam in 2009, and 72% passed in 2010. In even smaller states and regions the number of test takers and GED recipients continue to rise. In 2010, the state of Alabama had a total of 14,622 test takers and 61% of them were awarded GED credentials (American Council on Education, 2011).

An increase in American GED testers and the increasing passage rate influences the number of students eligible for postsecondary enrollment. States are increasing the numbers of GED testers in effort to reduce the large number of individuals without a GED or high school diploma and to meet President's Obama's goal of "having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world" by the year 2020 (The White House, n.d.). Gaining an understanding of GED students' persistence can decrease the gap between GED students and those earning a postsecondary credential.

GED Requirements

GED requirements differ nationally and internationally in terms of prospective GED candidate eligibility. Some states require students be at least 16 years old and no longer enrolled in high school in order to take the GED assessment. Alabama requires individuals under the age 19 to provide additional proof of eligibility to officially enroll in a General Education Development course and/or take the GED Exam (Alabama Community College System, 2009; American Council on Education, 2011). Moreover, some states such as Arkansas, Georgia, and Hawaii require students to enroll in a program that provides instruction and assistance in preparing students for the GED assessment prior to testing (American Council on Education, 2011).

Additional requirements include a minimum test score for each portion of the GED exam. Currently, each state requires GED test takers to earn a minimum score of 410 points on each subject area and an average score of 450 points on the entire battery in order to pass the GED assessment (American Council on Education, 2011). However, one U.S. state and many foreign countries require a minimum score of 450 points on each subject area in order to pass the exam (American Council on Education, 2011).

Adult Education

Many GED recipients are academically unprepared to enter postsecondary education (Patterson, Zhang, Song & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). Therefore, it is important that students seek academic assistance prior to taking the exam. Non-high school graduates can choose to take adult education courses to receive the academic assistance needed prior to taking the GED assessment. State adult education programs enroll many students interested in earning the alternative diploma. Several state departments of education offer adult education courses free of cost to prospective students. However, some states require that students meet program objectives in order to receive educational assistance. The federal government allows each state to administer adult education programs (Duke & Ganzglass, 2007; Zafft, 2008). In states such as Alabama, most GED courses are administered by the community college system and are called adult education. Adult education programs offer courses such as English Second Language (ESL), student remediation, adult literacy, and workforce credentialing opportunities.

Adult education student goals. When enrolling in an adult education (AE) course, students are given various goal attainment choices. Students must select at least one goal in order to participate in an AE program. In some states, AE participants have the option of attaining a GED, enrolling in a postsecondary education course (continuing education), earning

their high school diploma (this option formerly prepared students to take the now defunct High School Graduation exam in the State of Alabama), English Second Language (ESL) preparation, or remediation in general education skills such as reading, writing, and math (Adult Basic Education [ABE]). In a report conducted by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2011), they found that 41% of Adult Education students enrolled in AE courses as ABE, 14% in Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and 46% as English Second Language (ESL). The ASE component of the adult education program consists of students preparing for the GED exam and building English proficiency.

The adult education classroom provides an avenue of instruction and academic preparation for many high school dropouts. The American Council on Education found that in states that require AE courses prior to taking the GED, students had higher passage rates (American Council on Education, 2011). Despite GED students' unpreparedness prior to assessment and time of college, enrollment in AE classes provides GED students with the increased potential of persistence and completion.

The Effect of the Economy on Higher Education

The 2008 recession presented many challenges for individuals, business and industries, governmental entities, and educational institutions across the United States. The year 2008 marked the shift in America's economy and sparked significant change in the lives of many Americans. Policy makers, legislatures, and educators searched for ways to prohibit recession and jump-start consumer and business spending. In turn, the government adopted legislation aimed at assisting corporate America in reducing drastic downsizing, thus decreasing unemployment across the United States. Despite legislative efforts, America suffered an economic recession and is still trying to overcome the quandaries the recession produced.

One of the major effects of the recession was job loss. The unemployment rate across the country soared. For instance, the annual unemployment percentage rate in the United States increased from 5.8% in 2008 to 9.3% in 2009 and remained above 9% for the year 2010 (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2013). The impact of the recession devastated rural areas of the country that relied on timber mills, textile industries, and other type of manufacturing companies for employment. Many of the workers in these rural areas were without a high school diploma or GED. Therefore, before they could retrain for new skills, they had to return to the classroom and prepare for their high school diploma or GED.

As adults transition from GED to the postsecondary setting, they bring with them a wealth of knowledge from the workforce (Brown, 2002). These experiential skills benefit adult learners and can assist GED students through earning their General Education Diploma and obtaining their postsecondary education (Brown, 2002). With previous work skills and postsecondary training, GED graduates have an enormous income potential for their families as well as tax revenues for the communities they reside (Tyler, 2003). For instance, over a 10-year span, women completing a GED credential earn 25% more income annually than women without a high school diploma (Song, 2011). Song (2011, p. 22) suggested, “GED test credential recipients earned higher hourly compensation, worked more hours, had higher family incomes, enjoyed higher job satisfaction, and tended to receive better fringe benefits from their employers.” In addition, Song found that GED graduates earned an additional two percent more per year after earning the GED compared individuals without a high school diploma. Moreover, Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) review of career and economic impacts of education found that earning an associate degree increased annual earning by nearly 20% for men and nearly 30% for women compared to those with only a high school diploma. Additionally, Pascarella and

Terenzini's (2005) review found that over a five-year span, "men with an associate degree had an annual earnings advantage of 27% over men with a high school degree, whereas the corresponding advantage of women with an associate degree was 40%" (p. 455).

Additional findings note that over 39 million Americans are in need of a high school diploma (American Council on Education, 2011). The American Council on Education (2010) found a large percentage of GED graduates and testers who take the exam seeking future postsecondary enrollment (American Council on Education, 2010; Patterson, Song & Zhang, 2009). Studies have shown that many who complete the exam with postsecondary aspirations as a goal do not enter into higher education (Patterson, Song & Zhang, 2009). With additional governmental support and effort on recruiting, retaining, and completing GED students, a significant impact can be made on the American economy and workforce development.

Continuing education for GED students and ensuring their persistence is important in communities across America. According to a brief released by the Congressional Budget Office, life expectancy increased at age 25 for those with any college education compared to those with a high school education (Hebel, 2008; Manchester & Topoleski, 2008). The educational advancement for students in rural areas can bring better access to health facilities in addition to industry growth and better schools.

Intertwined: The GED and America's Colleges

GED courses can fall under the umbrella of adult education at associate's colleges or under the K-12 system. Students interested in adult education can take advantage of courses or services such as English Second Language (ESL), student remediation, and GED preparation. These courses can be offered and managed by a two-year associate college by way of each state's department of education. Nearly, all adult education programs are federally and/or state

funded. However, some programs are privately funded and provided at local community agencies, churches, and/or non-profit organizations.

In the state of Alabama, General Education Development students who enroll in a state operated college AE program is able to interact with students who are attending college to earn a postsecondary degree or credential. These GED students experience college prior to postsecondary enrollment and are given incentives for choosing to attend a two-year associate's institution within the state once they have earned the alternative diploma. For instance, GED students receive a scholarship that covers their tuition for one course at a two-year associate's institution of their choice upon successfully earning their GED.

Many two-year associate's colleges were placed in rural communities in order to provide easy access to education in terms of geographic locations and provide workforce skills to students who were not interested in earning a four-year degree (Thelin, 2004). Over the course of several decades, the name "community college" has evolved from the junior college, trade school, community college and two-year associate's college or institution. The United States opened its first junior college in 1901 and the state of Alabama opened its first two-year associate's college in 1925. Its purpose was simple: increase higher education access for high school graduates who were unable to immediately attend a four year institution or find employment and to offer the first two years of course work for a bachelor's degree (Thelin, 2004). According to Thelin (2004), the success of junior colleges presented unwarranted competition for many universities. As a result, many two-year associate's colleges began to concentrate more on technical career training courses and less on academic transfer courses for its prospective students. The term "vocational school" became one of the signature names for the institutions as the focus on technical training and skills became more prevalent especially

after War World II. Eventually, associate's colleges were redeveloped with new missions and goals for prospective students and constituents. This change in mission and goals transformed the two-year associate's college system into what it is known as today, the community college (Thelin, 2004).

Numerous GED students have taken advantage of the many program options that community colleges and technical colleges have to offer. Two-year associate's college students have a choice between a certificate, diploma, and/or associate's degrees as their academic objective. Prospective students interested in certificate programs can complete coursework within one year of instruction. Short-certificate programs require less time and usually require intensive clinical or live-work training sessions. Diploma and associate's degree programs provide prospective students with additional detailed information and take approximately one to two years for completion. Students are categorized as being either transfer students (students enrolling with the purposes of transferring to a four year college) or degree seeking (earning a certificate, diploma or associate's degree with or without the option of transferring to a four year institution).

Two-year associate's colleges provide the optimum setting for rural GED students in postsecondary education to thrive. However, declining two-year associate's college retention and completion rates can stifle their academic success. For General Education Development graduates, non-persistence and completion is an all too familiar issue. Thus, understanding the GED student's perspective is critical in enhancing educational attainment for alternative diploma students.

Conclusion

The GED exam has long provided an avenue for access to higher education for students who have experienced challenges and did not complete high school. These groups of non-traditional students often seek associate's colleges to pursue their educational objectives. Their interest in a two-year or short-term degree continues to rise while local, state and federal legislatures mandate an increase in retention and completion efforts at the community and technical college level. GED graduates present retention and completion challenges for two-year associate's college practitioners and administrators especially considering their previous academic experiences. This dissertation provides two-year officials with a better understanding of the world of GED graduates enrolled in associate's colleges. Analyzing the experiences of GED graduates enhances the body of retention and completion literature needed to increase persistence in American colleges and universities.

CHAPTER II: GED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

GED participants play an important role in the need to provide a quality education to many Americans who are without a postsecondary education. With added pressure and an increase in international competition, academic practitioners must venture outside the traditional student pipeline to increase enrollment, retention and completion in postsecondary education. Administrators at associate's colleges are aware of the lack of retention and completion affecting the success of their students (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl & Leinbach, 2008; Craig & Ward, 2008; Jenkins, 2007; Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2010). Thus, analyzing the experiences of students within these institutions can increase researchers' knowledge on how students persist and ultimately succeed in their educational endeavors.

This dissertation uses Astin's I-E-O Model to frame and guide the study. This approach assists in answering the questions posed in this dissertation:

1. How do GED recipients experience the academic demands of an associate's college?
2. What role do student involvement and personal characteristics have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?
3. What role does the college environment have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?

This chapter discusses research on the characteristics and qualities of GED recipients when they arrive at college as well as college experiences. Moreover, the chapter provides data concerning the persistence of GED recipients in college. The basis of this literature review provides a foundation for understanding how these characteristics define the college experience of GED recipients. Additionally, this chapter emphasizes the relationship between GED recipients enrolled in a two-year associate's college and the challenges that impinge upon their academic success.

Conceptual Framework

This dissertation examines experiences of GED graduates enrolled in a rural two-year associate institution. Astin's I-E-O Model is used to "understand why things are the way they are" and to provide a clear understanding of the environments that influence a student's development (Astin, 1991, p. 20). The model provides a helpful framework to understand the experiences of GED students as they enroll in college. The model takes into account the various "inputs" or characteristics GED recipients bring with them to higher education. These characteristics can be issues such as previous academic experiences that influence their educational outcomes (Astin, 1991). In addition, the model accounts for institutional experiences and contexts while a student is enrolled in college (Astin, 1991). According to Astin (1991, p. 21), "Knowing what particular environmental experiences each student has had helps us to understand why some students develop differently from others."

In detail, the I-E-O Model represents three distinct areas of a student's development: Input, Environment, and Outcome. First, Astin defines inputs as the "personal qualities" a student brings to college (1991, p. 18). Although students' input information is critical, this sole measure cannot determine or provide a better understanding of students' development (Astin,

1991). Secondly, Astin (1991, p. 18) explains that environments (E) represent “the student’s educational environment and experience: the courses, programs, facilities, faculty, and peer groups to which the student is exposed.” According to Astin, it is critical to assess the educational environment because practitioners influence the student’s development. The final component of Astin’s Model is the outcome (O). Outcome is noted as the capacity in which the institution or program has influenced the student (Astin, 1991).

Although the I-E-O model is typically used in quantitative research, the structure can also be applied to qualitative methodology. Astin explains that qualitative researchers seek to find correlation between experiences and how those experiences affect a person’s outcome. According to Astin (1991, p. 22), “The qualitative investigator who is striving to understand why a certain event (outcome) occurred would be well advised to consider the possible contribution of inputs as well as environment.” Astin further notes that understanding a student’s environment provides an opportunity to improve future outcomes because environmental experiences can be “controlled or changed” (Astin, 1991 p. 22).

Considering that this dissertation focuses on GED recipients’ experiences in college, I structure this chapter through a discussion of the inputs and environment associated with GED recipients and a two-year rural institution. This dissertation provides a better understanding of why GED students’ experiences. I focus on GED recipients’ experiences while enrolled as opposed to the outcomes of their enrollment. Astin’s I-E-O Model is used to structure the literature within this chapter as well as a frame to guide this research study. Astin’s I-E-O Model organizes the literature by addressing the following:

1. Inputs such as GED and adult education student demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, student barriers and previous educational experiences.

2. Environmental factors such as GED recipients' experiences and persistence while enrolled in college.

Inputs (I): GED and Adult Learner Characteristics

GED Gender, Ethnicity & Age

As noted earlier, inputs are personal characteristics such as age, race, and gender as well as previous academic experiences that students bring to college with them. The next section of this chapter discusses research associated with GED recipients' inputs. I begin by addressing data regarding the gender, ethnicity and age of GED students. Understanding GED students' inputs and how they relate to the avenue these students take in pursuing their education can assist researchers and practitioners in understanding GED student persistence. In addition, identifying specific characteristics of GED students can prompt proactive measures, which target groups that are not enrolling and persisting in postsecondary education. According to Astin (1991, p. 64), "It is very difficult, if not impossible, to learn how our educational policies and practices affect student outcome in the absence of input data on the entering student." Moreover, demographic characteristics such as gender and ethnicity shape the way students engage the college environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.53). The following research discusses the gender, ethnicity and age of GED students prior to and after college enrollment.

Gender and Ethnicity

GED recipients demonstrate ethnic diversity and represent an even mixture of males and females. However, research shows that some populations are taking and passing the GED exam at higher rates than other groups (Patterson, Song & Zhang, 2009). Additionally, research reveals that some subpopulations are choosing not to enroll in GED programs aimed at assisting dropouts with continuing education and GED success, although the number of individuals

without a high school diploma within those populations is increasing (American Council on Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education and Office of Vocational Education, 2011). For example, white Americans are the largest population of GED test takers in the U.S., yet this population typically does not enroll in a GED preparation program (Office of Adult and Vocational Education, 2011). However, Hispanics represents the largest number of students enrolled in GED preparation courses, but overall test at a lower rate. Moreover, Hispanics accounted for 44% of all students enrolled in adult education classes during the 2007-2008 school years while white students only represented an enrollment of 26% (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2011).

The number of African American (25.4%) and Hispanic (20.2%) GED test-takers continue to be less than White American testers. However, previous reports conducted by the American Council on Education found that the Hispanic population has gradually increased the number of GED test-takers at a faster rate than African Americans. For instance, according to the 2008 GED Statistical Report, 52% of GED test-takers were white, while 24% were black and 19% were Hispanic (American Council on Education, 2009). The 2009 report found that the number of white test-takers had reduced by two percentage points and black test-takers remained the same while the number of Hispanic test-takers increased by 1% (American Council on Education, 2010).

Although the above data suggest that ethnic and racial proportions of GED test-takers and GED program enrollment are shifting to include more Hispanic and African American students, the white population continue to enroll in postsecondary education at higher rates than Hispanics and African Americans. For instance, one institution found that 91.8% of their GED enrollments

were white. The study also found that a large number of female students (64%) seek higher education after earning their GED credentials (Hamilton, 1998).

Although these findings suggest an increase in the number of Hispanic and African American GED testers and completers, white students continue to outgrow the number of GED test-takers, but at a much lower rate (American Council on Education, 2011). Additionally, current GED data suggests that male students are taking and passing the GED at higher percentages than the female population (American Council on Education, 2010; 2011).

GED TESTERS BY ETHNICITY/RACE

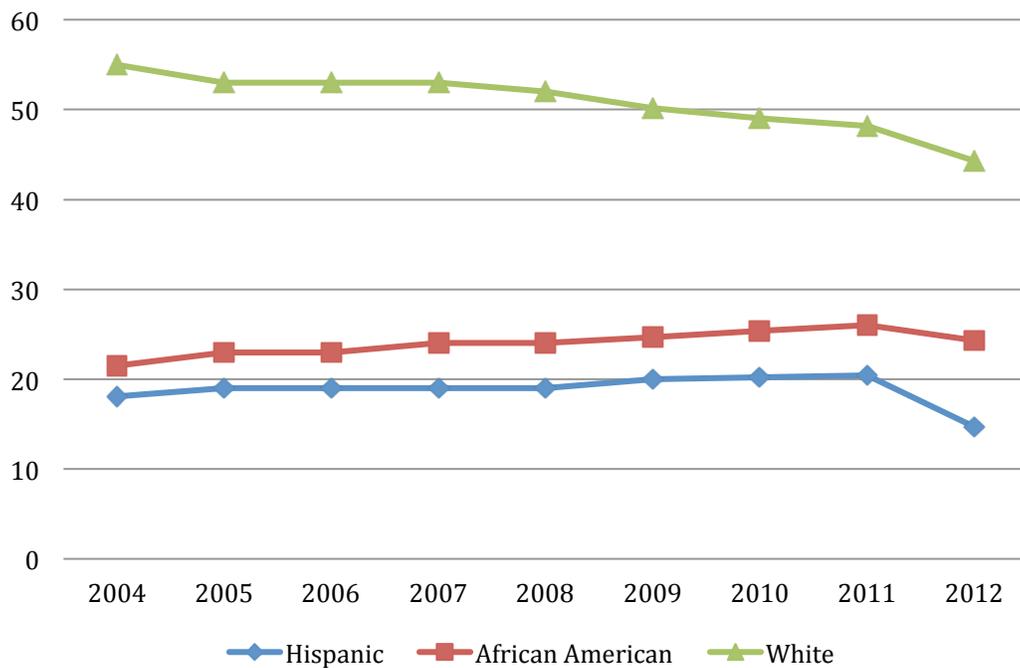


Figure 1. The above figure represents the percentage of GED test-takers by ethnic groups.

Age

Does age influence GED recipients' persistence in college? In Hamilton's (1998) study of traditional-aged GED students (GED recipients less than 25 years old entering college within four years of earning their diploma), traditional-aged GED recipients persisted at much lower

rates than traditional college students. According to Hamilton (1998), the persistence rate for traditional-aged GED recipients was 43% versus the college's persistence rating of 63%.

However, Hamilton (1998) found that completion rate (90%) for traditional-aged GED students were comparable to college's completion rate (93 to 95%). Although Hamilton's study is small and is limited to an individual institution, the study's findings implicate how age at the time of GED and college enrollment can affect students' persistence in college.

Additional findings in Hamilton's (1998) study illustrated that the majority of GED recipients entering college within five years of earning the GED are between the ages of 16 and 21. More recent studies found that GED recipients are slightly older than traditional students at the time they enter college (Guison-Dowdy & Becker Patterson, 2011). According to Patterson, Song, and Zhang (2009), the average age of GED recipients who enrolled in college in 2003 was 20. Additional research conducted by Zhang (2010) suggests that younger GED recipients (16-24) delayed enrollment in postsecondary compared to older GED recipients (25-34).

From its beginning the GED exam has provided numerous educational and workforce development opportunities for many Americans. This alternative diploma has increased access to higher education for students who were unable to complete high school. As GED students enter postsecondary institutions, they bring with them various characteristics, which provide educators and government officials with the knowledge of who, at what age, where, and when they will enter into college. This information helps college officials identify how to target prospective GED students and provides background of educational needs in order to pass the GED exam, which allows GED students to enroll into college. In addition, as the number of GED test takers rise, college officials must look closely at how GED students are prepared and the role these centers of preparation play in continuing education of many GED students.

The Adult Education Classroom

The next section discusses literature surrounding prior classroom experiences for GED students. Many GED students choose to enroll in adult education (AE) courses to assist in preparing for the GED examination. Although there is little research that addresses students' experiences while enrolled in adult education courses, understanding the AE classroom experience, how the AE classroom functions, and the role of AE practitioners is vital in identifying GED recipient persistence in postsecondary education. Therefore, researchers must analyze GED students' educational background prior to postsecondary enrollment in an effort to understand GED student persistence and experiences. Astin's I-E-O Model can assist in framing this study because the model discusses how various inputs such as students' individual backgrounds, previous academic experiences, and demographic characteristics shape a students' educational outcome (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The average AE classroom is made up of a diverse body of students. Adult education students enroll at various grade levels and are taught general education skills that prepare them for the GED exam. However, AE practitioners' instruction is continuously challenged considering the complexity of the multi-level classroom (Haley, 2008). Students enter the adult education classroom at various ages, entry points, and level of academic ability (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2011). For instance, adult education classrooms are open entry meaning students can enroll in some programs on a daily or weekly basis (Haley, 2008). Adult education practitioners provide academic assistance to all students regardless of the students' academic or non-academic circumstances. One AE practitioner stated, "Designing a successful multi-level classroom takes some time" (Haley, 2008, p. 2). According to Haley (2008), in an open classroom setting, students are always in need of assistance.

Considering the diversity of the AE classroom, researchers and practitioners have grown accustomed to revamping their instruction methods and approach in order to teach students from various academic, social, and cultural backgrounds. In order for adult education students and practitioners to perform successfully in a culturally diverse classroom setting, “Adult educators should find ways to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their learners and to discover learners’ webs of significance” (Guy, 2003, p. 16). Moreover, Guy (2008) notes that AE practitioners must become culturally self-aware in order to successfully assist GED students within the classroom.

Age Relations in the AE Classroom

Nationwide, individuals between the ages of 25 and 44 enroll in AE classes more so than any other age bracket (U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2011). However, a report conducted by the American Council on Education suggests that GED testers and passers are typically younger than those who enroll in adult education programs. According to ACE (2011), “The average age of passers in 2010 across all jurisdictions was 25.4 years, the highest passer age during the operation of the current series. Test Passers were slightly younger, on average, than candidates” (p. 3).

Ethnicity in the AE Classroom

The Hispanic population represents the largest ethnicity enrolled in adult education classes across America. Overall, Hispanics represents 44% of all students enrolled in adult education classes (U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2011). Moreover, the Office of Vocational Education (2011) notes that African Americans represent 20% of students enrolled in AE classes and whites represent 26%. Some researchers have acknowledged the diverse make-up of adult education (Baumgartner & Johnson Bailey,

2008; Guy, 1999). For instance, Guy (1999) notes that in order for educators to be successful in adult education, practitioners must change how they teach to incorporate the various cultures for successful classroom learning. Guy's findings suggest that college instructors can also be successful in teaching GED students by culturally diversifying instruction. Overall, the make-up of the adult education classroom is consistently changing with the demographic make-up of the nation and the demographic changes throughout postsecondary education (Oultz, 1995; Swail, 2002; Vargas & Conlon, 2011).

Adult Education Classroom Retention

Aside from being highly diverse, adult educators struggle with student retention within the classroom (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). For instance, one study found that less than 20% of GED students (enrolled in adult education class) graduated within one year (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). Although retention in the adult education classroom may be low, students who enroll in an AE program are more successful on the GED exam than those who do not enroll. The American Council on Occupation Education (2011) suggests that GED districts which require students to enroll in an adult education program or take the GED official practice test had students who passed the exam at higher rates than those who did not enroll in an adult education program. In addition, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2011) found that students who enrolled in an AE program showed increasing completion rates between the years of 2005 and 2008.

GED Students and Enrollment in Postsecondary Education

Like most adult learners and non-traditional students, GED recipients are unique among the traditional students enrolled in higher education (Gohn & Albin, 2006; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). Their characteristics, educational objectives, and previous academic experiences differ from traditionally enrolled students (Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011). Most GED

recipients share similar characteristics and many have no experience in postsecondary education (Patterson, Zhang & Song, 2009). Researchers believe one way to close the gap between GED recipients and postsecondary education is to provide more resources and effort towards recruiting GED students (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2008; Duke & Ganzglass, 2007). Moreover, understanding the history of this unique group educates postsecondary practitioners on how to enhance their educational experiences.

The majority of GED recipients choose to enroll in a college or university offering programs of two years or less (Patterson, Zhang & Song, 2009; Patterson, Zhang, Song & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). Enrollment in associate's colleges is a growing trend of GED recipients and most are enrolled part-time (American Council on Education, 2011; Patterson, Zhang, Song & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). In a study conducted by Patterson, Zhang, Song and Guison-Dowdy (2010), 60% of GED recipients choose to take the GED for educational purposes.

Many students with an earned GED attend community or technical college to gain work-related skills and professional development (Brown, 2000; Patterson, Zhang & Song, 2009; Patterson, Zhang, Song & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). In fact, in 2004-2005, 70% of GED test takers took the GED exam in order to attend college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Additionally, the American Council on Education (2011) notes that the number of students taking the GED exam to further their education has increased steadily from 58.9% in 2006 to 63.9% in 2010.

The American Council on Education lists some distinct characteristics of GED recipients in postsecondary education, as found by authors Patterson, Zhang and Song (2009):

- More women with a GED enrolled in postsecondary institutions than men

- 89 percent of the participants in the study choose to enroll a two year institution
- Students who earned their GED while working part-time were more likely to enroll in college
- 77 percent of the study’s participants enrolled in college for only one semester

Contrary to the previous study, a similar report conducted by Patterson, Zhang, Song and Guison-Dowdy (2010, p. ix) found that over 60% of the study’s participants “maintained enrollment for two or more semesters.” However, the authors also found that over 30% of GED recipients dropped out after their first semester.

GED recipients consistently continue to enroll in associate’s colleges despite the rising number of GED recipients who drop out after enrolling in postsecondary education. For instance, the American Council on Education Annual GED Statistical Report (2011) found that the number of students indicating continuing education as a reason for testing has risen from 58.9% in 2006 to 63.9% in 2010. Moreover, Patterson, Song, and Zhang (2009) noted as much as 78% of students in their study of 307 GED candidates attended institutions of two year or less.

As legislators adopt policies and strategies aimed at moving the status of education forward, it is essential to recognize the role GED recipients play in increasing retention and educational attainment. Additionally, understanding how GED students in postsecondary education relate to traditionally aged students is also vital. Distinguishing key characteristics provides practitioners with specific resources and services needed to assist GED recipients, which differ from traditional graduates.

Environment (E): GED Students in College

Next, this literature review discusses the GED student environment. As noted by Astin (1991), the environment consists of experiences students have in college. This section covers

GED student preparation relative to their college academic performance, the barriers they face while in college, GED recipient persistence in college, and the function of community colleges for GED students.

GED Student Preparedness in college

Proper preparation is a major step in improving student persistence and retention in college. Research shows that preparation is an issue for GED students as well as traditional high school graduates because many GED recipients require remedial or developmental courses upon enrolling in postsecondary education (Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011; Reder, 1999; Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006). According to a study conducted by Guison-Dowdy and Patterson (2011), “about the same overall percentages of GED test credential recipients (21.8%) and traditional high school graduates (21.4%) took developmental courses the first year they enrolled in PSE” (p. 12). Additionally, researchers found that the probability of students completing college decreases once a student enrolls in a developmental or remedial course (as cited in Barbatis, 2010). Some researchers suggest developmental courses negatively impact student retention and completion because taking development or remedial courses increases the length of time to completion (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Calcagno & Long, 2008). Additionally, these courses increase student costs and are usually not covered by federal programs such as Title IV Pell Grant.

An earlier study conducted by Hamilton (1998) found that many GED students (81%) enroll in developmental courses upon entering college. His findings conclude that GED recipients who enrolled in developmental courses have a lower chance of persisting or completing college. According to Hamilton (1998), students who enroll in multiple developmental courses are at a high risk of not persisting. Hamilton (1998, p. 2) states, “This at

risk [label] accounts for almost 1 out of 4 of the GED-students in the study.” In addition, Hamilton found the risk of non-completion rises depending on the number of developmental courses students enroll in.

As mentioned earlier, the extant literature indicates that some GED recipients are unprepared upon enrollment into postsecondary education (Garvey & Grobe, 2011; Zafft, 2008). Research shows successfully passing the General Education Development exam does not necessarily prepare GED recipients for college level coursework (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). For instance, a study conducted by the American Council on Education (2011) found that some GED recipients stated they needed additional preparation for postsecondary education regarding core general education courses. According to Quigley, Patterson, and Zhang (2011, p.11), as an example, “International students need a solid knowledge of Western literature and U. S history for the GED test.”

Student preparedness is important for all students regardless of their educational backgrounds. Some researchers found that traditional students who graduate from high school also face challenges when it comes to being properly prepared for postsecondary education (Adelman, 1998; Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011; Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006). According to Guison-Dowdy and Patterson (2011), traditional high school graduates took remedial courses at the overall same rate as GED recipients. Conversely, a study conducted by Tokpah and Padak (2003, p. 9) found that GED graduates were “twice as likely” than traditional students to take remedial courses and that traditional students scored higher on the college entrance writing entrance exam than GED graduates. Overall, Tokpah and Padak (2003) found that there was no difference between traditional students and GED graduates’ reading scores.

Properly preparing students for successful postsecondary experiences begins prior to students graduating from high school or completing coursework in preparation for taking the GED examination. Although some researchers suggest that GED recipients are as prepared for college level work as traditional high school students, other researchers found that GED student persistence and completion differ from traditional high school graduates (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010).

In the end, research reveals that GED graduates can be as successful in postsecondary education as traditional high school graduates given proper preparation and thoughtful engagement in remedial/development courses. In order to improve GED student preparedness, researchers must begin working with GED and adult education practitioners before prospective GED candidates earn their alternative high school diploma. Prior preparation increases GED students' probability to persist and eventually earn a postsecondary degree.

Student Barriers

As mentioned, environment represents the experiences students encounter while in college. This section discusses the non-academic and academic barriers students experience while enrolled in higher education. Some barriers are academic, while other challenges are external to the educational learning environment. Among the literature, student transition to the college academic environment and student preparation were the most common barriers faced by GED recipients. Other personal barriers such as finances, family support, and student obligations were also identified as GED students' challenges.

Non-Academic barriers. Barriers for GED recipients include navigating college campuses and communication among students, faculty, advisors, and administration (Kist, 2003; Zafft, 2008; Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006). A study conducted by William Kist (2003)

discusses non-academic challenges of GED recipients and how these challenges affected their learning context. Kist (2003) lists the following: university bureaucracy/logistics, learning to work with others, and economic and family pressures. According to Kist (2003), GED students had trouble understanding how to navigate the college or university settings. In addition, students had issues with a lack of communication (between students and academic advisors) and in understanding what courses to take. Kist (2003) explains:

Some of our participants reported not understanding why they had to take certain coursework for certain majors and why they did not have to take certain coursework they wanted to take. One student reported wanting to go into interior architecture and feeling that her advisor did not adequately explain why she had to take certain courses. This breakdown in communication that occurs may constitute an academic risk factor that is not even related to the students' academic aptitude. (p. 11)

Scanlon's (2009) findings agree with the importance of communication within the classroom environment. Her findings suggest students must have "effective communication" among the teachers, students and other teachers (p. 33). "Students expected a learning environment in which teachers established an integrative approach to learning that was inclusive of all students – an environment in which teachers listened to students," she concluded (Scanlon, 2009, p. 33).

Ritt's (2008) findings also concur with Kist (2003) regarding university bureaucracy or institutional barriers faced by many GED graduates. According to Ritt (2008, p. 14), "institutional barriers impose restrictions that are outside of a student's or adult educator's role of influence. These barriers include limited or no access, high costs, and diminished affordability." Other non-academic barriers noted by Ritt were personal challenges such as the student's physical/geographic location, family, employment, childcare and previous academic experiences.

Ritt suggests that personal barriers such as “location, personal and family commitments, work and family related activity schedules, past experience in college, lack of adequate and consistent childcare services, financial limitations” and fear of returning to school are among some of the non-academic factors affecting adult learners across the nation (p. 14).

According to Ritt (2008), professional and institutional barriers took precedent over many of the previous barriers listed. Professional barriers consisted of reimbursement from employers for courses or programs completed, while institutional barriers such as access to student services and cost obstruct students’ academic goals. Kim (2002) noted that because adult learners are forced to balance school, work, family and finances, successful completion of their chosen goal is more difficult to obtain. Kim (2002) found many of these non-academic barriers left adult learners feeling ostracized from the academic community within the college. According to Kim, adult learners or non-traditional students would benefit from improved resources “such as improved parking, registration, financial aid, social networking and support, counseling, child care, and information services, [and] adult students would benefit from specialized customer services and appreciate being treated like adults and feeling as if they belong to the college” (as cited in Kim, 2002, p. 76; Raisman, 2002). Barbatis (2010) found that when students are more academically integrated, they are more likely to persist in college.

This section discussed non-academic barriers GED students encounter in college. The review found that many non-academic barriers, such as communication, campus climate and campus logistics/navigation can hinder a GED graduate’s persistence. Academic officials and practitioners can help GED graduates understand the academic environment and promoting student engagement.

Academic barriers. Academic preparedness and the need for support services are among the major academic challenges adult learners face. Some educators may argue that GED recipients perform just as well academically in college as compared to traditional college students. Tokpah and Padak (2003) conducted a quantitative study on college readiness of traditional freshman and GED students enrolled in a university. Their study assessed the results of the university entrance exam (COMPASS test, developed by the American College Testing Service) to identify student readiness. According to Tokpah and Padak (2003), the purpose of the college's entrance exam is to identify the preparedness of entering students in regards to college-level basic education courses such as reading, math, and language. Tokpah and Padak (2003) found that freshman students who enrolled in college with a General Education Diploma (GED) performed just as well as traditional freshman. However, their findings also concluded that the average GED student needed remedial math when entering college.

Considering GED graduates tend to enroll in institutions offering “programs of two years or less” (Patterson, Song & Zhang, 2009, p. 9), their chances of enrolling in a developmental course increases. For instance, O’Gara, Mechur and Hughes (2009, p. 196) noted that one barrier of academic success for community college students are their “low levels of academic preparation.” O’Gara, Mechur and Hughes (2009, p.196) continue, “Entering freshman at community colleges are more likely to need at least one remedial course than are their peers at four-year associate colleges, and they are more likely to need to spend a longer period of time taking such courses.” In addition, Zafft wrote the following in regards to academic preparedness:

Research on the obstacles to college for adult education students is generally small descriptive studies. Educators are primarily concerned about inadequate academic

preparation, particularly limited exposure in algebra and experience with longer, more complex reading and writing assignments. (2008, p. 8)

Another academic challenge adult learners face is the need for academic support services such as tutoring. Because of their non-traditional characteristics, administrators, faculty and staff try to improve support services for adult learners. According to Ritt (2008), the average adult learner attends college part-time, thus making it difficult for the adult learner to gain access to the services available to traditional students, typically because they are not on campus when the services are being offered.

GED graduates enter into postsecondary education with a number of challenges and barriers. Because their previous academic history is linked to stopping out before completing high school, persisting through college becomes an immediate concern for postsecondary practitioners. According to Reder (1999), many of the challenges GED students faced when dropping out of high school often continue into adulthood. Research shows many of the challenges and barriers facing GED students in postsecondary education are similar to traditional high school graduates. However, because of GED recipients' characteristics, many of the challenges are far more in-depth and are non-academic rather than academic.

Student Experiences in College

The study conducted by Askham (2008) discusses this pursuit in the context of education. His study reflects on the perception of adult learners who are experiencing higher education for the first time. Askham's (2008) findings conclude that there are emotional factors attached to how adult learners experience learning. In addition, Askham (2008) states educational practitioners' "familiarity with the culture, norms, and language of higher education means that

we take so much for granted, leaving students to interpret the same environment in terms of their own biographies and experiences” (p. 95).

A study conducted by Irene E. Karpiak analyzing three autobiographies of adult learners revealed similar findings as Askham. Karpiak discusses the autobiographies of adult learners using three distinct methods of story telling: ethnographic, reflective and uncanny. She explains that the ethnographic approach “reveals cultural factors and psychological dispositions” (Karpiak, 2003, p. 112). In the reflective and uncanny stages, the writer or learner can discuss influential factors or people in their lives and reveal the “greatest mystery” or tell the “untold” in their writings or experiences (Karpiak, 2003, p. 113). Her findings reflect a detailed description of the lives of adult learners that promoted transformative learning for the study’s participants. Additionally, Karpiak (2003) noted that the autobiography provided students with a “fuller appreciation of themselves and their world through the various ways of telling their story” (p. 114).

Adult learner relationships and interactions inside and outside their learning environment affect the adult learner perspective of higher education. Scanlon’s study (2009) seeks to gain understanding of adult perceptions or experiences as learners relative to a particular “curriculum structure.” According to her findings, students’ experiences and the influences affecting their perspective as learners were based on previous learning experiences and teacher relationships, the students’ reasons for returning to school, their understanding of “competency-based education” and the support or distractions of the beguiled world of the adult learner (Scanlon, 2009). Scanlon noted that “the students provided detailed accounts of the kinds of interactions in the formal college learning environment and outside the college which supported or distracted them from learning” (2009, p. 41). Alisa Belzer (2004) had similar findings in her study, which

focused on how prior learning experiences affect current learning contexts. Belzer's study inferred that previous learning experiences can alter an adult students' perspective of academia and could potentially hinder their willingness to learn. According to Belzer (2004), some past experiences can "create a kind of dissonance that causes adult learners to feel discomfort and tension, leaving them with a sense of ambivalence about the learning context" (p. 47). The study suggests having previous educational experiences can completely alter a new or current educational experience for adult learners. Belzer (2004) found that critical experiences could either cause students to stop coming to class completely or to create new outlooks relative to learning environments.

According to Scanlon (2009), students within the study were able to identify their learning needs and what factors negatively or positively affected their learning. Her findings suggest students are able to gain "self-knowledge" about their learning context and therefore adjust or alter the structure in which they learn. "Within the college, students revealed a complex understanding of their own learning needs and the ways in which teachers and other students could support or distract them. They were attuned to the kinds of plausibility structures required for them to effectively learn and hence sustain self-concept transformation," Scanlon concluded (2009, p. 41)

Autonomy is a major factor affecting learning for adults. Scanlon (2009) found that although autonomy is an essential component affecting adult learner success, teachers control the amount or effectiveness that autonomy has on adult students' ability to learn. Scanlon (2009) states the following, "This research reveals that student autonomy can be severely restricted by teachers who are not always receptive to students. Ultimately, it is teachers who determine the learning environment in the classroom" (p. 41).

Student Persistence in College

The next two areas of this literature review cover student persistence and research relative to two-year associate colleges. As this study seeks to provide a better understanding of GED students' experience persisting in a two-year rural institution, I feel it necessary to discuss literature relative to GED student persistence and two-year associate colleges. Various studies regarding adult learners and underprepared students illustrate the persistence of these students who face many academic and non-academic challenges. For example, a qualitative study conducted by Peter Barbatis analyzed underprepared and ethnically diverse community colleges students, and found that despite the odds or challenges faced by students of that nature, many of these individuals complete college (Barbatis, 2010). Barbatis (2010) states that students have unique features, which enable them to persevere, thus completing their educational goal. According to Barbatis (2010), "students who possess certain precollege characteristics such as middle to high socioeconomic status, positive secondary school achievement, and strong family support were more likely to persist and graduate" (p. 15; Tinto, 1997).

Hensley and Kinser's (2001) study of adult learners' persistence found the barriers that cause adult learners to withdraw or not complete school is the same in which causes them to persist in their completion. In particular, "participants attributed their reasons for enrolling to past academic experiences and personal difficulties; they perceived that they had transformed former obstacles into strengths," they concluded (2001, p. 98). An article written by Golden (2003) also examines persistence relative to self-efficacy. The research was part of a study conducted at Kent State University, which analyzes how GED graduates matriculate into postsecondary institutions (Golden, 2003). Golden's (2003) findings relate to self-knowledge and its effect on earning the GED:

Through individual interviews and focus groups with GED graduates matriculating at KSU, we learned that high self-efficacy also determines their success in completing college. Within or under the umbrella of self-efficacy, a strong sense of self, helping others, and receiving academic accolades, i.e. scholarships and high GPAs, were also essentials for academic success and reaching their goals of obtaining a four-year degree. (p. 15)

A study conducted by Margaret Patterson further discussed the persistence or retention of GED students in college. The study analyzed the retention of GED recipients from the 2003 cohort of GED passers who attended a two-year associate institution or less. Patterson's findings revealed that 26.6% of Alabama's GED passers attended an institution of up to two-years and 11.2% of enrollees ultimately graduated from college. In fact, Patterson (2010) noted the following regarding GED students' retention and completion: "1 in 4 graduates also stopped out—14.9% for a semester and 9.4% for multiple semesters—before resuming and completing postsecondary programs in institutions of up to two years. In fact, these graduates stopped out at proportionately higher rates (24.3%) than non-graduates (13.7%)" (p. 15).

Creating an Opportunity for Higher Education

Community colleges are noted for having diverse populations and consistency in enrolling adult learners (Kim, 2002). According to O'Gara, Mechur, and Hughes (2009), community colleges are the visionaries in assisting adult learners obtain credentials due to their demographic and economic structure. For instance, they note the following:

The mission of community colleges is to provide access to a postsecondary credential for students who may not otherwise be able to attend college.

Because of their convenient location, open access, and low cost, community

colleges tend to enroll students [,] who are more academically, economically, and socially disadvantaged than do other postsecondary institutions. (p. 195)

With similar characteristics of non-traditional students, adult learners fit the mold of students enrolled in community colleges as explained by O’Gara, Mechur and Hughes. Like adult learners, community college students face many barriers that are external to the learning context. For instance, O’Gara, Mechur and Hughes (2009) state some barriers of community college students relative to degree completion are the need to work, family obligations, and low levels of academic preparation. Likewise, Kist (2003) study revealed that two major factors affecting adult learner GED success are economic and family pressures. Kist (2003) notes, “Some participants reported having to sacrifice schoolwork to take care of family obligations. ‘For the most part,’ one student said, ‘I have worked full-time, gone to school full-time, and helped raise a family. Sometimes family took more precedence than schoolwork.’” (p. 12). Other authors, such as Tokpah and Padak (2003) found that although there is a lack of academic preparation for adult learners (specifically those with GED credentials), adult students are as academically prepared in English as traditional college students, but less prepared in math.

Various community college offices seek to facilitate continuous student success and degree completion. However, community college completion rates remain low despite their efforts in creating services aimed at improving student success. A study conducted by O’Gara, Mechur, and Hughes (2009) addresses how community colleges can increase student persistence toward degree credentials. In addition, they discuss barriers that affect community college students (adult learners/non-traditional) and how those obstructions can be reduced to improve student success. The authors noted one way to improve completion is to offer an array of student support services that target a range of student needs. They go on to state that some of those

needs are guidance counseling focused on academics or careers, academic supports such as tutoring, or personal assistance such as childcare (O’Gara, Mechur, & Hughes, 2009; Purnell & Blank, 2004).

Conclusion

This chapter addresses literature on inputs, environment, persistence and community colleges relative to GED recipients in postsecondary education. The research has revealed that GED graduates’ persistence and completion in college, though unique in terms of previous academic experiences and student characteristics, do not differ entirely from traditional college students. In fact, the research suggests that the institutional type tend to be the major factor influencing students, persistence and completion. However, the literature fails to address the qualitative nature of GED graduates’ experience within a two-year associate institution and none are descriptive studies that address GED graduates’ persistence in a rural two-year associate institution.

Although the challenges and barriers faced by GED graduates can hinder their progression in college, the literature reveals that campus climate; such as the institutional academic environment, faculty/staff support, and communication between students and college employees also play a major role in student persistence in college. This dissertation analyzes how GED recipients experience college.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As a former adult education/GED instructor, I had an opportunity to work closely with GED students over the course of three years. A part of my job required personal interviews of all prospective GED students prior to their entrance into the GED class. Most students I encountered disclosed information about their personal and academic experiences. At times, they shared heartfelt, inspirational and encouraging stories. Other experiences caused me to question the role of academia as a whole and the significant influence that parents, family and friends play in a student's ability to persist and succeed in education. After each interview, I remained curious about how their previous academic experiences and current life situations would influence their success in the GED program. Moreover, as students began to successfully exit the program and enter into other postsecondary programs, I felt confidence for those who were able to complete their GED despite any disclosed academic and non-academic barriers that existed. Their success intrigued me and I wondered how those who struggled significantly through the program could benefit from the success of former GED students who continued to persist through postsecondary programs.

During a time at which there is urgency for two-year associate colleges to address federal educational completion agendas, exploring the persistence of GED graduates in postsecondary education is critical. College officials along with GED practitioners are in the midst of strategizing ways of meeting legislative and accreditation completion objectives (Garvey &

Grobe, 2011; Reder, 1999). Providing suitable research, which addresses these issues, can assist government and academic institutions in establishing federal completion goals and providing a better understanding of why students persist and succeed.

In this chapter, I outline the research design and methodology used in this dissertation. Merriam states, “Engaging in systematic inquiry about your practice—doing research—involves choosing a study design that corresponds with your question; you should also consider whether the design is a comfortable match with your worldview, personality, and skills” (2009, p.1). Yin adds that each research method is different, and has disadvantages and advantages. However, he states it is important to “appreciate” their differences (Yin, 2009, p.6). Therefore, the research design and method chosen in this dissertation utilize qualitative inquiry that reflects important dimensions of my research questions.

The literature review revealed few studies that address GED students’ experiences in postsecondary education, particularly at associate’s colleges. Most studies are small-scale, descriptive, quantitative studies analyzing GED students’ characteristics. Further, larger, quantitative studies evaluate GED students’ characteristics and do not provide a detail understanding of the lived experiences of these students.

As noted earlier, this chapter discusses the research methods and design utilized within this dissertation. In addition, this chapter provides descriptive detail regarding the research site and the population and research instrument used. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in a public two-year associate institution. I addressed how GED students from a rural institution experience college and how their characteristics, academic experiences, and environment interplay to impact their academic success. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do GED recipients experience the academic demands of an associate's college?
2. What role do student involvement and personal characteristics have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?
3. What role does the college environment have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?

The Research/Study Design

Merriam notes that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (2009, p. 5). This study addresses the research questions employing a qualitative inquiry, which provides a rich description of the participants’ perspectives. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006, p.2), qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to capture the experiences of participants in their “natural settings,” thus providing a more realistic, in-depth view of the phenomenon.

In deciding the type of qualitative research to employ, several traditions were relevant to the proposed research design. Phenomenology, ethnography and basic qualitative research all seek to capture the experiences of participants, culture, and/or group (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, Merriam, 2009). Before choosing a design perspective, I investigated each type of design by analyzing when each study type should be conducted. For instance, Creswell (2008, p. 473) states ethnography should be conducted “when you have a culture-sharing group to study—one that has been together for some time and has developed shared values, beliefs, and language.” Additionally, ethnographic studies require participant immersion, which allows the researcher to become up close and personal with the culture in which they are observing (Emerson, Fretz &

Shaw, 1995, ps. 2-3). Although GED students share many characteristics, academic and non-academic experiences, and cultural nuances, my role as the researcher is to seek an understanding of GED students' individual experiences in postsecondary education. For the purposes of this study, a basic qualitative design addresses the central questions surrounding the research and allows the researcher to frame the study based on the following criteria noted by Merriam (2009):

Qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences. (p. 23)

Background

I was first hired in higher education as an adult education/GED instructor in 2003. The job's primary responsibilities were to prepare students who had not completed high school for the GED, the high school graduation exam, employment and/or postsecondary education. I held this position for three years before changing positions and instructing students who primarily had earned their high school diploma. After six years of working in various other positions, I remained curious about the success of current GED students and the successes of my former students who had entered into college.

My experience in working with students from challenged backgrounds, rural areas, and small institutions have framed the questions I have posed in this dissertation. Specifically, I am driven by the experiences I have shared with my previous GED students who enrolled in postsecondary education and despite all odds persisted and were successful in their educational endeavors. Although I am connected to the research within this study through personal

experiences, this study reflects the perspective of the individual participants within the research by providing a detailed description of GED students' experiences through interviews.

Site Selection and Rationale

Choosing the appropriate site to conduct this dissertation is a critical decision in the data collection process. Access, support, and the participants' willingness to participate are major factors to consider when selecting a research location, particularly when a research subject is sensitive or could negatively impact the research site. Knowing who the GED students are and where they are academically in their chosen programs takes considerable cooperation among the institution's GED program practitioners and admissions officers in addition to the individual students' trust.

The research focuses on an institution located in the Southeastern portion of the United States. Considering the need for access and networking among the adult education community, faculty, and students, the study was conducted at a small, rural, public two-year associate institution within the state of Alabama. Choosing this area of focus was based on my knowledge of adult education and GED practices within the area. Additionally, most of the state's two-year associate colleges are defined as rural institutions. Hardy and Katsinas (2007) conducted a study that describes rural community colleges in higher education. They note that small rural colleges consist of associate's colleges with an unduplicated enrollment headcount of less than 2500 students. In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture uses specific classifications for defining rural America as noted in the following paragraph (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012).

For the purposes of this dissertation, I utilize both the classification of two-year associate colleges noted by Hardy and Katsinas as well as the USDA's ERS typology code which

classifies rural based on “economic and policy types” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010). According to the USDA (2010), “the policy types include housing stress, low education, low employment, persistent poverty, population loss, non [-] metro recreation, and retirement destination” (para. 2).

Upon reviewing the various rural, two-year associate colleges, I found that my current institution, along with other associate’s colleges within this community college system align with the definitions described above. However, selecting my institution as the research site provides me with institutional access and AE program-networking opportunities needed for pertinent qualitative research. Additionally, I was interested in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled at the technical college in which I worked, and the site location provided easy access for data collection. The research site is located directly off a major interstate within this state, which provides greater access and reduces commuting time for the study’s prospective participants. The college is centrally located among four rural counties within the institution’s service areas.

Participant Selection

Over the past year, this technical college’s enrollment consisted of approximately 700 students. GED student enrollment varies each semester and is dependent upon GED students who have enrolled in adult education courses and graduate throughout the year. GED student enrollment also incorporates students who did not attend GED/adult education courses, but decided to take the exam without preparation. Up until the current year, the college enrolled students without a high school diploma or GED. These students were admitted in some technical programs, but were expected to enroll in the college’s adult education program in order to earn their GED prior to graduation. These students enter as ability-to-benefit (ATB) students. In 2012, ATB enrollment was approximately 100 students. This research study consists of

participants that are currently enrolled in the GED program and a technical program at the college.

The participants in this study came from various educational and personal backgrounds. A total of 25 students were selected to participate in the study. The participants' ages and gender was varied throughout programs and communities surrounding the college's service area. The interviewees' ages ranged from as young as 20 to age 52. Also, the vast majority of the interviewees were female. Several male students who fit the selection criteria choose not to participate in the study. Overall, 85% of the participants were female and 15% were male. This makeup of female and male participants was comparable to the overall gender structure for the entire college. As of fall 2013, the student body at the institution consisted of 38% male and 62% female students. Also, the participant body comprised of an even mixture of black and white races. Sixty-six percent of the participants self-identified as white, while the remaining identified as black. This number also represents the overall makeup of the college. For the fall 2013 semester, 48.4% of the students enrolled were white and 48% were black.

Each prospective participant was given an equal opportunity to participate in the research study. After the study was announced in classrooms around campus, many students either called or met with me on campus to discuss the research project. Once I provided an overview of the study, many students suggested other classmates that fit the selection criteria to participate. Interviews took place from the second week in April of 2014 until the end of August 2014.

The college's adult education practitioners were also contacted to identify currently enrolled GED students. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 89), "Qualitative interviewers gain access to experienced, knowledgeable interviewees along social networks." They also note, "It is common to start with a personal acquaintance who is a member of the group being studied"

(p. 89). Additionally, announcements were made to all programs through faculty, in addition to placing flyers of the research study in each of the campus' buildings. Current students at the institution are not provided college email addresses. Therefore, electronic announcements were sent to faculty and staff asking to encourage student participation.

This study utilized snowballing sampling technique to select and identify potential participants. As the researcher, I used snowballing sampling in two ways. First, after gaining consent from the college's administrators, I individually met with adult education Instructors to discuss former GED graduates enrolled in college. Second, as students concluded their interviews, participants were asked to provide names of GED graduates that were enrolled in college. According to Merriam (2009, p. 78), a typical sampling method is chosen when the sample "reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest." Merriam also notes, snowballing sampling is common and is used when participants refer other potential research participants (2009, p. 79).

Researcher Position

As a current employee and former adult education instructor in a Community College System, I understand my experiences could reflect a conflict of interest during the research's data collection process. However, it is my responsibility as the researcher and a professional educator to collect and record data purely as disclosed by the research's participants. Merriam notes (2009, p. 15), "Since understanding is the goal of this research, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem to be the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data." In addition, Merriam states, "Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or 'subjectives,' it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data" (p. 15).

I currently work as the college's Assistant Dean of Institutional Effectiveness/COC. Admittedly, my current role at the institution gives me very little interaction with GED students. I have held the Assistant Dean's position for 1 ½ years, have worked as the Director of Recruitment, Retention and Placement for four years and as an instructor in the Office of Administration Department.

In this dissertation, I take an interpretive/constructivist perspective. An interpretive/constructivist position is the belief that there is no single reality but that "multiple realities" exist (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 27) conclude that a constructivist believes that people view things differently and analyze things through different lenses. They also note, that in the end, because of these different views people come to "different conclusions" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 27). Therefore, this study reflects findings from each participant's point of view.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, student interviews were the primary source of data collection. This study used a semi-structured interview protocol. The semi-structured protocol addressed GED recipient experiences as students in the GED program attending postsecondary education and as GED completers enrolled in a post-secondary program (see Appendix A for interview protocol). According to Merriam (2009, p. 90), "This format allows participants to view things in their own way."

The interviews were conducted in my office located on the main campus. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and coded. I personally transcribed each interview as well as kept a reflective journal to record my thoughts (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Each participant was given the opportunity to review all notes and transcriptions of the interview. Interview recordings and

transcription were placed in a secure locked file cabinet located in my office. The key to the file cabinet was placed in a locked safe located at my residence. Interviewees' identification was maintained by coding each participant name and personal information. The data were stored in the file cabinet with the audio tape recordings.

Second, document analysis through my reflective journal was a secondary data collection method. I analyzed the institution's mission and vision in relation to that of the college and state's adult education program's mission and vision. Additionally, documentation included a personal reflective journal to be completed during participant interviews. Also, I conducted a demographic analysis of each participant prior to their individual interview. Table 1 identifies the study's data collection methods, participants, and the frequency of the method employed.

Table 1

Data Collection Methodology

Research Method	Participants	# of Assessments	Frequency
Interviews	GED Graduates	25	Three per week beginning in April 2014
Participant Demographic Analysis	GED Graduates	25	At the end of the Interview Period
Document Analysis	Institutional Mission Vision and Mission Statement		Complete review at once
Reflective Journal	Interviewer	25	Complete during each interview

As a researcher, it is important to note the disadvantages of various qualitative data collection methods. According to Creswell, students at non-research institutions and universities are not accustomed to academic research or participating in academic research studies, which can cause them to feel less comfortable in a research environment. Moreover, the research site can

affect how participants react and respond, especially during the interview process (Creswell, 2008). To address this possibility, I offered to conduct interviews after hours and during institutional downtime to limit on-campus traffic. However, many participants choose to have their interviews in between class hours or during their lunch break.

Data Analysis

Merriam states that data analysis is conducted to answer the study's research questions (2009). In addition, data analysis and data collection should take place simultaneously during the research process (Merriam, 2009). This dissertation utilized the constant comparative method which allows the researcher to compare one area of data with another one to identify "similarities and differences" within the data (Creswell, 2008, p. 443). Once recorded and transcribed, the data were coded for easy access and to assist in analyzing and identifying the research findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 173). Additionally, codes were placed in categories to further manage the data collected.

The study's primary source of data was the participant interviews. Interviews began immediately upon the University of Alabama IRB and research site's administrative approval. As aforementioned, interviews took place beginning in April of 2014. Additionally, analysis was performed concurrently with the collection of interview data. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006, p. 155), "In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis typically go hand in hand to build a coherent interpretation."

The secondary source of data includes demographic and document analysis. Participants' individual characteristics and reflective journal documentation during the interview period were analyzed. The demographic data align with the "input" analysis as noted in Astin's I-E-O

Model. The reflective journal was used to capture the researcher's thoughts and response to body language and specific comments and discussion during the interview period.

Validity and Trustworthiness

One of the primary objectives of a researcher is to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the data collected. Validity and trustworthiness can be obtained in qualitative research by performing multiple tasks such as member checks and triangulation (Creswell, 2008, p. 266). To ensure trustworthiness, I conducted member checks by allowing participants to review notes taken during the interview process as well as the interview transcripts. Additionally, once data were coded and analyzed, interviewees were asked to provide feedback on the accuracy of the data. An extensive audit trail of interviews and journal notes taken during the interview and evaluation of documentation analyzed was conducted during the data collection process. Finally, the study's use of triangulation through various methods of data collection enhances accuracy of the research (Creswell, 2008, p.266).

Conclusion

Fulfilling economic and educational needs across American is an essential initiative of education practitioners and administrators throughout the next three to six years (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2011). Legislatures and government officials have recognized the importance of workforce development at two-year schools and have charged colleges with increasing the number of college graduates in order to remain globally competitive (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2011). Identifying and understanding the roles and experiences of adult education students is essential for two year institutions to remain progressive especially during times of economic uncertainty.

This dissertation addressed the importance of adult education students in the country's educational and economic health in respect to GED students' persistence in postsecondary education. In this chapter, I provided detailed information regarding the research's methodology. The research design employed in this dissertation was utilized to gather data to assist in gaining further understanding of GED students' experiences and to address the research questions posed in this study. Additionally, the site and participant selection, my position as a researcher, data collection methods, data analysis and validity and trustworthiness information was described in this chapter. Through qualitative methodology, this research provides data to understand the educational experiences of GED graduates in college.

CHAPTER IV:

RESULTS

Two-year associate colleges have long been a beacon of hope and a means of educating those who could not afford to attend a university (Thelin, 2004). These institutions have also served as an opportunity for students who are not academically prepared to enter into a four-year associate institution to attend college. Two-year associate colleges were accessible due to their location, affordability and minimum requirements for entry (Craig & Ward, 2008). Students from all academic levels have been educated at two-year associate colleges and much effort has been made through the federal government and non-profit organizations to enhance the educational opportunities for students who choose to attend these types of institutions.

Like many other students, GED students choose to attend two-year or technical colleges for education, training or enhancing their workforce skills. Existing research has identified that many GED graduates choose to attend colleges such as the above and that GED students' reasons for earning the General Education Diploma is to continue their education (American Council on Education, 2011). However, little attention has been placed on how GED graduates experience college in rural areas based on their characteristics, demographics, previous academic experiences and college environment. Analyzing qualitative data and capturing the lived experiences of this body of students can provide insight to educational practitioners on what matters most when it comes to enrolling, retaining and completing GED students at two-year associate colleges. This research explores how GED recipients experience college specifically at

a technical rural institution. The research takes an in-depth look at how GED graduates cope with the academic demands of a rural technical college and how student involvement along with non-academic challenges impact GED graduates' experience in college. This chapter discusses the findings from using qualitative methodology during the data collection process. Three questions were used to frame the research and data collection of this study:

1. How do GED recipients experience the academic demands of an associate's college?
2. What role do student involvement and personal characteristics have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?
3. What role does the college environment have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?

The results of this dissertation are broken into four distinct sections. First, the results are presented as they relate to Astin's I-E-O Model, which is the conceptual framework that guides the research of this study. Secondly, the results are discussed in terms of answering the research questions presented. The following section provides an overview of the study's results as they relate to the purpose of the study, which aims to analyze the experiences of GED students in college. The final section provides the chapter's conclusion. First, this chapter discusses the breakdown of themes found in the analysis of the data. This information is addressed using the figure below and this study's conceptual framework, Astin's I-E-O Model. Several major themes and underlining themes were identified during the data collection, coding, and analyzing process.

Table 2

Major Themes and Underlying Themes

GED Students Experience in College		
Major Themes and Underlying Themes		
Preparedness	Involvement • Family • Time	Location • Small Setting • Distractions

The above themes emerged through student interviews collected during the data collection period. Through the participants’ experiences, relative themes emerged and guided the structure for summarizing the data’s results. The next section discusses Inputs (I): Who are we, and Experiences (E): Our environment. A visual representation of the results is noted below.

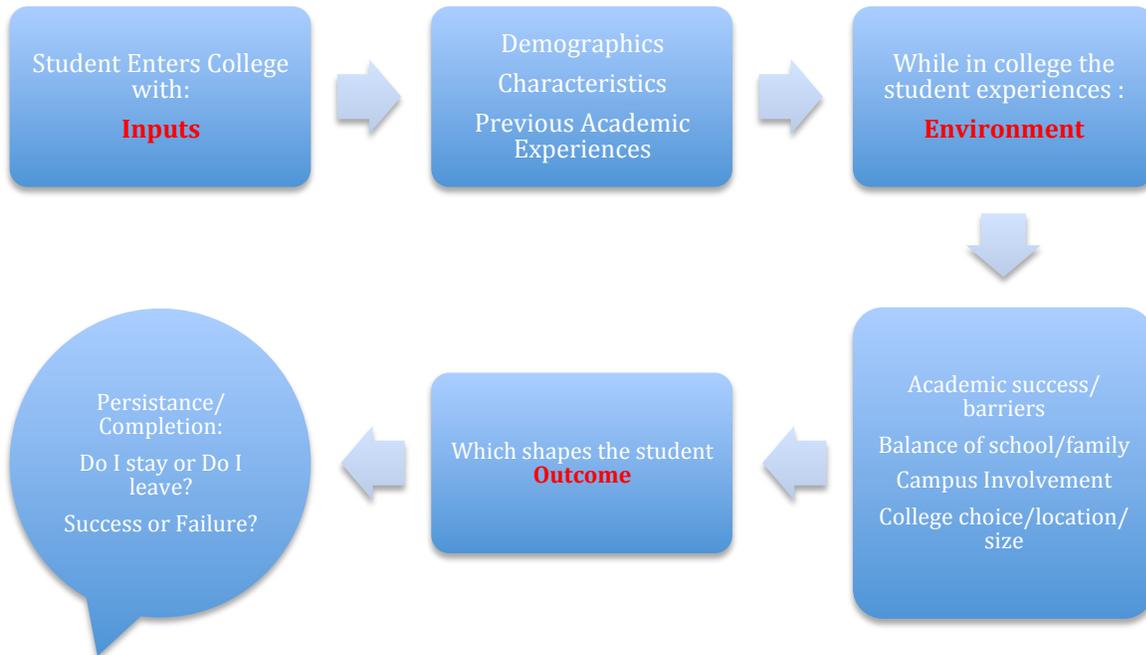


Figure 2. Visual Representation of Results Using Astin’s I-E-O Model

The following segment provides a detailed outlook on the participants selected for this research study. As noted in the next section, a diverse body of students was selected to participate. Participants' personal characteristics, where they come from and their previous college enrollment and program information are discussed in the section below.

Inputs (I): Who are we?

In this section, I discuss student inputs of the participant body. Participant home origin, previous college attendance, and marital and family status are addressed. Identifying student inputs are essential in order to help researchers understand what GED recipients bring to college and how those characteristics can influence students' overall college experience.

Interviewees came from various communities within and surrounding the college's main campus. Some participants traveled approximately 35-40 miles to attend college. During the interview process, I recorded that travel was a problem for some of the research's participants. A few interviewees noted that when they were enrolled in GED preparation courses it was difficult for them to attend classes. Moreover, they stated that this problem has continued since their enrollment in college. For instance, one participant stated that she tries to keep her transportation issues from hindering her coursework. Another student noted that as a student she has many academic challenges but "trying to get to school" is also an issue. A third participant noted that because of the rural location, she has a hard time getting to class and if transportation were offered it would help with her attendance.

Rankin, Katsinas, and Hardy (2011) noted that transportation along with childcare continues to be a persistent problem for college students in rural areas. More specifically, the article noted that transportation was a major hindrance to retention and success (Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2011). Traveling the distance was common for many of the GED students.

Over 95% of the participants interviewed lived in neighboring cities. However, I was pleasantly surprised to see that although many students traveled 35-40 miles daily to attend class, their determination to complete their programs of study seemed to outweigh the burden of traveling the distance.

For many participants, attending this institution was their first college experience. However, nearly a fourth of the participants attended another college before attending this institution. For some with previous postsecondary experience, their programs of study changed drastically from one career field to another. For instance, one participant noted that she had previously enrolled in pet grooming school, and accounting at a different college. However, at this institution she was enrolled in the welding program. The participant explains:

I'm actually a certified pet groomer. I went to Florida Academy of Pet Groomers for a year. So I've been through another college too. I went from pet grooming to welding. Yes, ma'am, I just wanted something different I guess you can say. It just wasn't the right path for me. Which I still do the pet grooming you know now, but I just want something more. You know you are never completely finished with you education, continue learning every day.

When asked about previous college enrollment, some participants noted they were unsuccessful in their previous programs because they were too young or not serious about the program. One cosmetology participant noted she was enrolled in Criminal Justice at another college several years ago, but she felt her age kept her from being successful. She noted that she enrolled in cosmetology because this career would provide her with flexible working hours, which would allow her to spend more time with family.

My reason [for re-enrolling] I guess to get a job. You know to be able to get a good paying job. With the cosmetology program I can kind of set my own hours and things, [which] would [be] better with my kids. And if I was just to go out and get a job somewhere and have to work whatever hours are set.

Another participant was enrolled in a Psychology program at an online school. The student stated she withdrew because she had small children. This was an interesting factor considering online courses or programs are designed to provide flexibility in course offerings. Although the student did not provide additional detail as to why she withdrew previously, she mentions the importance of one-on-one faculty interaction during her interview. I concluded that the student could have withdrawn previously due to the lack of one-on-one interaction with faculty in her on-line course. Moreover, since the participant benefits from personal interaction with faculty, the lack of this interaction had a negative effect on previous college enrollment for this participant. Table 3 shows the variation in previously enrolled programs by the research's participants.

Students with previous college experience changed institutions and programs for various academic and non-academic reasons. Some participants' enrollment pattern consisted of starting, stopping and returning to college during various stages of life. An interesting similarity was that for returning GED students, completing college this time was critical to their livelihood and their family. Another interesting finding was that during their re-enrollment period, some returning students choose to enroll in programs that were short and would immediately prepare them for work.

Many participants' college experiences were affected by whether or not they attended a GED preparation program and by the age in which they earned their GED. Over 60% of the participants attended a GED preparation course prior to earning their GED, while others earned their GED diploma with little or no preparation. Only 40% of the interviewees discussed their age at the time of earning their GED. Approximately, 50% stated they earned their GED

immediately following their departure from high school. Other participants noted they earned their GEDs much later in life after leaving secondary education.

Table 3

Participants' Previous and Current Enrolled Programs

Previous Program	Current Program
Pet Grooming/Accounting	Welding
Criminal Justice	Cosmetology
Business Technology	Phlebotomy
Nursing Assistant	Nursing
Child Development	Child Development
Program Unknown	Nursing
Collision Repair	Welding
Medical Assisting	Nursing
General Education	Nursing
Phlebotomy	Barbering
Psychology	Nursing
General Education	Nursing
EMT/Paramedic	Cosmetology

During the data collection and analysis process, I noticed that recent and previous GED graduates shared different experiences based on their age, whether they attended a GED preparation program or previously enrolled in college. For instance, one student who had earned her GED and enrolled in college at a young age felt her previous college experience was

unsuccessful because she did not learn some of the soft skills taught during the latter years of high school. More specifically, she noted that she did not understand the importance of prioritizing. When asked about her current challenges she stated the following:

I would say probably like prioritizing. To be able to get all my assignments done. I think that with me see I finished the 10th grade, but I didn't go on to the 11th because I missed so many days of school. And that's why had withdrawn and got my GED because they were going to hold me back, but I had all A's in my classes anyways, but I was skipping because I was bored. Because I didn't have to be there to make my classes so I just skipped and still got an A, but missed to many days so they were going to hold me back. And I think that with that being said I don't really remember being in high school you know and I think that because they teach you that a lot when you're in the 11th and 12th grade, prioritizing and they get you ready for college and I think I missed that.

Another student also felt her age affected her previous college experience. When asked to explain that experience she noted the following, "A lot of it was I didn't comprehend a lot of what was going on. I just, I don't know if it was my age or what, I don't know."

A third participant stated she completed her GED right out of high school in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The participant also noted she started college at that time but did not complete the general education program. As a current nursing student, the participant stated she was not prepared for college when she first enrolled years ago and felt the GED did not prepare her for college now. Specifically, the participant referred to the GED classes and exam as elementary. The student stated, "Cause like I said, [what] we had [was] like elementary. It really was like first grade." Therefore, even at a young age and right out of high school, the student felt she was not prepared for college.

The next student expressed that the timeframe between earning her GED and enrolling in school has caused undue stress as a current student in college. The participant explains:

It depends on rather we are going back in time. Because I finished high school when I was supposed to. It would be less stressful and I think it would be easier for me to learn

because everything would be fresh on me. Whereas waiting too many years and you put everything on the back burner. Older people are the ones you see most time with a GED because they are like I got to go back. I got to get a job and everything. It's just too much, because you got to get a job to pay those bills because the light bill ain't gone pay itself. And then you got school and you're trying to juggle and full load of school to get finished quicker to get that income in to support them kids. So I think it would be easier if you went directly out of high school with a high school diploma. I think it would.

Age continued to plague other participants' college experience. For one nursing student, her previous and current college experience was influenced by her age at the time of earning her GED. The student notes:

Well, I was 16 years old when I started the GED classes. And I can honestly say I didn't take it very seriously. The teacher I had was very lenient. Very lenient. Anything flew with him. We didn't have homework. Our GED classes were spent on the computer. Doing what we wanted to do. And of course it's been almost ten years since then. I've matured and now that I'm in actual college classes it's completely different, you know the real world and I love it.

Age played a major role in how many of the participants experience college as a current and previously enrolled student in college. Throughout the study, participants continued to discuss age differences in the classroom. These differences are discussed in more detail later within the chapter.

Marital and family status was other inputs discussed by participants during the study. It is essential to note these characteristics in this section, considering their influence on GED graduates' experiences in college. To understand their influence, participants often mention their significant others, children, grandchildren, or family when answering questions, although family and marital status was not asked during the interview. There were very few participants who stated they were married. The majority were single mothers or fathers, who spoke of their children and the importance of completing college for the welfare of their family. Family also emerged as an underlying theme and I provide further discussion of this topic later in the chapter.

Although the participants enrolled or re-enrolled in college at different stages in life, under different circumstances, and from varying ages, races, and gender, the GED students were alike considering they all had not completed high school, had earned a GED and were currently enrolled in college. Moreover, the participants' differences in experiences produced major and underlying themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis process that connected the participants in more ways than they would know. The next section discusses these themes as they relate to their experiences while enrolled in college.

Environment (E): “Our Experiences”

According to Merriam (2009), the overall purpose of a basic qualitative study is to “understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 23). In this section, I discuss the study's results based on how GED students experience college. This section is broken into three major areas: Preparedness, Student Involvement, and Location. Additionally, subsets or underlying themes of student involvement and location are discussed.

Preparedness

Academic preparation is known as an essential function to ensuring academic success. Students who enter into college unprepared can hinder their progression and completion in college. For many GED students, enrolling in college academically unprepared is a grim reality. Based on this reality, colleges have implemented remedial or developmental courses to assist students academically in college. However, some studies reveal that these courses have not helped students who enter college unprepared (Reder, 1999). Based on this research, it appears that some GED students in technical and traditional programs of study would benefit from college preparation courses.

For many of the participants in this study, academic preparation influenced their college experience and was a challenge to their overall success. Participants discussed how GED preparation programs and colleges could assist in providing additional academic resources to help ease transition from GED to college retention and completion. This section discusses the relationship between age and academic preparation and how understanding basic subjects (reading, math, and language) affect participants' experience in college.

Time: Friend or Foe?

Starting school after years of withdrawing can be quite challenging for students who left school at an early age. A student may wonder if he or she will be accepted by peers or have the knowledge necessary to complete their studies. For many of the interviewees, trying to keep up academically with their peers has been challenging. Some participants feared they would be unable to keep up, while others felt that if their current program required more rigorous coursework, they would struggle to complete their courses.

Many participants were challenged by the age differences in the classroom. Some older GED graduates felt younger students understood classroom information that was being taught better because they recently graduated high school versus older students who were not taught (or could not remember) many of the basic academic skills needed to understand the coursework. Moreover, many of the older participants felt they were less prepared because of the timespan between exiting high school and entering college. For instance, one participant stated, "I would probably feel more confident about being in [the] classroom, because with my age I'm 40 years old. Because with my age I'm up against babies 17 and 18 so. That's the only difference."

A second participant also felt that the classroom age difference influences how she experiences the academic demands of college.

If the students are fresh, young 18 you know that age, the younger students they're fine. But the older students you know after they have been a few years is not in high school or something it's a little harder. Because you have to get back in the way of going to school. And you now it's kind of like you have to be a kid all over again. And that's the only thing. I think there should be some way or something to help with that.

Another participant noted that because she had withdrew from school at an early age, she did not learn the skills needed to clearly understand her coursework

It was probably because I got my GED when I was 16. So it's not knowing as much as the other students. Like some of the things that they're teaching me in college I didn't finish in high school. It's really hard for me to understand some things as I would if I would have finished high school. I would have already known what to do. Like being in college.

Another student also noted that because of her current age and the period between earning her GED and enrolling in college, readjusting to school was difficult. The participant noted the following about her current challenges in college.

Just to get here on time. Now that I have a family and it's been quite a many years since I've been out of school. So just the overall just getting back into the routine of it. I think just because of my age. As far as having to dig down deep and remember what I have going isn't as bad as just now that I'm having a family and older. I think coming back into it is my biggest.

Another participant also shared similar thoughts pertaining to age and college preparation. He noted, "Well, just the fact of coming back to school again. Getting back in the groove of doing it. Because I dropped out of school when I was 16."

Age was one characteristic noted among many participants that separated them from many of their peers in college. For them, the age difference made older participants feel less prepared than their younger counterparts. However, despite their differences in age, older students continue to persevere and look forward to completing college. But, being prepared for college coursework does not only affect the mature participants' experience. Students of all ages

expressed their discontent with how well they understood basic subjects (reading, writing and math) they should have mastered in high school.

Preparation and Knowledge

Research in Chapter 2 discussed GED student preparation for college and their performance on college entrance exams. College entrance exams assess students' knowledge in basic subjects such as math, reading and writing. According to extant research, students who do not perform well on college entrance exams enroll in developmental courses (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; Crisp & Delgado, 2014). Research revealed that students who enter into developmental courses have a high chance of not completing or progressing in college. Therefore, it is important to understand how core subject areas can affect students and their college experience. This next section discusses GED graduates' experiences in relation to their preparedness for college. In this section, I provide detailed descriptive data collected that revealed participants' feelings towards GED preparation programs and the GED diploma in preparing them for general education courses and other college coursework.

In terms of preparation, participants expressed their thoughts on how their lack of knowledge in core subjects affects their college experience as GED students. Moreover, many interviewees conveyed that the GED did not give them the academic background needed for college coursework. Some participants stated the GED was too simple and it lacked the basic fundamentals needed for college. For instance, one student shared her experience relative to her preparedness for college.

Probably not because I only made it through the 10th grade. I didn't make it through 11th and 12th and I didn't have any kind of preparation for the GED and I took the GED and took it. So that tells you right there that you don't have to. It's doesn't even give you what you get through the 11th and 12th grade. You definitely need that for these college classes. Even if you have that it's still hard. So I would say that the GED doesn't

prepare you for the college classes because I was able to pass the GED with flying colors and only made it through the 10th and I didn't go through 11th or 12th.

The student continues to note that GED unprepared her for college due to its simplicity. "I think it's too easy. Especially, if it's somebody that's getting their GED and planning to go to college, it's too easy for them," the student concluded.

Another participant noted that her first college experience was unsuccessful because she was not properly prepared for college coursework. She stated she could not "comprehend" what was going on particularly in math. Because she did not understand her coursework, the participant stated she failed and had to retake the course. Another participant also stated she too had difficulty understanding some material. The participant noted, "It is really hard for me to understand some things as I would if I would have finished high school; I would have already known what to do."

More participants expressed their thoughts regarding their preparedness for college and how they felt the GED itself along with the courses aimed to prepare them for the diploma lacked the academic depth needed to be successful in their classes. For example, one student noted she was only enrolled in a GED course for one month before earning her diploma. She continued, "I just don't think that I learned anything from it to do for college." Another participant stated her college preparation came from her high school teachers although she dropped out of high school and earned her GED. Moreover, the participant noted that although she felt her high school teachers did well in preparing her for college, if she were enrolled in a more rigorous college program, she feels she would not be adequately prepared for college coursework.

Some students felt their lack of academic preparedness was due to little instruction from their GED instructor. For instance, when asked about preparation for college, one student noted the instructor did not prepare them for college classes. She expressed her thoughts below:

If I can be honest, the instructor just didn't prepare us for it. I think he just was there to get a paycheck. We never went over a book. We never did anything. We just sat there and gave him his hours to get paid. I mean he didn't never taught us never did anything for us. We were nowhere near prepared. It took me three times to pass the GED test.

Another student felt her GED preparation program did little to prepare her for the academic and non-academic demands of college, such as taking notes, studying, preparing for lecture mode of instruction and dealing with the day-to-day stressors of college. The participant noted:

I think that they could better prepare them for college. Like how to cope and deal with stress. Like most of the time people who go get their GED are older people they are not younger people. They have kids, they have to work, you juggling school with all of that. I think that they need a better equip them to handle all the different things that entails.

A third participant felt the GED was too simple to prepare him for college. Although his current coursework consisted of little academic rigor, he felt he was not academically prepared for college. The welding participant noted "it [the GED] was easier than the tests I was taking in high school. So I guess if it was easier, how can this prepare you for college level."

In summary, many participants expressed discontent with their preparation for college. Often, participants commented on the simplicity of the GED exam, which caused them to believe they would not be adequately prepared for college level coursework. Only a few participants felt the preparation received from their GED coursework or the exam itself equipped them with the knowledge needed for postsecondary education. Participants who stated they were sufficiently prepared often mentioned a GED teacher that prepared them or felt they had strong academic skills prior to earning their GED. A childcare student commented on how her GED instructor prepared her for college level math, which was a weakness in GED classes and as a student in

college. The student noted, “I didn’t struggle as much [with math] when I got here [college] as I did when I was in my GED class because he [the instructor] helped me a lot.” Moreover, to assist with the lack of college preparation exhibited by the GED preparation programs and the GED exam itself, one participant suggested that GED preparation programs could add a college preparedness course to the GED course curriculum.

Overall, this notion of unpreparedness made many participants feel uncomfortable and less confident in the classroom. One student noted, “I knew I was good enough to go to a community college, but I just didn’t feel prepared as far as academic[s]. I wasn’t prepared.” The next section discusses data collected regarding GED student experiences through student academic and non-academic involvement. This theme encompasses two sub-themes: the role of family and GED students’ use of time, which further explains the participants’ experiences in college through student involvement.

Involvement

What enhances college student’s overall educational experience? According to some researchers, there is a positive relationship between students being involved socially, athletically and academically on their college campus (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 426). In this study, many participants expressed that student involvement was an important part of their college experience, but they often did not have the time to be involved in activities that were unrelated to academia. Participants noted that involvement in academic services was extremely important and they often made time to be involved in any academic services that extended beyond class time.

Students’ non-involvement was contributed to several factors noted by the participants. For instance, some expressed personal obligations outside of school, such as family, work, and

limited time in general, which influenced their non-involvement. Although these factors often prohibited students from participating in non-academic services, they did not pose as a problem for their involvement in academic activities. Moreover, I found that some participants were not involved in non-academic services because they were apprehensive when meeting new people. For instance, two students stated because of their shyness they were afraid to get involved in social activities and organizations.

The presence of non-academic activities on campus provided a sense of belonging to many of the participants. Although none of the interviewees were involved or had been involved in non-academic activities on campus, they felt a need for these types of organizations and programs that were unrelated to academia. Interestingly, I found that when participants discussed non-academic involvement on campus many became reserved and shy and often spoke of that during the interview. This reaction brought me to conclude that some of the participants choose not to participant because of that very reason. For instance, one student stated the following when asked about her involvement in non-academic activities on campus:

Well me I'm a shy person. I would never try to take a [?] like that unless I just had to. But it could help you out if you want to get into the world like doing other business projects or whatever like trying to be able to standup and be somewhat a leader instead of a follower. But like I said I don't have the guts to do it myself. But it will help your overall experience of trying to become better to walk and talk a different way. To experience different things that you might you know might see on and off in your daily like you know. But like I said, I have the butterflies on a lot of things. When I was going to school on the advanced diploma I would never volunteer for things like that then. I've always been a shy and kind of closed in kind of person.

A second student also had reservations about participating in non-academic services. The participant acknowledges that she lacked the enthusiasm to be involved in non-academic services and programs because she was shy. The student notes:

I've never been involved in any extra-curricular activities or organizations to be honest. But that's just my personality. That's because I'm just a to myself kind of person. But I

do think they are important. I wish I had been more involved in organizations and stuff, but I'm just kind of a shy person. You know I go and just get done what I got to get done.

Another factor of non-participation relates to the participants' chosen program of study.

A majority of the interviewees were enrolled in programs that were two to three semesters in length. In addition, due to the short time to completion, participants attended classes more often and typically all day to complete required contact hours needed for many technical programs, which often prevented them from participating in non-academic activities. For instance, one student noted that her only challenge in college has been that the cosmetology program uses a clock-hour structure to progress students through the program. She states, "Cosmetology is an hour program and having boys if something happen to them or one of them has to go to a doctor. I miss time and time is hard to make up when you in a program and it's not extra days. That would be my only challenge."

Overall, time to program completion often prohibited students from being involved in extracurricular activities. Moreover, participants' expressed non-academic activities were less important than those that were academic. Participants continued to note that academic services such as tutoring and faculty interaction were most important because these services were essential for them to persist in college. However, other barriers such as balancing family time with school also prevented participants from being involved in non-academic activities. I begin the next section discussing how family affects participant involvement in college and hence their attitudes relative to their college experience.

Family

Many of the participants interviewed spoke of their family life. Whether they were married or single, with or without children, participants expressed how important family were to

their educational success and continued enrollment in college. For participants who had children, several stated they were enrolled to provide a better life for their kids. Others expressed the need to be self-sufficient and dependent upon no one other than themselves. Because many of the interviewees had strong family ties or cared for family members, this left very little time outside of class for them to become involved on campus.

One participant noted that her non-involvement in non-academic activities does not affect her success in college although she feels it is important to be involved in non-academic activities. Moreover she states “the only reason I’m not [involved] in it would be because I have children and I work and I go to school and I just don’t have the time to do it. But if it wasn’t for those things I would like to experience it.” Another participant enrolled in the college’s nursing program stated the following regarding non-academic involvement on campus:

I don’t think that is a good way for college students to be able to, if they get involved in something like that that is not, it’s kind of like a stress relief. But also being involved with what’s going on in the campus. But personally, I don’t have time for it. I’ve got family at home and a full load at school so, I don’t have time. I would like to, but I don’t have the time.

Another student provided a similar response regarding her involvement in non-academic activities on campus, “I mean, I’m not that interested in the extra things. I’m just trying to focus on the academic stuff and get through and everything because I have more going on. Like, if I was younger and I didn’t have a family I would probably be a little more interested in that.”

Overall, participants felt non-academic involvement was important although family obligations prevented them from being involved. Also, this statement was true for the few participants who felt non-academic involvement was not an important factor in their college experience, but important for students who were interested in non-academic activities. For instance, a nursing student expressed her thoughts of non-academic involvement on campus:

You know what I'm not interested in it. But a lot of people are and I think it's great if they want to do it that's great. I'm not interested in it you know. But I can see why people get excited about it you know. I don't know. I think that's a stumper too.

But for this student, non-academic involvement was not important for her in high school either.

Moreover, the participant continued to note that although it was not of any importance to her, she felt a need to support others who are actively involved in non-academic activities on campus.

The student shared her thoughts:

Even back when I was in high school and middle school when we did stuff like that. It never appeals to me. I never been a sporty person or wanted to run for class president or anything. It just wasn't me. But you know so other people got really into it. You know I'd vote for my friends and cheer them on. That was then, but me personally I just never got into it.

For some participants with parental obligations, being involved is a positive approach in keeping students out of trouble on campus. Although they are unable to participate, some felt non-academic activities are essential for their peers' success in college. One welding participant felt non-academic involvement "kept students from going off and doing if it would be anything bad or anything else. I mean they're participating in something that's constructive the entire time." Another participant had similar thoughts regarding participation in non-academic activities for younger students.

Being involved in stuff like that is good for some college students if you're younger because it keeps them on track. It keeps their minds busy. It keeps them busy and out of trouble. And it makes the time you have to keep the grades they stay on the team. So to me that is a great plan.

Some GED participants were active in non-academic activities in high school. However, as college students, they chose not to participate. In fact, for some participants their involvement in high school was critical for their self-confidence. For instance, a practical nursing student stated she thinks sports and student organizations are important. She noted, "I was a big sports

person. Unfortunately for me, I didn't finish high school. I could have went to numerous colleges on a softball scholarship." The student expressed that softball was more than a sport to her. It provided her with self-confidence and relief from a home environment that was complicated. The participant stated the following when asked about the importance of non-academic activities in college:

Yes, I believe, they are. Especially sports. For some people that's a stress reliever. It's helpful, for like me I grew up in a very abusive household and I was on my own at 13. And I played softball, softball was my perfect world. It was just my relief from everything and I think well, college you under enough stress. I think that that's a good way to get that aggression out and just relax a little bit.

Although family time prohibited participants from being involved in campus non-academic activities, family did not prohibit participants from being involved in academic services. A majority of the participants felt it was essential to be academically involved on campus. For instance, many stated they would not be successful as a student if they were not involved in academic services such as tutoring and faculty assistance outside of class. When asked about the importance of academic involvement on campus, one participant responded:

Very, very, very, very. Like I wouldn't have made it through some classes if I didn't have tutoring. It's very important. Like very important. Like I just pointed that out on the board to somebody. I said you see that day that's coming up right there. She said, "I'm not sure I'm ready for this." And I say, "You need to be there that day because that's the day they are preparing you for this day." Yeah those days are very important.

Another student expressed the same feelings toward academic involvement on campus.

That's really important, because the main thing that I'm worried about is passing my classes. So, if I'm having a problem, knowing that there is someone there that can help me learn the information, I think that that is very important having teachers and faculty that's willing to help and show that they're willing to help even before you have a problem. Like the first day of class they all tell you, you know if you have a problem come to me. You know if you start failing test before mid-term you need to come to me before mid-term because after mid-term it's hard so it may, here at [the institution] anyways they definitely show you that tutoring available there's people here to help you. Even the third level students last semester when I was in first semester came and talked to

us and you know helped us, gave us some pointers. Those things like that, they are very important.

Considering technical education is very much hands on, participants feel academic involvement is imperative. One cosmetology student noted that “it’s hard to learn without one-on-one [instruction]” and assistance outside of class. Another student stated academic involvement forces her to put more effort in her education. She stated the following academic involvement and services on campus:

I think it greatly affects it. It gives you a push. Getting that one on one time with your instructor. To have them tell you what’s going on. What you need to, you know if you’re not doing so good in this or you’re doing really good in this. Put more effort in to this. That’s what I think. I think that that’s good.

For another student, academic involvement has been essential to her retention in college. The participant noted she is academically weak and without the availability of academic services, particularly, one-on-one assistance from instructors she could not complete college. The participant explained:

Me personally, I would not be successful, because I’m a slow learner and I don’t understand everything. So, I would be done flunked out. I would be done quit by now. So I’m glad they have it. I’m glad that we have teachers that will work with you like that at [the institution].

Whether family prohibited GED students from being involved or not being involved in academic or non-academic activities, many participants felt having the time to participate often prevented them from actively being involved on campus. Participants often made statements such as “I just I work and I have a busy schedule” and “I would like to do them, but I kind of feel like I’m already stressed to the max with what I have to do and I really don’t have any extra time to do anything else anyways.” Having little time outside class, family and work often made it difficult for participants to participate in extracurricular activities such as student organizations. All participants agreed that academic and non-academic services and activities are needed in

their college environment. In general, students felt that not participating in non-academic activities would not affect their success as a student. Conversely, participating in academic services such as tutoring, study groups and one-on-one faculty interaction was essential to their success.

GED graduates enrolled in this technical college had varying experiences when it came to student involvement. Balancing family time with class time and work was essential for students enrolling in technical, short-term programs, which allowed little time for extra activities and events outside of class. Overall, a majority of participants noted that being involved academically affects their success as a college student while non-academic involvement does not. One student noted, “It’s all up to you if you are gonna get out there and you’re gonna try your best in your education. Nobody’s going to do [it] for you. You are going to have to do it yourself.”

The next section discusses the final theme and sub themes, which emerged within the qualitative data. This section provides detailed analysis from participants regarding how the location of an institution and its resources affect GED graduates’ experiences at a rural technical college.

Size Matters

When I was a senior in high school, my mother and I scheduled college visitations to see which college would be a “best fit” for me. Luckily, the first institution I visited met all the qualities and characteristics of my ideal college. After our visit, my mother and I discussed what influenced my decision on attending that particular college. For me, the campus esthetics, college tradition, academics, and the institution’s location and size were the main factors influencing my decision. Most importantly, I wanted to attend a college that made the transition

from a high school of 1000 to a college of 25,000 as simple as possible. For me, location mattered and as described within the next few paragraphs, location is important for many of the study's participants. The next section provides descriptive narratives from participants regarding their thoughts and experience on attending a rural institution.

According to Miller and Kissinger (2007), rural communities can be characterized as having high poverty rates, little economic growth and fewer “opportunities for advancements” (p. 27). The technical college described in this study is located in a community with a population of nearly 13,000 citizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In a study conducted by Alabama State University Center for Leadership and Public Policy (2011), this rural community has experienced high poverty rates and little economic growth for over a decade. In fact, the study revealed the college's location and student base consist of students from four counties that have been deemed as “counties in crisis.” The study defines “counties in crisis” as those that are underperforming significantly in the areas of health, public safety, education and economy.

Despite the findings in Counties in Crisis, students from these counties expressed how rural to them does not carry the same meaning as described by Miller and Kissinger. The study's participants often described two areas when discussing how the institution's location relates to their college experience: small settings and internal and external distractions. This next section provides interviewees' detailed descriptions categorized by their view of small settings and how distractions due to a college's size and location affect their college experience.

Small Settings

For many of the study's participants, attending a small or rural technical college is much more than a place to get an education or training for the workforce. It is a way of life. A majority of the participants are accustomed to small classrooms, more green space than parking

lots and one-on-one interaction with faculty and staff. Although the college is small in size and is located within a city with limited economic resources, many participants stated the college provides what they need to be a successful student transitioning from the GED to college. One student noted that being in a small, rural area is safer than that of a large city or institution. Also, the smaller college environment provides her with a family-like environment while in college.

The student expressed her thoughts:

There's also a lot of danger in those bigger colleges. That's not to say it can't happen in a smaller one, but you got more chances in a bigger college and most of the time you're not going to know people in your class. I know most of the people in my classes. Now next semester that might change. But right now, I can name the people that are in the cosmetology program because they're in my math class. Because it's not so big and it's not, you don't have to learn on 12 levels. That class is smaller and most of the time they can stay right there together. And if not, of course [the instructor] he'll do anything you need him to do. As far as to help your levels you know if you're not catching something. I don't know it's like our own little close knit class. I prefer smaller. To each's own.

Another student explains that being in a rural environment makes her feel more “comfortable.” She stated, “There are less people so you get to know your classmates personally, you help each other.” A third participant explains, “I do worry sometimes like I may be missing something. Like, it's a small town are they going to be as good as a school in a big town. But it kind of balances itself out because you have more one-on-one time with the teachers because the class size and it's not as far of a drive.” A few students were burdened by the lack of public transportation offered at this rural institution. However, the drive was not a problem for those with reliable transportation. Some participants found more value in the college's location because it is located in an extremely rural area within the state. This statement holds true even for a participant who lived in an urban area prior to moving to the rural area.

The student explained:

I don't think it affects mine. Because they with what they have we get what we need. We do have a lot less resources than more populated areas. I come from California, so I

know that they have a lot more resources available, but with what they have they you know get the same experiences the same education and so I don't think it affects my experience personally.

For majority of the research's participants, attending a rural institution did not have any bearing on how they experienced college. For the most part, participants' experiences were positive and provided me with insight on how GED students experienced college in terms of the institution's size and location. Moreover, I was pleasantly surprised to hear one participant's description of his take on the value of a rural college. The participant expressed that this rural college provided opportunities that he did not otherwise have. The participant explained, "For me, some people may be better in the bigger city, but for me it gives me a lot better opportunities to do what I want." Another participant expressed that size didn't matter. For her, gaining the knowledge or information needed is what mattered the most. She explains:

Not in a bad way. In a good way it's because it doesn't matter about how big or how small a college is, it's what the information you're getting out of college and what you're learning. You know what I mean. It don't matter to me how big or small, it's the information and the learning and training that I'm here for.

For another student who attended college in a more urban area, the rural experience was more personal and positively affected her college experience. As a student at a larger institution, the student felt she was "just thrown in there [college]." She expressed she did not know where her classes were or what to do when she arrived to the campus. Her experience at this rural institution was much different than the aforementioned. The student expressed navigating college was easier at the rural college and she received more personal assistance from staff and teachers.

More students stated the rural college was a "best fit" for them because of the constant interaction with teachers and staff. Additionally, students felt important and needed at the college. A nursing participant describes her rural college experience:

I think it does. Well I guess it does because a larger campus, to me it's better because at a larger campus you're overlooked. You're just another person taking up the seat. Smaller campus where you're able to get that one-on-one approach. That feel of comfortableness and hominess. It's more relaxing and it settles you, which makes it easier for you to learn.

Students enrolled at this rural technical college enjoyed the attention they received from faculty.

Attending classes where classmates are like family and instructors are like parents appeals to the participants. These factors are what the participants truly value in their college experience.

When asked about her rural college experience, an Office Administration student notes:

I never got to go to a big four-year college. But as far as being at this college, I honestly think I prefer it more than going to a bigger college. You may not get the constant activities, but it is that every once in a while thing every gets together as one and does stuff. That gives us something to look forward to. Something to work harder towards. I think that with it being a smaller college that the teachers get to have more one-on-one time with their class. Because once you may have, like my first semester here, my math class, 36 people in my class. So that helped me tremendously that being able, not so many in the class has helped me to be able to sit with her and her give more attention to each student because of the fact that she didn't have a massive class full of people. So I think that going to a smaller college is probably a little more beneficial, at least in the beginning to help you get on the right track.

Overall, participants expressed the college and its environment offered the small atmosphere conducive to learning. Even participants from beyond the region expressed the college's small, intimate environment enhances their overall experience as a GED student in college. Also, several students expressed that the small setting kept them free from distractions that they would otherwise experience in larger settings, such as urban cities and institutions.

Distractions

The research participants explained that the benefits of a rural technical college were not limited to the size and location. Participants expressed that the size and location also provided little distractions, which enhanced their learning experience as a GED student in college. For instance, several interviewees noted that having few non-academic activities and few social

venues outside of the college kept them focused on completing coursework and studying. One participant stated:

Well, being in a small town like this, it kind of helps me to focus a little bit more, because it ain't as many distractions and stuff. So I can actually get more stuff done then I probably could at a bigger school in a bigger city.

Other participants also expressed their contentment in how the college's size and location provided little distractions. Another example came from a phlebotomy participant who noted that she would rather attend a rural institution because "You can concentrate more" and there are "No distractions." When asked about how attending a rural institution affects his learning experience, a welding participant stated, "Yes ma'am. But I believe it would be for the better. I believe you would have more of an opportunity to focus on what you are doing and your work and not be so caught up in the bigger life." Moreover, a practical nursing student also shared her thoughts regarding how she experiences attending a rural institution:

I believe that it would for me personally. I like the small groups. I feel like I can get more out of it when there're small groups. You get lost in the hustle and bustle of all the people and distractions. I just seem to do better when I'm in a smaller college.

In summary, students articulated that urban and metropolitan areas along with institutions with a large population would negatively impact their college experience. Participants felt this smaller institution and rural area provided them with the one-on-one interaction with faculty needed to enhance their learning and training for their career. In addition, considering many students have obligations beyond college life, such as family and work, smaller, less populous areas promoted their family and educational goals.

Summary of Results and Conclusion

As an overview of the results, this chapter was framed using Astin's I-E-O conceptual framework as a guide in identifying the relevant themes related to the research questions. The

first section of this chapter addressed theme one, which focused on GED students' preparedness in college as well as demographic and personal characteristics of the research's participants. This section highlighted how students coped with the academic demands, through differences in age, level of academic preparation and previous college experience.

The second section discussed theme two, or how involvement in academic and non-academic services, programs and activities affect the overall experience of GED students in college. This area emphasized the influence of student involvement on campus given external factors such as family and available time for participation. The final section discussed location in terms of institutional and community size and the role these factors play in how GED students experience a rural technical college. Theme three provided the research's participants descriptions of environmental influences on GED students in college.

Overall, chapter four's data provides detailed analysis of the research's data. In closing, Alabama State University Center for Leadership and Public Policy (2011), noted that in southwest regions of Alabama where change is slow and critically impoverished, "history, traditions, and fellowship continue to enrich lives and instill a sense of optimism and pride in their citizens" (p. 1). This statement resembled many of the responses from GED participants noted throughout this chapter. Although data, history and public opinion illustrate a negative connotation of rural Alabama, the detailed description from this study's participants paint a different view (Alabama State University Center for Leadership and Public Policy, 2011). Students expressed excitement and joy when discussing their experiences as GED students in college. For them, having the opportunity to attend college after quitting high school was a dream come true. Further interpretations and implication for further research will be discussed in chapter 5.

CHAPTER V: INTERPRETATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This chapter provides my interpretation of the data discussed in chapter four along with implications for further research on topics regarding GED students in college. The first portion of this chapter provides an overview of the research's questions and purpose of the study. Secondly, this chapter offers a brief summary of the literature discussed in chapter two and the study's data collection methodology from chapter three. Next, I discuss my interpretations of the data's findings followed by the study's possible limitations. Finally, this chapter provides the implications for further research and the study's conclusion.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of GED recipients in college. This topic became an area of interest and significance due to academia, researchers, and the federal government's interest in the completion and retention of students in higher education (Ashburn, 2007; Hoover, 2008). Additionally, considering the vast increase in GED recipients who desire higher education, understanding how they experience college could shed light on their development as students and the programs and services needed for their academic success (American Council on Education, 2010; Patterson, Song & Zhang, 2009). Moreover, this study set-out to provide a better understanding of how this body of students experiences college life given their previous academic experiences, demographic and personal characteristics and the college's internal and external environment. The research questions addressed are as follows:

1. How do GED recipients experience the academic demands of an associate's college?

2. What role do student involvement and personal characteristics have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?
3. What role does the college environment have in the experiences of GED recipients enrolled in an associate's college?

Summary of the Literature

This study utilized Astin's I-E-O Conceptual Model to frame the literature discussed in chapter two of this research. Astin's model was developed to provide insight on how environments shape a student's development in college (Astin, 1999). More specifically, the model characterizes a student's development by observing (I) Inputs: personal individualities, (E) Environment: the student's educational environment and previous experiences and (O) Outcome: which refers to the student's development after college. This study's literature emphasized only two areas within the model, Inputs and Environment, to evaluate GED students' individual characteristics and capture the experiences of GED graduates who enrolled in college.

First, the literature addresses inputs by discussing gender, ethnicity and age of GED graduates in college. Secondly, environment was examined by addressing literature pertaining to GED students' college environment. More specifically, I analyzed research related to student academic preparation and prevalent academic and non-academic barriers for GED students in college along with data relative to the role of and issues affecting community colleges and the students they enroll. Overall, much of the literature review consisted of research based on quantitative data of GED students in large community colleges or small colleges and universities located in urban or metropolitan areas. This study's aim was not only to add to the body of literature concerning how GED graduates experience college, but more specifically analyze the

experiences of GED recipients enrolled in a small, rural technical college. Because there were few qualitative studies directly addressing GED graduates enrolled in small rural technical colleges, this research was of significance and will provide researchers with meaningful information on this body of students.

Review of Data Collection Methods

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers aim to understand the experiences of their research subjects and how those experiences are defined. This study used basic qualitative methodology to capture and gain a better understanding of how GED students experience college. The research used individual interviews as the primary source of data collection. Additionally, a reflective journal was used during the interview to capture additional thoughts and body language of participants as well as reflect on the researcher's thoughts from the participants' interviews. In this study, basic qualitative methodology best fit the purpose considering the study's aim was to gain a better understanding of how GED graduates provide meaning to their lives and experiences (Merriam, 2009). Also, utilizing an interpretive/constructivist approach allowed me to provide the research findings from the participant's perspective.

Summary of Results

In analyzing the data, three primary themes emerged: Preparedness, Involvement, and Location. In their experiences, GED graduates were most challenged by their lack of preparedness in general education courses, such as reading, math and English, and their ability to perform academically in the classroom, their need to be involved in academic support services or the time less spent involved in non-academic activities and their preference for small, rural settings. Additionally, students' characteristics such as age, family obligations, and previous

academic history in college developed as underlying themes in the research data. Other underlying themes were time, small settings and distractions. I provide my interpretation of the results and data later in this chapter.

Addressing the Research Questions

This research utilized detailed, descriptive dialogue as the primary resource and data collection method to answer the research questions presented in this study. To answer the study's questions, research and data were gathered using Astin's I-E-O conceptual framework as a guide in analyzing the information. Although capturing GED graduates' experiences in college was the overall purpose of the study, the research questions provided a profound take on their experiences in terms of academic demands, personal characteristics, student involvement and environmental influences.

The first research question addressed the academic demands of GED students in college. Overall, the participants felt they were unprepared in course work related to general education (math, English and reading). For many GED recipients, this deficiency often left them feeling like imposters in the classroom. Particularly, older participants expressed how they felt they were less prepared than their classroom peers and younger students. Additionally, older students felt their unpreparedness was due to the time span between earning their GED and/or taking GED classes before enrolling in college. Other participants felt their unpreparedness was because they did not complete higher-level courses in high school that would have prepared them for college. Only a few participants noted they were prepared for college when they enrolled. Some felt they were prepared because their program did not require rigorous college level work. Others credited their preparedness to the program that prepared them for the GED examination and others credited high school teachers that helped them prior to leaving high school. In the

end, students expressed a huge need for faculty support through individualized tutoring sessions to help with the academic demands of college. Participants were challenged by the general education component of their prospective programs and health related course content for students enrolled in health programs. Many participants expressed if they had a stronger academic background, their experiences relative to college academics would be better. In the implications for practice section, I provide specific suggestions addressing GED students' needs for enhanced academic experiences.

The second research question evaluated GED students' experiences relative to their involvement on campus and their personal characteristics. Overall, participants' valued academic involvement on campus, regardless of their program of study. Participants expressed they most valued one-on-one faculty interaction with students and tutoring experiences on campus. However, participants' views on non-academic activities and services were divided. More specifically, GED graduates felt non-academic activities were non-essential and they did not have the time to participate in non-academic events and organizations. Students conveyed that their coursework along with family obligations were more important and those responsibilities expended the majority of their time outside of class. For participants who were married, had children or other personal commitments such as employment, non-academic involvement was less important compared to academic activities. Some participants felt non-academic activities were needed, but they did not have the time to participate. A few participants noted that non-academic activities are important for those students who have the opportunity to be involved. They expressed those activities provide intrinsic and social opportunities that some students would not otherwise have a chance to acquire.

The final question addressed GED students' experiences relative to environmental influences such as the college's rural environment and institutional size. Nearly every participant noted that their college experience remained unaffected by the college's rural location. In fact, a majority of the participants stated that the institution's rural environment enhanced their college experience. Moreover, students felt the institution's small size allowed them to connect more with instructors in order to get the assistance needed for optimal academic performance.

Interpretations

This next section provides the significance of this study's finding and my interpretations of the data. Prior to this study, there was minimal research that addressed how GED students experienced college. A large portion of the research was quantitative studies that focused on large institutions in populous areas as well as large longitudinal studies. It was essential to qualitatively examine this body of research and students to close the gap in literature concerning GED graduates and their experience in college. This study was significant and added to the existing body of literature on GED students for several reasons.

First, in recognition of GED students and their previous academic history of non-completion, studying GED students' experiences in college provides researchers and GED practitioners with information on what matters most to GED students enrolled at a rural technical college and what can be done to enhance their college experiences. According to Astin (1991), identifying those various inputs and environments of college student, helps researchers to understand why students develop differently from other students. Also, studying the various inputs, experiences and environments of students helps researchers to understand what influences students' outcomes.

It was no surprise that students' inputs or personal characteristics such as family obligations, transportation and previous academic history influenced how they experienced college. Previous studies had identified the above areas as barriers that affect GED student completion and retention in college. Many of the participants had family obligations that preceded their educational responsibilities and limited what they could participate in and to some extent how well they performed in class. For example, some students stated they left high school because they became pregnant and/or had to care for a child and this circumstance remained prevalent as students in college. Although student family obligations are important circumstances that are external to the college's control, institutions can use this information to seek external support services such housing and childcare and provide access to this information on campus for GED students.

I anticipated that other inputs, such as previous academic experiences and transportation barriers, would also affect GED students' experiences in college. Students with previous negative academic experiences often struggled with the same academic issues as current students in college. However, for older students, their experiences became more complicated because of their age. Older GED students had little confidence in their academic ability when in the classroom with their younger peers. Additionally, older GED graduates required more attention and need for faculty interaction than the younger GED graduates. Perhaps, one of the most interesting conclusions revealed that although most of the younger participants felt they were prepared, their academic experiences were not significantly different. This finding has implications for further study and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Some rural areas of America lack many of the modern conveniences that urban and more populous areas provide. Some of the students located within the rural communities surrounding

this small technical college struggled with the lack of transportation to get to and from classes. However, this barrier was not as influential as I would have expected. Students often found other means to make it to class, such as carpooling or getting permission to complete coursework online. In the end, transportation issues did not seem to affect student's tenacity to complete their chosen programs. This discovery was gratifying especially considering the effort to improve completion and retention in America.

This study was also significant by addressing GED student enrollment in rural technical institutions. Previous studies focused largely on the college experiences of traditional students enrolled at public and private universities and community colleges. This study examined GED students' experiences considering the rural aspect of a technical institution and provides researchers with a better understanding of how GED students' environment influences their experiences in college. It was interesting to find that nearly every participant valued the small rural environment of this technical college. GED students were excited to have a "second chance" in earning a college degree. Therefore, small size and location was great for participants despite being without the modern conveniences such as school transportation, housing and plethora of student support services along with the social amenities provided in more urban areas.

Additionally, technical education seemed to provide GED students with the optimal educational experience due to their minimum curricular requirements, hands-on or live-work components, and on-the-job training approach to learning. Throughout the interview period, participants expressed they did not participate in non-academic activities and their non-participation did not affect their educational experience. GED graduates were not influenced by this factor because their programs of study lasted approximately two to three semesters, which

caused them to be in class for long periods throughout the day. Their extensive time in class limited their ability to actively participate in non-academic activities. Therefore, students were more concerned with learning and mastering the material within their program of study than participating in services and programs unrelated to their academics.

Moreover, students in many technical programs learn their skill or trade by mastering skill sets. Students must perform certain task before progressing to the next skill level or component. GED students seem to appreciate this aspect of technical education. Participants understood that once they completed many of the skills sets they would be one step closer to completing their program of study and finding stable employment. Also, technical education allowed GED students to learn the job in which they were training or preparing for. Although some courses such as health related courses and general education courses were challenging, getting the hands on experience from their chosen trade or program of study enhanced their overall educational experience. GED practitioners can benefit from this knowledge by exposing and promoting technical education to students seeking their GED and prospective GED graduates prior to enrolling into college. Therefore, exposing more GED graduates to technical education and training can potentially increase the number of GED students enrolling in college and considering the short-time to completion, earn a certificate or degree.

Overall, several conclusions can be drawn from this research in terms of how inputs and college environment influence students experiences in college. First, age and level of personal responsibility at the time of enrollment influences how GED graduates experience college. Older GED students are more challenged by their college environment and academia when they enroll later in life versus the GED students who earn their GED diplomas shortly after leaving high school and enroll in college. Secondly, small, rural, technical colleges enhance the college

experiences of GED graduates due to the campus environment, small class size and short-programs of study, particularly for students who come from communities that resemble the college's environment.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This section acknowledges the possible limitations of this research study and discusses suggestions worthy of future research. It is important to note that this study's limitations were addressed in the validity and trustworthiness section of Chapter 3. However, it is essential that the researcher discuss this research's validity, trustworthiness, possible limitations and any biases within this chapter that could impede the study's results. When evaluating the results of the research, three possible limitations exist: partiality in gender participants, single site study, and length of the data collection period. Finally, although sampling size is not a possible limitation, I feel a need to discuss how increasing the number of student participants could enhance this study.

Responses from female participants accounted for over 80% of the research's data. However, the research institution has nearly a 40% to 60% enrollment of male to female students. Thus, the study's data do not reflect the overall current student body at the college. Although the current number of female versus male GED recipients enrolled at the institution aligns with the current sample size, future researchers could examine qualitative data from an even sample size of both genders to enhance insight from each gender and to reduce biases in gender characteristics. Additionally, future research could examine how each gender experiences college as GED students.

Next, the findings within this research are centered on a small rural technical college located in the Southeastern part of the United States. Therefore, the research's findings may not

be generalizable to other institutions and institutions in rural locations other than the Southeastern region of the United States. Future researchers may want to expand the research setting to other rural technical institutions throughout the country and to additional institutional types.

The final limitation was the data collection period. The study's data was collected over a period of five months. Future studies could expand the data collection period to capture how GED recipients develop throughout their college experience. For instance, research could examine student's initial entrance, continuation, and exit experiences.

A total of 25 GED graduates participated in this research study. Merriam suggests in qualitative inquiry, sampling size is based on the study's purpose or until saturation is evident (2009). Although the sampling size used in this study adequately meets the research purpose, additional participants can be used to "maximize information" for further data analysis (Merriam, 2009, p. 80). Additional future research should address the credibility of the GED examination. In detail, a majority of the GED participants expressed that neither the GED exam nor GED preparation courses prepared them for college level course work. Researchers should evaluate the exam's various subject areas and the curriculum in GED preparation programs to ensure its content is appropriate and includes college readiness skills needed to enter postsecondary education.

Relationship of Study Findings to the Literature

The basis for this research study was framed around Alexander Astin's I-E-O Model. This model is used to gain a better understanding as to how GED graduates experience college given various inputs such as personal characteristics that they bring to college and the college's environment. Similar to Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, the I-E-O Conceptual Model is a

framework that provides an in-depth analysis of how students develop in college in addition to how students' inputs affect their college experience subsequently affecting the student outcome. This section provides an overview of how the existing literature relates to the study's finding.

In this study, GED students came to college with various inputs such as family obligations, financial responsibilities, age differences and previous academic experiences that influence how they matriculate through college. The overall findings within the research were consistent with the aforementioned findings within chapter two. For instance, Kist (2003) identified academic and non-academic barriers faced by GED students in college. Among his findings, Kist (2003) noted economic and family pressures as prevailing challenges faced by GED students, which impacts their learning environment. My findings were also consistent with others researchers, such as Ritt (2008), who found that adult learners are restricted by their physical location, family obligations, employment, childcare and previous academic history. Most importantly, these findings corroborate Astin's I-E-O Model as to how students' development is influenced by various personal inputs or characteristics students bring to college.

Additional review of the literature found that students who positively integrate into the college and community through formal and informal social and academic interactions would presumably persist in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Conversely, students who experience negative integration will subsequently withdraw. My findings concur with these ideas, considering participants within this study truly valued formal and informal academic interaction with faculty. Whether or not this factor leads to participant retention would require longitudinal research on the study's participants.

Overall, through extensive descriptive data, participants provided me with information on their college experiences given their various demographical characteristics and the college's

environment. Astin's I-E-O conceptual framework provided the structure that guided the research's questions, literature, and data.

Recommendations for Practice

An important objective of this dissertation is to provide recommendations for practice. First, in respect to preparedness, this study's findings revealed that majority of the participants entered college feeling unprepared. Moreover, students who enrolled in GED preparation programs appeared to be more prepared than their peers who had no prior training or preparation for the GED examination. Also, age was a primary factor in gauging students' self-confidence in preparation and their ability to perform academically as their younger peers. Colleges and universities could benefit by requiring GED students to participate in individual and/or group counseling sessions allowing students to discuss personal issues that could inhibit their academic success in the classroom. Additionally, for students who did not participate in a GED preparation program but plan to attend college, institutions could offer and require GED students to participate in a college preparation course offered by GED instructors.

The second finding noted that participants felt a great need for faculty interaction on campus and this factor was essential to GED students' campus involvement. It is suggested that campus officials create more formal and informal opportunities for GED student to interact with campus administrators and instructors. Of course, this suggestion would vary depending on campus size and could include academic advisors in larger settings were it would be difficult to interact with individual faculty on a regular basis for each course.

The third finding was in reference to demographic location and school size. It is recommended that GED students be exposed to technical colleges and trades earlier in their pursuit for the General Education Diploma. GED students enrolled in preparation programs

could truly benefit from early exposure to technical careers and opportunities. Considering the connection of many GED programs to associate's colleges, GED programs can strengthen their relationship with recruiters and embed college and career ready strategies in the program's curriculum.

Conclusion

College completion, career and technical education, meeting workforce development needs, and global academic competition are topics that continue to shape higher education institutions across the United States (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2014). As policy makers and academic officials seek strategies addressing the aforementioned topics, more attention should be given to how GED students can positively support goals addressing these issues. This study began with an in-depth analysis at matters addressing higher education such as completion and retention. After further exploration, the research focused on GED students, a non-traditional student population, in which minimal research has been conducted on college experiences. If completion and retention along with business and industry need for skilled trained employees is expected to improve, officials must address not only the needs of traditional students, but the needs of those who have taken the non-traditional path to continuing education as well. Moreover, research indicates GED students consistently express interest in continuing education beyond the GED (ACE, 2009). Therefore, identifying and analyzing through qualitative inquiry how these students experience college given their individual characteristics, demographics and college environment has provided insight to how institutions can better address GED students' academic demands prior to postsecondary enrollment.

This study used Astin's I-E-O Model as an outline to frame the existing literature and findings surrounding the research's topic. Overall, the findings revealed that GED students' college experience varies given individual inputs they bring to college and the college's environment. GED students' experiences can be enhanced with better academic preparation and when personal needs, such as family obligations, are met. Once these needs are addressed, GED students are more likely to be involved in activities outside of academia. The expectation stands that with successful college immersion, GED students will be more inclined to persist and complete despite their non-traditional path to college and previous negative academic experiences.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date _____

Pseudonym _____

Introduction

- Personal Introduction
- Purpose of the study
- Provide informed consent form
- Provide information regarding interview structure

1. How does your current experience as a college student differ from when you were enrolled as a GED student?
2. What were your major challenges as a GED student in college?
3. Is this your first time enrolling in a two-year associate college? If not how many times have you enrolled in college?
4. What are your reasons for enrolling or re-enrolling in college? (If **NOT** re-enrolling skip to question 11)
5. Do you feel your GED classes academically prepared you to take college level courses? Why or why not?
6. As a college student, how does having a GED differ from a regular high school diploma?
7. What are your feelings towards GED students' treatment in college compared to regular high school graduates?
8. How do you feel adult education programs could improve GED students experiences in college?
9. How important is non-academic involvement (such as student organizations and sports) to your overall educational experience?
10. How important is academic involvement (such as tutoring services and faculty interaction) to your overall educational experience?
11. How does your involvement in academic and non-academic services and program affect your success as a student?
12. How does your non-involvement in academic and non-academic services and program affect your success as a student?
13. Does attending a rural institution affect your experience as a college student? Explain.
14. How would your college experience change if you were a traditional high school graduate?
15. What do you feel has guided you to stay or maintain your enrollment as a student in college?

APPENDIX B

FORMS

Office for Research
Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA
R E S E A R C H

April 7, 2014

Coretta Boykin
ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870231

Re: IRB#: 14-OR-113 "College Experiences for GED Students"

Dear Ms. Boykin:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on April 6, 2015. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Office of Research Compliance
The University of Alabama



358 Rose Administration Building
Box 870127
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0127
(205) 348-8461
FAX (205) 348-7189
TOLL FREE (877) 820-3066

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
Individual's Consent to be in a Research Study

You are being asked to be in a research study. This study is called "College Experiences for GED Students." This study is being done by Coretta Boykin, who is a doctoral student in Higher Education Administration at the University of Alabama's College of Education. Dr. Karrie Holley, a professor of Higher Education Administration, at the University of Alabama, is supervising her work. All participants must be 19 or older to take part in this study.

What is this study about?

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of GED students' experience at a small rural technical college.

Why is this study important-What good would the results do?

There is very little research on how GED students' experience college. In addition, the federal government has placed emphasis on college retention and completion. Understanding how GED students' experience college can provide insight on how institutions can better serve this population of students in college.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

Your educational background and enrollment in a small technical college will assist in providing a better understanding of how GED students experience college.

How many other people will be in this study?

Approximately 25 GED graduates enrolled at this institution have been invited to participate in this study.

What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide information regarding your experience as a GED student in college during an interview with the study's researcher. Your responses will be recorded for preservation and future analysis.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

Interviews are expected to last approximately 30 minutes and a review of the interview transcription will take approximately 15 minutes for a total of 45 minutes for research participation. Participants have an option to interview in an on or off campus setting.

What will this study costs us?

There is no financial cost for participating in this study.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

You will be provided with a small gift valuing under \$5.00 for your participation in this study.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being in this study?

This study doesn't pose any physical, emotional or psychological risks to you as a participant. Additionally, there are no risks to you as a student at this institution for your participation or

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4/7/14
EXPIRATION DATE: 4/6/2015

non-participation in this study. Your acknowledgement of participation or non-participation in this research will be kept confidential.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

There are no direct benefits for research participants. However, the research will benefit practitioners and GED students in a broader sense, who work or attend a small rural technical college. Your participation will provide insight to how GED students experience college.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

The alternative to participating in this study is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama or Reid State Technical College.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (“the IRB”) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Will this study be audiotaped and/or videotaped?

This study does involve audiotaping of each participants interview. Audiotaping is necessary to ensure validity and accuracy of your response to the interview questions. Your participation, audio recordings and responses to interview questions will be kept confidential. Participants who choose not to be audiotaped are still allowed to participate in the study. All information collected will be stored in a secure locked location. No one other than the researcher will have access to the audio recordings.

Do you give permission to audiotape this interview? Yes No

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please call the investigator, Coretta Boykin at 251-578-6089 or 251-227-0270, or the research supervisor, Karri Holley at 205-348-7825. If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

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CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4/7/14
EXPIRATION DATE: 4/6/2015

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it.
I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4/7/14
EXPIRATION DATE: 4/6/2015

STUDENT ANNOUNCEMENT

Attention: GED Graduates

My name is Coretta Boykin. I am currently working on completing the requirements for my Ed.D in Higher Education Administration at the University of Alabama. As a part of the requirements, I am conducting a study on the experiences of GED students enrolled in postsecondary education. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in this study. I need you to participate in a 45 minute interview. Your participation is completely voluntary and all data collected will be kept confidential. Attached is a copy of the research study's consent form, which outlines participant's expectations. Participants will receive a small gift valued under \$5.00 as a token of appreciation. Please note that you are not obligated to participate in this study.

I plan to conduct interviews on [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] from [REDACTED] to [REDACTED]. Should you choose to participate, you may contact me at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED] with two preferred dates and time. Additionally, I am open to meeting at another location that meets your needs. I will confirm our meeting date and time with a follow-up phone call and/or email.

Please feel free to contact me at either of the above contacts should you have any questions.

Thank you in advance for considering participation and I look forward to meeting with you soon.

LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

April 15, 2014

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

I am writing in reference to my dissertation research as a doctoral candidate at the University of Alabama. I am interested in conducting my research at [REDACTED] and I would like to meet with you to discuss the study's objectives.

The dissertation focuses on the experiences of GED students enrolled in a postsecondary institution. I plan to employ qualitative methodology in order to capture personal descriptive data from participants. [REDACTED] provides the ideal students, faculty and staff as well as the environment needed for this study's research.

I will contact your secretary later this week to schedule a meeting. Please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED] should you have any questions prior to our meeting.

I greatly appreciate your consideration and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]