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# Common Characteristics of Adult Education Programs Reporting the Highest GED Attainment Rates for Welfare Recipients

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study was to describe characteristics of adult basic education programs for welfare recipients that reported higher than average GED rates and to identify implications for practice and program improvement. Three program characteristics were found to influence GED rates: program practices, a motivational culture, and instructional approaches.*

## Purpose of the Study

The majority of adults who enroll in adult basic education programs to improve their skills aspire to earn a secondary credential. Similarly, most adult educators consider the high school credential or the General Educational Development (GED) certificate a desirable outcome of instruction because a secondary credential is a requirement for higher education, most training courses offered by businesses, or employment that offers benefits. The need to obtain a secondary credential intensified with welfare reform because of policies that connected adult basic education with employment and career advancement. Although participants, educators, and policy all place a high value on the GED, adult education programs have diverse strategies for helping participants achieve this goal; however, very little research has investigated the link between program characteristics and receipt of a GED. The purpose of this study was to describe the characteristics of adult basic education programs for welfare recipients that reported high GED rates and to identify implications for practice and program improvement. Three research questions guided this study. Which programs for welfare recipients report the highest GED attainment rates? What are the common characteristics of the programs that report the highest GED attainment rates? What are the implications for practice and continuous program improvement; specifically, what types of programmatic characteristics and instructional practices have implications for professional development of adult education practitioners, especially those working with individuals who receive welfare?

## Theoretical Framework

After a thorough search of the literature on adult education program effectiveness, we found no research that examined the link between characteristics of a program and a particular outcome such as the rate at which participants attained the GED. Some studies may have included the GED passing rates as indicators of “effectiveness” of programs; however, researchers, with the exception of Office of Vocational and Adult Education [OVAE], (2000) did not make this explicit. Interestingly, most of the studies cited in the literature on effective or high-performing programs do not explicitly define “effective programs” or “effective practice,” nor the types of outcomes that can be expected from such practice. Although the literature was not accommodating in identifying studies that linked program characteristics with specific outcomes, it contributed helpful information on the types of characteristics possibly common to

programs where students made better-than-average progress in basic skills, which eventually resulted in passing the GED test. The literature described characteristics of the “effective” programs in two broad areas: programmatic and instructional. The next paragraph summarizes the research on these characteristics.

Programmatic features that seemed to influence the effectiveness of a program were community ties, professional development activities of staff, recruitment and retention strategies, ongoing evaluation of the program, and accessibility for students (Fisher, 1999; Friedlander & Martinson, 1996; Lerche, 1985; OVAE, 1997 and 2000; and Solorzano, Stecher, & Perez, 1989). In the literature about effective instructional strategies, a key focus was on the importance of innovation that captured the interest of adult learners and helped keep them engaged in the learning experience (Black, 1997; Florida Community College, 1998; Lerche, 1985; OVAE, 2000; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2000, and Solorzano et al., 1989). In addition, researchers found that high-performing programs set learning objectives and goals, (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, 1996, Florida Community College, 1998; Friedlander & Martinson, 1996), focused on employment, (Ascher, 1994; Fisher, 1999, OVAE, 1997), and provided non-academic instruction and support (Black, 1997; Cochran, 2000).

### **Research Design**

Ten Tennessee Adult Education programs met the selection criteria for participation in this study. Adult education programs annually report the number of students in their programs who attain a GED to the Office of Adult Education at the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Eighty-four local program supervisors reported total enrollment of welfare recipients and GED rates for the program years 2000-01 and 2001-02 into an online database designed for this purpose. From these data, using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) computer program, we calculated the ratios of GED attainment to total enrollment for fiscal years 2000-01 and 2001-02. Using SPSS, we categorized these ratios for each year into four categories. Using “natural” breaks in the data, ten programs had the highest percentages of GED recipients among welfare recipients and therefore fell in the top category for both years. These programs constituted the sample for this study. The ratio of GED recipients among the programs that fell into the top category ranged from 27% to 60%, while the average ratio among all programs was less than 15%.

Researchers visited each of the ten qualifying programs and interviewed program staff to identify characteristics that contributed to their higher-than-average GED rates. Using the NVivo software for qualitative research, the research team analyzed these data collaboratively by identifying themes. At each step of the analysis process, research team members negotiated the meaning of individual themes until they reached agreement. Themes were first identified by individual programs. The software facilitated clustering related themes into categories. Constructing a matrix of programs and categories of themes showed common characteristics across programs. Only those categories of themes that occurred across all participating programs were included in the findings.

### **Findings**

Characteristics of programs reporting the highest GED rates clustered into three main categories: programmatic, instructional, and cultural. Programmatic characteristics most closely

paralleled the reviewed literature. An additional area mentioned only briefly in the literature but prominent in the data reported by the programs was the presence of a motivational culture.

### *Programmatic Features*

Programmatic features include aspects of the program that are not instructional. This section includes descriptions of the programs' external and internal relationships, administrative practices, and staff characteristics and development. Adult education programs in this study were not isolated; rather, they were visible in their local communities and in the agencies or school systems where they were located. These relationships, fostered by the program staff, brought a variety of resources to the program. Resources were primarily of four types: community ties, close working relationship with local school boards, collaborations with the Department of Human Services, and collaborations within programs.

As for the administrative practices, program staff reported that they did not view them as a burden. Rather, they explained that they were intentional about administrative tasks because those contributed to the services that enabled students to attain the GED. Effective administrative practices included supportive supervision (supervisor deals with administrative issues but "allows freedom to teach"), program improvement processes, rigorous record keeping, and using an orientation as a tool to connect participants with the program.

One of the strongest characteristics that programs reported was the importance of having skillful staff. Supervisors and teachers whom we interviewed were enthusiastic about their roles and dedicated to helping participants achieve their goals. The category of "skillful staff" includes having experienced teachers and their longevity in the program, which often led to the establishment of "traditions" carried on by new staff, as well as engagement in professional development.

### *Instructional Strategies*

Instructional strategies related to the content and process of learning basic skills in the AE classroom. The areas included in instructional strategies were: consistent and regular assessment and use of an assessment-based curriculum. Teachers generally chose a curriculum based on the participants' needs as diagnosed by tests and by the welfare initiative policy requirement that advancement in basic skills must be measured by such standardized achievement tests as the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or GED practice test. At times, curriculum choice was based on the materials available from a particular publisher (Steck-Vaughn, Contemporary, or the GED manual), but even the choice of these instructional materials was generally linked to the academic needs of an individual participant.

The most common instructional method used by the teachers in these programs was customized or individualized instruction. Teachers in these programs attempted to differentiate instruction based on the variety of levels and abilities of students. They grouped students when they could but generally individualized instruction because of student needs. Student needs were identified by the TABE and GED assessments. They emphasized the GED, but many had additional emphases, particularly for lower-level students. Overall, the teachers reported the need to make their classes varied and interesting. In many cases, they did non-traditional activities such as providing "extra help" or conducting various activities that fostered engagement such as playing games. In most programs, peer tutoring was a frequent activity, and a few programs had

outside tutors. In several programs that had more than one teacher, they “team taught” (departmentalized instruction) and reported that it was effective and participants seemed to like it.

Although less frequently than individualized instruction, teachers also conducted group instruction, particularly in the areas of workplace or life skills. Programs tried several ways to prepare participants to become successful workers. First, there were field trips to local employers. Second, several teachers said they tried to establish a “business-like classroom atmosphere” modeling a workplace. The programs had some work related materials, usually resumes, job applications, career advertisements, or commercial workforce preparation resources. However, commercial materials were used most frequently. All programs reported that they use computer-assisted instruction for individualization. Real-life or authentic materials were mostly newspapers and magazines.

### *Motivational Culture*

Although supervisors and teachers reported that programmatic and instructional characteristics affected their GED rates, establishing and maintaining a culture that focused on motivation was a prominent theme among the programs. The “motivational culture” identified in this study explains how programs “do things around here” so that participants feel welcome, at ease, engaged, and motivated to learn. This included caring relationships with participants, effective attendance and retention strategies, establishment of mutually agreed-upon individual goals, and use of external incentives, such as monetary bonuses used by the Department of Human Services to promote educational achievement. Other motivators included informative speakers (including successful program graduates), graduation celebrations, parties and food, field trips, and achievement certificates. Teachers were intentional about creating a learning environment. To help students engage in learning, they gradually made them comfortable, built rapport, created a “community in the classroom,” a safe place to work with others (as they would have to do in the workplace). To achieve this, teachers tried to establish peer relationships among students: a sense of caring, helping each other, and sharing successes and troubles. Teachers also talked about the need to build self-esteem, confidence, and a “can do” attitude.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

The findings from this study are only suggestive because of the small sample of participating programs. However, if all programs had the average GED attainment rate of the programs in this study, theoretically it would be possible to raise the average GED attainment rate for all adult education programs that serve welfare recipients or a similar group of adults. The findings correspond to the existing literature on programmatic and instructional characteristics that lead to students’ success in obtaining a secondary credential. One characteristic that emerged from this study was the motivational culture of adult education classrooms, a distinct category that has not been well addressed in the existing literature and warrants further research. The motivational culture was prevalent in all programs and may play a role in retention because it encourages students to stay long enough to reach their goals. Although numerous studies identify effective practice, the lack of research that links program and instructional characteristics leading to outcomes such as GED attainment rates is a surprising gap. This study provides a start in better understanding the relationship between program processes and outcomes.

Implications for practice and program improvement include the following: a) knowing the ratio of GED attainment to enrollment and comparing these data from year to year, b) collecting information after instituting programmatic and instructional changes to see if the changes are effective and lead to higher GED attainment, c) conducting professional development on the strategies that are related to learner outcomes including GED rates; and d) placing an emphasis on a motivational culture where welfare recipients can engage in learning and accomplish their goals. These areas could be among the topics for further investigation by researchers and practitioners.

Although helping welfare recipients attain a GED is multifaceted and complex, program practices, a motivational culture, and instructional approaches do appear to make a difference. This study is a valuable start in understanding the role that program characteristics play in influencing the rates of GED acquisitions.

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