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Persistence Strategies in Adult Literacy Programs Supported by Community Colleges

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Keywords: adult literacy, GED, community college, persistence, transition

Abstract: This roundtable will focus on the reasons why adult learners persist long enough to obtaining a post-secondary degree or certification. Furthermore, this study in progress is investigating the impact adult literacy and GED transition programs have on adult learners in post-secondary education.

Across the United States, a vast number of programs are dedicated to assist General Educational Development (GED) graduates into postsecondary education. According to Yoost (2007), community colleges in Texas have instituted a number of initiatives that focus on increasing the number of GED graduates who transition into higher education. Similarly, research conducted by the Lumina Foundation found that underrepresented adults experience financial challenges, attendance issues, and low completion rates when compared to traditional students in higher education. In addition, GED holders' completion rates of an associate's degree, a postsecondary certification program or a four-year degree is significantly lower than the traditional student's completion rates. A study conducted by Murnane, Willett and Boudett (1999) about the effects the GED credential might have on male high school dropouts' wage trajectories showed that only 3 percent of the GED students in the sample obtained an associate's degree and only 12 percent completed one year of postsecondary education.

In "Focus on Basics", a quarterly publication published by The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), Spohn and Kallenbach (2004), describe support systems provided by adult basic education programs to assist GED students in their transition to college. The list includes: free courses in college reading, writing, pre-algebra along with a college survival skills course that covers note taking, test taking, time and stress management.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the role community colleges have in assisting adult learners' transition from adult literacy programs into postsecondary education. In addition, the discussion will focus on how adult literacy programs contribute to adult learners' enrollment in postsecondary education.

Research Design

This qualitative study in progress includes a large community college system in an urban setting. This site was selected because it houses an adult basic education program and a GED transition program. The participants of this study consisted of two administrators: the Director of Adult Education and Continuing Education Programs, and the Program Manager of GED student transition. In addition, a total of ten GED graduates who are currently enrolled in their last year of a certificate program or an associate's degree at the college have been selected to participate in the study. These participants were selected to get their perspectives on the role the transition program at the community college plays in their retention and completion of a post-secondary education.

Findings to Date

Our findings to date suggest that three main forces are critical support mechanisms when it comes to adult students persisting in post-secondary education. Firstly, interviewees discussed the impact of the GED transition program on their decision to enroll in college. The college orientation session given to GED students prior to the GED test provides the necessary information about how to enroll in college. Students discussed that the idea of going to college was not feasible for them due to their busy lives as parents and workers along with lack of funds to afford college. They talked about not being aware they could attend college as a GED graduate, and not knowing the different ways colleges facilitate their enrollment by providing evening and weekend classes, financial aid, counseling, and baby-sitting among other student support services. One participant said: "I thought I could not be accepted into college because I had a GED."

Secondly, interviewees emphasized their spouses as one of the main reasons why they are able to further their education. Spouses provide not only encouragement, but also support in taking care of the children in the evenings or weekends when classes take place. "My husband is my biggest cheerleader," one interviewee emphasized when asked about support systems she could count on to attend classes.

Lastly, adult learners' intrinsic motivation seems to be a constant for most interviewees to date. Even though many mentioned wanting an associate's degree or a certification in a particular area; most claimed that their persistence was directly related to their children. Adult learners who go back to school after many years of working entry level jobs and raising their children want to set the example. In certain instances, these learners only realized the importance of obtaining a GED and subsequently a post-secondary degree once they became parents.

Conclusion

Adult learners differ from the traditional student in many ways. It is important for educators to acknowledge these differences in order to reach these learners in ways that will foster continued support throughout their time in school. Whether adult learners are enrolled in adult literacy programs or in college, education institutions must tailor their programs to fit the non-traditional learner.

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