IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES FOR GED RECIPIENTS: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Started in 1942, the GED test provides people a high school equivalency diploma to gain new career and educational goals. While many GED recipients state they wish to earn a college credential, few earn one, often dropping out before their second semester of college. To increase the number of GED recipients and their career and college opportunities, career bridge programs have been introduced to several adult education programs across the United States. This case study compares one example of these new bridge programs to a traditional adult education program to identify ways adult education programs can not only prepare students to pass the GED test, but also provide them with the skills needed to be successful at the postsecondary level. Results of the case study provided a comprehensive review of the programs’ policies and procedures, approaches to instruction, and students’ individual experiences partaking in one of the two programs and how they felt the programs prepared them for college success. Findings highlight the differences and similarities between the programs, GED recipients’ need for support services, and the skills adult education programs should include to increase GED recipients’ chances of obtaining a postsecondary credential. Finally, suggestions are offered based on the findings for adult education programs to implement to increase their students’ chances of college persistence and success.

*Keywords:* GED test, GED diploma, adult education, career bridge program, non-traditional student persistence, non-traditional student success, community college, postsecondary education
Dedication and Acknowledgements

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Adult education programs across the United States offer those who never earned a high school diploma the chance to go back to earn a high school equivalency credential in order to attend college or improve their employment opportunities. The most notable high school equivalency test is the General Education Development (GED) test. A number of community partners including community and technical colleges, nonprofits, churches, and career depots offer classes free of charge to those wanting to earn a GED diploma. Most of these programs focus solely on the content needed to pass the GED exam, leaving out crucial information and training students need to be successful beyond the earning of their GED diploma. One way states are suggesting to better prepare students for college or career is through bridge programs that provide associated training to adult education students with specific career interests (Gewertz, 2011). This study focused on the impact bridge programs are making in adult education by comparing postsecondary education enrollment and success of GED recipients from a career bridge program to those from a traditional adult education program to find out if bridge programs are making a difference. Specifically, the purpose of this comparative case study was to discover whether a career bridge program increases postsecondary enrollment compared to a traditional adult education program at the same community college, and what about each program has the most impact on student success during their time in college. For example, does having homework, graded assignments, reading assignments, and contextualized work help to better prepare them for college level coursework? Does the type of instructional methods used and the addition of a transition specialist make a difference as well? For this study, student success is generally defined by time taken to earn a GED diploma once enrolled in an adult education program, enrollment into a community college, and continuing registration in following
students. Knowledge generated can inform adult education practitioners and administrators of changes to state policies for alignment and support of bridge programs, best instructional approaches, and program effectiveness towards earning a GED diploma, postsecondary credits, and a certificate or degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). With the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 calling for career pathways in adult education, information about the formation and success rate of such programs will be paramount to all involved.

Following, a brief overview of the research related to adult education programs, the GED test, and current trends of GED recipients in postsecondary are given to provide context and background to the study. Next, the rationale and significance of the study are discussed to give the reader an idea of why the work is so important. Then the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented for examination purposes of the study. Finally, the theoretical framework taken from Terenzini and Reason (2005) is discussed as it provides the lens from which this study was conducted.

**Context and Background**

Students with a high school diploma equivalency degree, or GED diploma, are often not well-prepared for the rigors of college. Approximately 66% of students who enter an adult education program do so with the goal of attending college, but only 31% enroll in postsecondary education over a five-year time period, and of those, less than 12% graduate with a degree (Tyler, 2003). When comparing GED graduates to traditional high school graduates, Patterson, Song, and Zhang (2009) noted that 64% of high school graduates matriculated to college within the same year of earning their high school diploma compared to only 31% of GED diploma recipients. Along with matriculation rates, a report by the American Council on
Education (2011) found that after six years of being enrolled at a community college, only one third of GED recipients had graduated with half leaving before completion of a degree, compared to half of traditional high school graduates earning a college credential and only a third dropping out before receiving a degree. When looking at specific states, these numbers are even more concerning. For example, Ryder (2011) studied Iowa students over a five-year period, finding only two percent of students who earned a GED credential and enrolled in community college earned a degree. With job projections predicting that 65% of jobs will require education or training beyond a high school diploma or equivalent by 2020, steps need to be taken to improve the college success rate of GED recipients if they are to flourish in society and contribute to the economy (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Smith & Locke, 1999). Unless adult education programs make some drastic changes, these numbers will not improve, leaving the United States with 40-44 million people operating at the lowest literacy level defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) and not substantially contributing to the economy (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2002). The addition of a career bridge model into current adult education programs is one way to provide students with skills training and better preparation for college level coursework. By incorporating bridge programs, adult education programs can potentially increase the number of GED recipients receiving a postsecondary credential and entering a career.

The U.S. Department of Education (2011) discusses how important students’ education in years prior to entering college is to their college completion rates. For GED recipients, this means their time in adult education programs is related to their ability to complete college. Recently, there have been some changes to adult education programs across the nation with the inclusion of programs such as START (Successful Transitions and Retention Track Program) in
Idaho, I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) in Washington, and OPABS (Oregon Pathways for Adult Basic Skills Transition to Education and Work) in Oregon (Martin & Broadus, 2013; Nix & Michalak, 2012; Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011; Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010). The goal of such programs is to provide a more holistic teaching approach in adult education classrooms to include soft skills training such as time management and communication skills, specific career training through contextualized learning, counseling for academics and career, and improved instruction. Unfortunately, such programs are new and very little data is available to note the impact such changes are making for students. What data there is has been positive for such programs, finding higher numbers of GED recipients and increased postsecondary enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2012; Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011). For example, in a study on the I-BEST model, Zeidenberg, Cho, and Jenkins (2010) found those enrolled in the program were significantly more likely to make gains on basic skills tests, earn college credits, and receive a certificate or degree than those who did not participate in the program. Current research is mostly limited to comparisons between GED recipients and high school graduates on their success rates at enrolling in college, completing a degree, and earnings in the workforce (Tyler, 2003). Other studies have identified barriers to GED recipients transitioning on to postsecondary (Nix & Machalak, 2012), but none have identified changes to make to adult education programs’ structures, policies, or practices to help students overcome their barriers. Nor, has anyone looked at postsecondary outcomes of GED recipients from career bridge programs or noted if such programs are better preparing students for postsecondary education than traditional ones (Martin & Broadus, 2013; Nix & Michalak, 2012; Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011; Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate if career bridge programs improve postsecondary
enrollment rates and success for GED recipients compared to traditional GED preparation programs through the second semester of college and what components of each type of adult education program are linked to student outcomes.

**Rationale and Significance**

With over 1 million high school students dropping out every year and statistics showing only 18% of ninth graders will ever earn a postsecondary degree, the need for adult education programs that offer GED diplomas or other high school equivalency credentials while preparing students for higher education is apparent (Blackboard Institute, 2011). Last year, in my own adult education program, out of a survey of 205 graduates, only 35 had enrolled in a postsecondary degree program during the fiscal year and subsequent semester, and research shows even less will finish with a college degree of some level (Georgia Adult Learners Information System [GALIS], 2015; Tyler, 2003). With 65% of jobs requiring education or training beyond high school or equivalent by 2020, adult education programs across the nation need to be focusing on ways to assist students with not only passing the GED test, but providing them with the skills needed to successfully complete a postsecondary degree and enter a life-sustaining job or career (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Smith & Locke, 1999). The achievement gap, including educational and economic gains, for GED recipients is a significant problem for the education community, as well as the economy, and has repercussions for policymakers, practitioners, students, and employers.

One important factor for policymakers is the implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) that requires adult education programs to make sure individuals are prepared with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce (United States Department of Education, 2014). Current programs
are failing to adequately meet these standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). A 2014 survey of GED graduates showed 67% indicated higher education as their reason for returning to take the GED test with the hopes that earning a degree would lead to better and more sustained employment opportunities (Tyler, 2003). However, Tyler (2003) discovered that only seven percent of GED students enrolled in community college while Martin and Broadus (2013) found that only three percent of students made it to their second semester of college.

At the micro- and macro-economic level, the impact of having a college degree is substantial. Rocha and Ponczek (2011) discovered that illiterate adults, those unable to read or write, only make 31% of the hourly wage that literate adults make and are more likely to be unemployed and on financial assistance. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (United States Department of Labor, 2015) shows that not only do wages increase with degree attainment, but unemployment rates diminish as well. Earning potentials for someone entering an adult education program and earning an associate’s degree increase by over $300 a week while the unemployment rate drops from over 9% to less than 5%. These numbers continue to differentiate as a person earns higher level degrees (United States Department of Labor, 2015).

Not only is degree attainment important at the local, state, and national level educationally and economically, but it is important on a personal level as well. For those who earn a GED diploma and continue on to earn some college level degree or diploma, standard of living and quality of life increases (Baum & Payea, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). According to a number of studies, those who earn a GED diploma and continue onto postsecondary schooling have higher self-efficacy and self-esteem, increased motivation, set goals, participate in school and community activities more often, and have less economic and family distress (Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999; Groto & Martin, 2009; Nix & Machalak,
2012; Rosenthal, 1998). Mangan (2015) reviewed a program called Connect2Complete which helped to boost self-esteem in students taking remedial classes in community colleges through service learning and peer mentoring, finding that retention rates increased as confidence levels and students’ connections to instructors and peers increased. These findings are important for teachers and program administrators for changes to the classroom environment that could promote degree completion in students.

One way adult education programs can enhance learner persistence through postsecondary education is the creation of career bridge programs that link adult education students to career pathways and college programs. Such programs have only begun to surface in the last decade, and no research is available to attest to their contribution to earning a postsecondary credential for GED recipients (George, 2012). The significance of researching such programs is clear. This research will expand the knowledge around adult education career bridge programs and improved retention and graduation rates of GED recipients enrolled in postsecondary education which will improve their lives, their families’ lives, communities, and the economy. The implications for students, instructors, program administrators, employers, policymakers, and researchers make exploring career bridge programs an important focus of study and research.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this comparative case study was to examine the postsecondary enrollment rates and first year success of GED recipients from a career bridge program and a traditional adult education program at the same community college in order to better understand the impact and importance of career bridge programs for adult education.
To increase positive postsecondary outcomes for GED recipients, modifications must be identified for adult education programs. This study was designed to collect qualitative information from administrators, instructors, and students who came from either the college’s career bridge program or traditional adult education program in order to explore changes for adult education programs to better support GED recipients’ continued success at the postsecondary level.

Research Question

The research was guided by this overarching question: What role does the type of adult education program completed (career bridge program or traditional adult education program) play in the success of GED recipients enrolled at the same community college?

Sub-question one. Are there differences in pre-college academic preparedness (GED instructional materials and teaching methods) of GED recipients from a career bridge program versus a traditional adult education program?

Sub-question two. How prepared for and successful are GED recipients once enrolled in a college program?

Definitions of Key Terminology

For the purpose of this study, there are several key terms that need to be defined. Below, the types of adult education programs included in the study, as well as the postsecondary outcomes, are explained as they are understood within this study.

Traditional Adult Education Program – For this study, a traditional adult education program is defined as a program that provides instruction in reading, numeracy, and GED preparation for adults and out-of-school youths, ages 16 and older.
Career Bridge Program – This study defines career bridge program at the adult education level as a program that combines GED preparation with developmental academics and career and technical instruction and connects students to a postsecondary program of study at the community college.

Postsecondary Enrollment Rate – For this study, postsecondary enrollment rates will include those who enrolled within two semesters after earning a GED diploma.

Student Success – For this study, student success will be determined by the student’s ability to complete the first semester of college and their subsequent enrollment in a second semester of college.

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) model of student learning and persistence which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) integrated model of influences on student learning and persistence. The model assumes

- students come to college with a variety of personal, academic, and social background characteristics and experiences that both prepare and dispose them, to varying degrees, to engage with the various formal and informal learning opportunities their institution offers. These precollege characteristics shape students’ subsequent college experiences through their interactions with their institution’s environment and its major agents of socialization. (p. 6)
This framework offers a lens through which to explore institution-specific behaviors of adult education programs and individual experiences affecting student persistence in order to improve retention rates towards postsecondary completion.

The model was developed from the Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year Project (John Gardner Institute, 2017), a two-year national research and development effort looking to increase the understanding of the multiple, interconnected factors that influence academic success and persistence among first-year college students (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). The Foundations of Excellence® (FoE) (Drake, 2010) project was sponsored by the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Studies and helps institutions to focus on evaluating its policies, practices, and programs rather than on the characteristics or outcomes of students. The FoE (Drake, 2010) model includes a set of principles called the Foundational Dimensions®, developed by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (Drake, 2010). These Dimensions are the basis for the constructs in Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) model. The first-year principles include:

- Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices.
- Foundations Institutions create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.
- Foundations Institutions deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution’s philosophy and mission.
• Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty.
• Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.
• Foundations Institutions serve all first-year students according to their varied needs.
• Foundations Institutions ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.
• Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society.
• Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement. (John Gardner Institute, 2017)

Utilizing these Dimensions and Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991, 2005) 30-year review of research on student change, Terenzini and Reason (2005) developed their model to include the “multiple forces operating in multiple settings to influence student learning and persistence” (p. 5). Before delving into the specifics of Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) framework, a brief overview of the models that led to the creation of their framework are given.

History and Seminal Authors

Terenzini and Reason (2005) developed their model from an extension and synthesis of models by Astin (1985), Tinto (1975), Pascarella (1985), and Berger and Milem (2000). Each involves certain aspects of student attrition and retention from the environment to individual
student factors and rests upon sociological and social psychological foundations (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

**Involvement theory.** Astin’s (1999) simple theory of involvement provides a way to determine environmental influences on student development while being able to embrace ideologies from psychoanalysis and classical learning theory. Derived in 1975 from a longitudinal study of college dropouts, Astin (1975) defined involvement as the amount of psychological and physical energy a student puts into their academic experience and based the theory on the philosophy that student learning increases the more involved they are with the academic and social aspects of their education. According to Astin (1999), three factors influence involvement: academic involvement, student involvement, and student peer involvement with each changing over time. Involvement theory also acknowledges that there are other outside factors influencing student changes including friends, family, jobs, and extracurricular activities. The theory of involvement is significant for those in the educational field as it can set the tone for more effective curriculum and educational programs for students which can increase enrollment and retention while assisting students in gaining higher grade point averages, higher degrees, and life skills, while also guiding quantitative and qualitative research (Astin, 1999).

**Theory of retention.** Tinto’s (1975) theory of retention (also known as student departure or student persistence) originated with his and Cullen’s (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) work on longitudinal studies of student attrition. Based on Spady’s (1970) Theory of College Dropout and Bean’s (1980) Theory of Student Attrition, Tinto’s (1975) theory of retention proposes students need interactions with others at the college and congruency with the college’s value patterns in order for retention. If these are low, students will have less commitment to their social system,
increasing the probability they will leave and seek alternative activities. Both Tinto (1975) and Spady (1970) created their theories in relation to Durkheim’s (1897) suicide theory which advocates some people commit suicide because their values do not align with their social group’s or because the group does not support them. Tinto’s (1975) theory also includes ties to the field of economics of education, specifically cost-benefit analysis regarding student choice of alternative educational activities. Tinto’s (1993) model includes six factors that could influence a student’s decision to continue with higher education: prior schooling and family background, student commitment and institutional goals, institutional experiences with academic administrators, academic and social involvement, intentional and external commitments, and outcomes or departure decisions. Tinto believed these factors influence a student’s decision to begin postsecondary and to make commitments and goals based on interactions once in the college prompting degree completion or dropping out.

Tinto continued to add to his theories, making revisions to it in 1987 and 1993. As of the late 1990’s, there were 15 testable propositions of Tinto’s theory in use by researchers (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). Metz (2004) stated that Tinto’s theory is the most cited and used theoretical framework for studying student persistence and attrition and has evolved over time through re-examination and revisions after critiques were made of Tinto’s original 1975 model.

**General model for assessing change.** Pascarella’s (1985) model for assessing change incorporates both environmental and institutional characteristics and is largely an extension of Astin’s (1985) input-environment-outcome college impact model where students’ characteristics at the start of college are the input, their educational experiences are the environment, and their characteristics upon completing college are the outcome. Pascarella’s (1985) model includes five key sets of variables that can directly or indirectly impact student change. The first of these are
student background/precollege traits and structural/organizational characteristics of institutions, which together, establish the third set of variables referred to as institutional environment. The effects of all of these factors influence the fourth set of variables, interactions with agents of socialization. The final set of variables is quality of student effort. Together, the direct and indirect effects of these variables can be used to measure student change as it relates to learning and cognitive development (Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While the model was initially developed to only measure student change in relation to learning and cognitive development, Pascarella (1985) did note its relevance for other student outcomes and the need to extend the model.

**Modified model of college student persistence.** Milem and Berger (1997) contributed to research by using Astin’s (1985) theory to understand Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure. They suggested that student behavior and perceptions interact to influence students’ social integration and academic development (Milem & Berger, 1997). Milem and Berger (1997) believed involvement is critical to students’ process of persistence. Focusing on Tinto’s stages of transition through incorporation, Milem and Berger (1997) suggested Astin’s (1975) ideas of involvement were extremely helpful in understanding college student persistence. According to Tinto (1993), the level of involvement with the new norms and rituals of the college and the move away from the traditional behaviors and norms from past associations relate to a student’s successful incorporation. Milem and Berger (1997) set out to further define this process and to “specify mechanisms by which students form judgments and perceptions regarding the extent to which they ‘fit’ in the academic and social systems of their institution” (p. 390). Specifically, they proposed that the incorporation, or lack thereof, of students into the college environment resulted from a sequence of interactions between their behaviors and perceptions. In relation to
Astin’s (1975) theory, the researchers suggested this happens through a student’s involvement with their institution and their perceptions about the institution and how well they fit in (Berger & Milem, 2000). In the model, students enter college with specific characteristics then begin to engage in behaviors representative of involvement with the college. Their level of involvement influences their perceptions of the degree to which the school supports their academic and social experiences which in turn, influences the level of “energy” students will then put forth to further their involvement, leading to their successful or unsuccessful incorporation into the college’s social and academic systems (Berger & Milem, 1997). Based on their involvement behaviors and subsequent levels of institutional commitment, researchers can predict students’ departure decisions.

Ro, Terenzini, and Yin (2013) mentioned that Berger and Milem’s (2000) model seems to be the first to address in any significant detail the indirect and interlaced effects of an institution’s structural, organizational, and socio-demographic behavior and characteristics have on student outcomes. They address organizational behavior through five dimensions: bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic organizational behaviors, all of which they state, “affect different types of [student] behavior in different ways” (Berger & Milem, 2000, p. 311). Each of the five dimensions is suggested to influence and help shape peer environments and students’ experiences either directly or indirectly (Ro, Terenzini, & Yin, 2013).

**Conclusion.** Each of these models focuses on specific characteristics or aspects of a students’ life prior to entering college and their time during college to study student changes and outcomes. Unfortunately, except for the inclusion of engagement with faculty as a measure for Tinto’s (1993) and Berger and Milem’s (2000) theories, institutional factors such as class size,
teaching style, and budgets are left unexplored in their relation to student involvement and attrition. Terenzini and Reason (2005) noted this limitation of previous theories and set out to develop a more all-inclusive model to study student change and outcomes.

**Terenzini and Reason’s Integrated Model**

Terenzini and Reason (2005) believed the previous models mentioned above were too narrowly focused on certain aspects affecting student outcomes. For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified in their review two different groups of theories and frameworks that had so far guided research surrounding college impacts. The first, they labeled “developmental” in relation to the students and the second, they called “college impact models” which dealt with the college environment and origins of student change. They worked to develop a comprehensive model that included *intraindividual* changes created through the nature, structure, and processes of human growth, but also, *inter*individual changes in response to institutional traits, student experiences, and campus environment or culture. The authors also sought to provide a model that identified aspects associated with an institution’s internal organizational features such as structure, curriculum, policies, faculty recruitment, and budgetary and staffing arrangements, as no previous model provided for such influential factors on students’ college experiences. Believing Berger and Milem’s (1997) dimensions to be too abstract, Terenzini and Reason (2005) suggested just three domains that would provide more actionable guidance to administrators on an organization’s context and internal operations: 1) internal structures, practices, and policies; 2) academic and co-curricular programs, policies, and practices; and 3) faculty culture. Instead of attempting to identify every factor that could be involved in their model, Terenzini and Reason (2005) instead suggested examples within each domain that faculty members and administrators may have some control over in order to assist them in increasing
educational effectiveness of their institutes. They believed specific organizational structures, practices, and policies were more likely than institutional features, such as size or public versus private, to influence student outcomes through students’ experiences and the values promoted by the institution (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

While the dimensions look at internal structures, Terenzini and Reason (2005) also developed constructs to study student influences. Student experiences are guided by three primary sets of influences: students’ individual experiences, the peer environment, and aspects of the institution’s internal organizational context (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). These experiences are broken down into four constructs for review.

**Constructs**

The model includes four sets of constructs encompassing a wide assortment of variables affecting student persistence: (a) student precollege characteristics and experiences (including socio-demographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and student dispositions); (b) the organizational context, (c) the student peer environment; and (d) the individual student experience (a subset of the student peer environment), comprised of classroom experiences, out-of-class experiences, and curricular experiences (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). These constructs cover the major categories affecting student retention or implied by the nine Foundational Dimensions, discovered by the FoE’s project staff in their First Year College Project (2011), which “underlie the structures, activities, and cultures of institutions that are effective in promoting the success and persistence of…students” (Terenzini & Reason, 2005, p. 3).

**Precollege characteristics and experiences.** The first construct consists primarily of socio-demographic traits including socioeconomic status, parent educational achievement, high school GPA, race, ethnicity, and gender (Reason, 2009). Multiple studies, including Astin (1985,
1993), Pascarella (1985), Tinto (1975, 1993), and Weidman (1989), have used these factors to study college retention rates and student persistence with socioeconomic status and GPA being the greatest predictors of college retention (ACT, 2004). Student disposition, another precollege concept derived from Tinto’s (1975) model of student intentions and commitment, suggests high goals and motivation levels in students lead to increased persistence (Artze-Vega, 2012). Although, not as widely studied, student disposition has been shown to influence persistence through the third year of college (ACT, 2007).

Organizational context. The second construct examines the institution’s structural-demographic characteristics and its organizational behaviors. These include institution size, curricular mission, type (public versus private), admissions selectivity, financial aid, policies, and values. Research findings regarding these factors have been mixed (Reason, 2009). However, Terenzini and Reason (2005) concluded that what organizations do (actions, policies, values) have more impact on student outcomes than what they are (size, type, location).

Peer environment. Thirdly, peers have been shown to be highly influential on student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Braxton and Lee (2005) noted peer environment actually facilitates or inhibits social integration which is empirically linked to student persistence and academic commitment. Reason (2009) supported the finding, suggesting student peer environment affects an individual’s ability to integrate within the institution and/or feel a sense of belonging. Racial climate is one main concern of peer environmental influence on student persistence, as well as out-of-class experiences or a student’s level of engagement or involvement in extracurricular activities (Artze-Vega, 2012).

Individual student experience. Finally, the fourth construct, individual student experiences including curricular and classroom experiences, involves students’ academic
integration, with research showing that GPA is the best predictor of student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978). Tinto (2006) and Reason (2009) proposed student involvement in the classroom is important to student retention because the classroom is the only place where students meet peers and faculty and is regularly inhabited by every student. Reason (2009) noted classrooms are imperative “when [they] become the only organizational context students experience” (p. 678). Surprisingly, very little research is available connecting students’ classroom experiences to persistence and retention; although, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted student experiences most immediately shape student learning, change, and persistence.

**Critiques of the Theory**

One main critique of this framework is the amount of variables it encompasses and the given magnitude and complexity of it which may seem overwhelming to some researchers (Reason, 2009). However, Terenzini and Reason (2005) developed the model in response to previous models being too narrowly focused and not producing an entire picture of factors affecting student outcomes. They wished to join sociocultural influences with internal organizational ones in an attempt to identify direct and indirect influences on student behavior. This may have led them to a model that is too much to take on in one study by a single researcher. Another critique is its “more-or-less linear” flow of influences on student behavior which are undoubtedly, much less linear than presented with little guidance on what the actual patterns might be (Terenzini & Reason, 2005, p.13). Others have pointed out that influences are more likely to be indirect rather than direct as the framework suggests (Lattuca, Terenzini, & Volkwein, 2006; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2005, 2006). Additionally, the framework does not allow for internal organizational structure (i.e. type of control, size, mission, and budget) review, as it only focuses on the influence they have on student experiences and outcomes, not if
the structures themselves need to be changed or adjusted. Finally, the focus on organizational context factors (i.e. faculty culture, academic and co-curricular programs, and internal structures, practices, and policies) makes the framework useful only for multi-institutional studies, or in cases where departments or programs may vary within the same institute such as adult education programs (Ro, Terenzini, & Yin, 2013; Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

**Rationale**

This research study utilized Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) model due to its ability to not only encompass individual student experiences, but program structures as well on influences to student persistence and success. Although the model was originally created to study first-year students, Terenzini and Reason (2005) noted that it could be adapted for use across the entire undergraduate experience. In this case, the model will be adapted to adult education programs housed within the same community college. The model will be modified in order to study GED students within two separate types of programs: a traditional adult education program and a bridge program. Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) model provides the perfect framework for this study as it allows the researcher to view career bridge and traditional adult education program characteristics as one of the constructs relating to student success both at the adult education level and postsecondary level. One main reason for utilizing this theory is the ability to investigate what about the structure of the programs is similar and different and how those similarities and differences lead to potential differences in postsecondary enrollment and success. This is one of the few frameworks that focuses on internal educational environmental influences including policies and practices such as attendance policies, contextualized instruction, curriculum development, and faculty credentials that may influence GED recipients’ success and persistence once enrolled in college. Once similarities and differences are identified, findings
may be used to improve adult education programs and in turn, postsecondary completion rates of GED recipients.

**Application**

In this case, the framework was applied to students’ time in an adult education program as the input and their subsequent enrollment and success after two semesters in postsecondary as the outcome. The focus on student experiences and organizational factors allow for the researcher to study the effects of the students’ adult education experiences on their time in college.

The first construct was modified to look at students’ time before entering an adult education program including factors of last grade completed before dropping out and time out of school. These factors play a role in students’ pre-test scores and ability to enter the career bridge program versus the traditional adult education program. However, the researcher will only be looking at those students who score within the same range on the pre-test for validity reasons when comparing time to complete the GED test between program students.

The second and most important construct to this study allowed for exploration into the organizational structures and practices of each adult education program that affected student success in subsequent years. The researcher focused on the similarities and differences between the career bridge program and the traditional adult education program and what about each helped students be successful at the postsecondary level. This construct allowed the researcher to identify what about the structure of each program lent to student success after GED completion in order to provide administrators and policymakers with an idea for improving adult education programs and meeting WIOA standards.
The third and fourth constructs were utilized to study not only student input from their time in adult education programs, but also to review their outcome measurements of enrollment in and completion of at least one semester of college. Peer environment and individual student experience are useful in identifying reasons why students chose a specific adult education program, flourished and stayed in the program through completion of the GED test, continued on to postsecondary, and were either successful or not at completing their first semester of college and enrolling in another.

There is a high level of need for understanding what makes GED recipients successful in postsecondary education and how adult education programs can help to increase their resilience. This framework allowed for identification of organizational policies and procedures affecting student success and persistence in both the adult education and postsecondary environments.

Conclusion

With WIOA requiring adult education programs to provide career pathways, there is a greater need to understand how these programs are developed, set up, and utilized to help students move towards completion of a postsecondary credential. Before delving into the impact of career bridge and traditional adult education programs on GED recipients’ college success, a literature review is given, focusing on what is already known about GED recipient enrollment and success rates in postsecondary education, barriers to nontraditional student retention and persistence, and how bridge programs are currently impacting the field of adult education.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

With the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act calling for adult education programs to “prepare individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary” (United States Department of Education [DOE], 2014), adult education programs must look for new ways of educating students. Over 60% of GED candidates claim their motivation for wanting a GED diploma is to enroll in postsecondary education (Tyler, 2003). However, less than 12% ever complete a postsecondary credential, making the need for change to better prepare students for college level work evident (Tyler, 2003). Unfortunately, there is limited research on GED instruction and little data available showing what adult education programs can do to help students be more successful in college (Gardner, 2001). This literature review provides a look at what is known about adult education programs’ policies, practices, and structures in order to identify best practices for preparing GED graduates for college level work.

One method for adult education programs to help to improve postsecondary outcomes for GED recipients is through bridge programs or career pathways that link adult education programs to postsecondary institutions (Hoops & Kutrybala, 2015). This study is intended to discover if adult education bridge programs better prepare GED recipients for college compared to traditional adult education programs by looking at enrollment rates and subsequent semester enrollment of students from each program at the same community college. In the following literature review, an overview is given of adult education programs, students’ barriers, and how GED recipients are currently performing in postsecondary. First, the creation of adult education programs is discussed before focusing specifically on traditional programs followed by bridge programs. Next, a look at barriers and challenges GED students face at both the adult education level and in college is provided, as these challenges are often similar at both levels and can be
addressed by making changes to adult education programs’ structures. Finally, what is currently
known about GED recipients’ persistence and success at the community college level is
reviewed to shed light on the need for adult education programs to better prepare students for the
college atmosphere and coursework.

**History of Adult Education Programs and the GED Test**

The GED test was created in 1942 in order to provide soldiers returning from World War
II with a high school equivalency credential that would allow them to find a better job or attend
college or trade school. Considered the “largest high school in America,” the GED test has been
passed by more than 18 million people since its inception, opening doors to new opportunities
for all who have passed in relation to the workforce and educational field (GED Testing Service
[GEDTS], 2015). Since its creation, the GED test has undergone five revisions with the most
recent being in 2014 when it was overhauled to align with Common Core State Standards
(CCSS) and college- and career-readiness standards (CCRS), as well as being offered solely as a
computer-based test (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Skolits, 2014; GEDTS, 2015).

Unfortunately, in many instances, individuals are not prepared for the GED exam. One
way to remedy this is through adult education programs, also known as GED preparation
programs. The federal government allows each state to administer such programs through grants
and state and federal funding with the majority of funds coming from the Workforce Innovation
and Opportunity Act, under Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Duke &
more than 2,500 programs exist. The GEDTS (2015) reports that almost half of the adults who
take the GED exam attend an adult education program prior to attempting the test. In just fiscal
year 2012, over 1.8 million adults participated in such programs (DOE, 2014). For the most part,
participation in adult education programs is voluntary, signifying the need for providers to understand their students, their reasons for participating, and ways to create greater levels of participation (Petty & Thomas, 2014). The following sections provide an overview of how traditional adult education programs operate, along with what is known about the creation and operation of new adult education bridge programs.

Traditional Adult Education Programs

In a number of states, including Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, and New York, adult education programs that offer GED preparation are housed in community or technical colleges and offer training in adult basic and secondary education, numeracy, English as a Second Language, placement testing remediation, and workforce credentialing opportunities (Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012). Other community partners offering such classes include public school systems, libraries, Housing Authority agencies, churches, nonprofits, and other community-based organizations (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education [OCTAE], 2017). GED preparation programs are also offered in a number of correctional facilities due to the need to educate inmates, provide interactions with law-abiding citizens, and the portability of GED preparation and testing material (Lockwood, Nally, Dowdell, McGlone, & Steurer, 2013; Williams, Wheeler, Mance, & Freasier, 1984). While the majority of programs are offered year-round, in some cases funding constraints may affect when, for how long, and for whom programs are able to serve.

Adult education programs provide free instruction and academic preparation for the GED exam in each content area: math, language arts and reading, science, and social studies (GEDTS, 2015; OCTAE, 2017). Adult education program offerings include adult basic education (ABE) which offers instruction in math, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing skills, and other
basic skills needed in the workforce. For higher level students, adult secondary education (ASE) is offered which focuses solely on GED preparation and instruction in the four areas of the GED exam. Finally, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are presented for those needing to work on their English for personal, family, and/or work-related reasons (GEDTS, 2015). Classes are usually offered throughout the week in the morning, afternoon, and evening to accommodate working adults and those with family obligations with some programs offering weekend schedules as well (GEDTS, 2016). Some programs offer open enrollment meaning students may enter and exit the program at any time with classes allowing learners to participate as they are able, while other programs have managed enrollment that takes in cohorts at certain times throughout the year (Gopalakrishnan, 2008).

The GEDTS does not provide policies or procedures for the creation and running of a GED preparation program or adult education program, allowing for great diversity in the way programs are structured and operated. For example, some programs have separate classes for each subject or are separated by grade levels while other programs teach all levels and subjects in one classroom. In some cases, classes function similar to their public K-12 counterparts with everyone working on the same lesson or assignment. In other cases, students may work independently at their own pace. Programs may also choose to combine instructional strategies (Mearns, 2010). Some programs offer computer-based instructional opportunities, in-class instruction, and distance learning (Prins, Drayton, Gungor, & Kassab, 2011).

Haley (2008), a 14-year veteran in adult education, offers insight into traditional adult education programs, discussing what it is like to work in a multi-level classroom with open enrollment, managed enrollment, independent study, and structured class times. Open enrollment can be great for increasing enrollment numbers and meeting state requirements; however, often
times, instructors are interrupted from teaching or helping students one-on-one in order to go through the enrollment process with a new student which includes filling out required application paperwork, intake forms, and completing a skills assessment which can take approximately 2-3 hours (Haley, 2008). On the other hand, managed enrollment allows instructors to schedule a time for new students to complete intake and orientation without interrupting class time. Unfortunately, this often leads to decreased enrollment due to the nature of adult education students (Haley, 2008). They want their needs met immediately and often change their mind about attending classes if they have to wait. In her attempt to find best practices, Haley (2008) discovered that enrollment numbers were lowest with eight weeks in between orientations, slightly better at three weeks, and best with a weekly orientation offering, especially when students could start class the very next day.

As for class structure, Haley (2008) describes how numerous adult education programs have classes set up. Many offer open class and lab times for independent study with teacher assistance if needed and specific class times for the sections of the GED exam that students need the most review for – language arts and math (Haley, 2008). Having structured class times for these two sections of the GED exam allow instructors to cover more information in a shorter amount of time while giving students the chance to learn within a group setting; whereas, the independent study times allow students to focus on their specific areas of concern.

**Instructors and Effective Practices**

The nature of adult education is very different from K-12 systems. For the most part, GED instructors are part-time, come from diverse backgrounds, and lack teacher certification, teaching experience, content area knowledge, and adult education experience (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Skolits, 2014; Mears, 2010). Training and requirements for adult education instructors vary
by state. While all programs across the United States require at least a bachelor’s degree to teach, some do not require the degree to be related to what the instructor will be teaching, nor do they require prior teaching experience (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). For example, Missouri requires instructors to go through a 12-hour training program prior to teaching while Georgia only requires six hours of professional development hours throughout the year (Foushee, 2015; Technical College System of Georgia [TCSG], 2016). Although, many adult education centers are housed within the community college setting, often times, instructors function independently with little supervision or networking opportunities (Mearns, 2010). Mezirow (1991) noted that those involved in adult learning rarely communicate with each other and “fly by the seat of their pants” (p. xi) due to their different backgrounds, frames of reference, and perspectives.

One of few studies focusing specifically on GED instructors is that of Conti (1985) who studied 29 part-time GED instructors’ teaching styles and their students’ learning gains. Conti (1985) found that instructors are most likely to use teacher-centered or learner-centered activities. Surprisingly, findings revealed that student gains were most associated with teacher-centered instructors. Conti (1985) suggested the reason for this was because GED students are more focused on passing the test, so teacher-centered strategies that allow for more immediate progress are favored. A more recent study by Taylor (2002) found that teachers with a wide variety of teaching strategies were the most effective, especially when they created a caring and safe environment for students within their classrooms.

Taylor (2002) was not the first to identify caring and creation of a safe environment as positive attributes for adult educators. In a study by Henry (1983) with close to 500 ABE student participants, teachers’ personal qualities including personable, knowledgeable, understanding, and supportive were identified as the most important to a student’s own failure or success.
Students also noted the most effective teachers were warm, had a sense of humor, were patient, creative, and had knowledge of relevant subject areas (Henry, 1983). Along the same lines as Taylor (2002), King and Wright (2003) offered implications for instruction after interviewing 19 ABE students in their study. They suggested “building a learning environment that is safe, supportive, collaborative, and learner-centered” and using transformative teaching strategies that include “role-plays, class discussion, critical questioning, and group projects” (King & Wright, 2003, pp. 117-118).

From the research described in this section, one can surmise the most effective GED instructors are those who can relate their own educational experiences and assumptions to current practices, develop a caring and safe learning environment, and provide instructional strategies that incorporate the learning styles of the adult students in their classrooms. The ability of GED instructors to incorporate teacher-centered and learner-centered instructional opportunities allows students the chance to quickly learn material, but also puts the responsibility of learning on their shoulders. Making them responsible for their own learning can help to improve their chances of succeeding in postsecondary education.

**Instructional Models**

Although the majority of adult education programs are housed within the community and technical college systems and are provided for through federal funding, Lesgold and Welch-Ross (2012) note the surprising lack of research on effective approaches to adult literacy instruction. Gardner (2001) also mentions that “few classes have a prescribed curriculum to teach students the knowledge base needed” (p. 68) and that unless reviewing material from high school, students lacking instruction within an area may be without a method to resolve their deficiency
due to the structure of practice materials. Following, is a review of the available literature on program operating procedures and instructional strategies.

According to Garvey and Grobe (2011), the predominant model for GED preparation classes is part-time study for brief periods, in most cases, 20 hours or less a week. This is just instructional time offerings. For example, programs in Georgia suggest students attend a minimum of six hours a week, well below the offered amount of class time (TCSG, 2016). In Connecticut, attendance hours vary widely from 3-15 hours a week (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). However, most students need much more than just a quick brush up on skills and academics in order to succeed in college. Martin, Martin, & Southworth (2015) discuss the inability of GED students to effectively “learn” and the need for instructors to not only teach academic material, but also “how to learn” (p. 28). Garvey and Grobe (2011) note that even once students enter a GED preparation program, “it is unlikely that its curriculum, instruction, or assessments are robust enough to ensure they will do well on the test” (p. 9) and even less likely that the preparation will assist them in passing college placement tests and excelling in college level coursework. Identifying ways to improve instructional strategies for adult students is paramount for their success in college.

Oftentimes, traditional adult education programs focus more on passing the GED test instead of instilling the knowledge and skills needed to succeed beyond a GED diploma. As Garvey and Grobe (2011) mention, programs tend to focus on getting students passing scores on the GED test instead of higher scores that denote college readiness. They use commercial materials geared strictly towards the GED test, leaving out opportunities for contextualized learning and a deeper understanding of concepts that will stick with students (Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). According to Gardner (2001), all published GED preparation materials are
designed the same way – pre-test, practice problems and exercises, and post-test – with students practicing tests and problems until they make a score high enough to ensure they will pass the GED test. Instruction offered pays little heed to life experiences and the ways students learn, leaving them with little relevance to their lives and ways to carry information on to their college careers (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). The predominance of rote learning or behaviorist instructional approaches through teacher-directed classes using programmed workbooks and materials often leave students disorganized, unclear, and unstable and without the critical thinking and transferable skills they need to pass the GED test or do well in college (Martin et al., 2015). For example, a study by Purcell-Gates, Degener, and Jacobson (1998) investigating 271 adult education programs found that 73% of them used materials decontextualized from students’ lives which attributed to poor performance on the GED test. If GED recipients are to succeed at the postsecondary level, more curricula and extensive practice need to be available within adult education programs that match what students will be asked to achieve in their college classes.

**College and career readiness standards.** Adult education programs have been working to reduce the gap between secondary and postsecondary education. In 2011, CCRS launched to the forefront of adult education instructional methods with the hopes of aligning adult education standards with CCSS and eliminating the need for students to take remedial classes once in college (Pimentel, 2013; Rutschow & Crary-Ross, 2014). These standards have been adopted by 46 states (Pimentel, 2013). According to Pimentel (2013), the “central purpose of this effort is to forge a stronger link among adult education [and] postsecondary education” by “raising awareness and understanding of the critical skills and knowledge expected and required for success in college [and] technical training programs” (p. 1).
The standards for English language arts and mathematics were released in 2013 (DOE, 2013), and Pimentel’s (2013) report includes content for adult education students to learn the standards necessary to do well on the GED test and in college. In response to the change to CCRS, several publishers, including Kaplan, McGraw Hill, and Houghton-Mifflin have offered new GED preparation workbooks that align with new Common Core-aligned assessment targets in order to better prepare students for the GED test (GEDTS, 2017). The new math content includes concepts typically taught in beginning and advanced algebra, geometry, and statistics courses while the language arts standards mandate strong oral and written communication skills along with solid reasoning and analytical abilities (Pimentel, 2013). The adult education standards are paired down and more focused on specific ideas than the K-12 standards due to adult students spending, on average, less than 100 hours studying before taking the GED test (Pimentel, 2013). With how relatively new CCRS are, it is unknown at this time if they are properly preparing students for the rigors of college work or improving enrollment and retention numbers in either adult education programs or postsecondary institutions.

**Enrollment, Persistence, and Program Effectiveness**

There are a number of factors involved with student enrollment and persistence, many of which involve individual and social factors experienced by each student. However, Link (2006) discovered several factors within the classroom that are related to student enrollment and persistence within adult education that can be controlled by the instructors and programs. Knowing how to improve meaningful direct instruction, integrating computer technology, adopting smaller class sizes, providing some higher-intensity services, and having caring instructors can all lead to greater student achievement and persistence (Link, 2006). Link (2006) also noted the importance of building connections between students, their peers, and teachers in
student retention, stating that it might be just as important as having goals and being able to identify progress towards those goals. Following, specific studies touch more on these factors and how they influence retention and persistence of students working towards their GED diploma.

Gopalakrishnan (2008) found in a comparison of GED preparation programs to adult secondary completion programs in Connecticut that the GED preparation programs had the least amount of structure and requirements. This lax learning environment led to the lowest graduation rates with fewer than 20% of learners passing the GED exam within the same year of enrolling in the program (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). The preparation programs also had the highest rate of learners exiting before program completion at close to double the rates of those leaving the secondary completion programs. Likewise, they had the lowest rate of returnees within 1-3 years of exiting the program. Students returned to GED preparation programs at less than 40% compared to the secondary completion programs which had returnee rates around 70% (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). One suggestion for the low retention rates in GED preparation programs is the lack of goals and skill measurements throughout the program. Passing the GED exam is the only end goal, so for those who come in at a lower skill level, this goal may seem out of reach, leading them to leave the program before making any skill gains (Gopalakrishnan, 2008).

Gardner (2001) conducted a study comparing three different instructional strategies for adult education programs within an independent school system in Texas. The three program types included a traditional setting using commercially prepared materials and teacher instruction, a test-retest program that used only GEDTS practice tests for preparation, and a computer-assisted instruction program. She found no significant difference between pass rates and scores on the GED test between the three groups of students. However, pass rates for all
three groups were notably low with an average pass rate of just 27% among the groups, although she noted the graduate groups’ scores were two points higher than district averages (Gardner, 2001). Similar completion rates were found by Ryder and Hagedorn (2012) who studied GED candidates within Iowa’s adult education programs. Of the 11,675 candidates who enrolled between July 2003 and June 2004, only 32% obtained their GED diploma within the consecutive five-year period studied (Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012).

Champagne (1983) compared programs in Boston based on funding type: 1) school sponsored programs support by State Department of Education funds, 2) community-based programs that received state funding, 3) non-state funded programs that received community block grants and charged tuition to students, and 4) testing sites (as a control group). Findings from the study suggest those who partake in a GED preparation program before taking the GED exam score significantly higher than those who test without formal preparation. Other significant findings from the study include state-funded programs have higher graduation rates and key variables related to differences between programs include enrollment policies, operating procedures, and teaching methods. For instance, the non-state funded programs with lower graduation rates had closed enrollment, operated on a semester basis, and utilized a lecture instructional method (Champagne, 1983). Champagne (1983) noted in her discussion that more attention needs to be given to program practice differences as they play an important role in student outcomes. Hayes (1988) also suggests the most effective recruitment and retention strategies may be to tailor individual programs to meet the needs of the specific groups they’re serving.

Kerka (1988) reviewed five successful programs and their recruitment and retention tools. Ideas included certain training models, enlisting the help of outside agencies, and
increasing management techniques within the classroom. The first program, located in Kentucky, follows a four-phase model that touches on students, teachers, and instruction before following up with an evaluation. The program utilizes a number of recruitment resources, provides training to their instructors beyond just teaching the subject areas such as psychological factors and counseling techniques, and uses individualized instructional materials for students, leading them to a 79% retention rate (Darling, Puckett, & Paull, 1983). Missouri’s Adult Education Dropout Project utilizes a large number of outside sources as well including counselors, school principals, and other agencies to increase referrals and enrollment (Kerka, 1988). During their first year, 75% of the people referred to them enrolled in ABE classes (Martin, 1987). Lastly, an adult education center in South Florida incorporated behavioristic principle techniques in their classrooms to decrease student attrition (Kerka, 1988). Behaviors included the use of small groups to increase social facilitation, reinforcement of schedules including having a specific day for testing, and teaching breathing exercises to reduce test anxiety (Pelzer, 1986). The common thread throughout these successful programs is including everyone in the process and identifying what the students at their specific locations need in order to be successful.

**Conclusion**

With varying regulations for administering adult education programs across states and limited funding, those within the field must get creative in serving the large population of adults without a high school diploma. Increasing the professional development and/or training for instructors in order to improve their adequacy at teaching the GED exam subject areas and expend their arsenal of instructional strategies to include everyone’s learning styles is one place to start. Also, identifying limitations of class time offerings and instructional strategies and ways to improve them to meet student needs can help improve GED graduation and matriculation rates
into postsecondary institutes. One way to increase the success of adult education programs would be to share best practices across programs and implement blanket standards for all states. The addition of CCRS, along with career bridge programs, may be the start of much needed change in traditional adult education programs.

**Bridge Programs**

In the last few decades, there have been a number of programs to assist students in transitioning on to postsecondary or the workforce across high schools and colleges. According to Bragg and Taylor (2014), a bridge program can link two levels of education together, or it might link education to employment, sometimes concurrently. Yet, only recently have such programs begun to surface in the adult education world (George, 2012; Strawn, 2011). These programs have come about in response to concerns over the lack of connection between school and work that lead many students to be unmotivated in school and work in low-wage jobs. The need for a more educated workforce and the increasing demand for employees with the ability to learn on-the-job, think complexly and critically, and work as part of a team have led to their creation (GEDTS, 2014; Neumark & Rothstein, 2006). Such programs offer students the chance to improve their skills beyond just learning the material needed to earn a diploma or degree. Additionally, students in these programs learn about soft skills, participate in internships and job shadowing opportunities, and have the option to fast-track toward a career or postsecondary credential. They also have counseling sessions and are offered increased support through transition services that link them to additional supports as needed (Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP], 2010). Since most programs employ the same traits, a quick historical context for the start of bridge programs is given before looking at specific ones to see the benefits of adding such structures to all adult education programs.
Historically, the need for a school-to-career transition process became apparent after outcome studies found that students who leave high school before earning a diploma experience downgraded futures, and it was identified that students needed assistance to become contributing adults which included postsecondary education and workforce training (Lehmann, Cobb, & Tochterman, 2001; Sitlington, Clark, & Kolsto, 2000). Beginning with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (DOE, 1990), focus was placed on students’ quality of life after graduating with respect to careers and postsecondary education, among other aspects (Lehmann et al., 2001). One such way to improve student outcomes was through school-to-career (STC) programs (Neumark & Rothstein, 2006). The Federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act (DOE, 1994) provided more than $1.5 billion to public schools in order for them to increase their career preparation activities (Civic Impulse, 2016). Although federal funding for such programs only lasted five years, Neumark and Rothstein (2006) found evidence that STC programs boosted post-high school students’ employment and enrollment in postsecondary education. Their research included 2,057 participants in three types of STC programs: co-op, school enterprise, and Tech Prep and provided evidence that school enterprise STC programs had a positive causal effect on college attendance while a co-op or internship/apprenticeship program improved employment probabilities (Neumark & Rothstein, 2006).

Stemming from STC programs, recently bridge programs (also known as career pathway bridges) have been developed to specifically address the needs of low-skilled adults and youth in order to enable them to enter and succeed in college and worthwhile careers (Strawn, 2011). Today’s bridge programs typically consist of multiple parts including the ability to earn industry certifications while working towards postsecondary academic degrees, learn through contextualized curriculum, and partake in career counseling and non-academic support services
(CLASP, 2010; Strawn, 2011). Oftentimes, students are part of a cohort, learn basic skills for passing the GED test while gaining specific occupational knowledge through team-teaching, take part in a curriculum that prepares them for the rigors of college, and receive assistance in navigating the college application and financial aid process (Strawn, 2011). According to CLASP (2010), these individual parts aid in students’ knowledge of basic skills and passing the GED test, along with increasing enrollment in and completion of college-level coursework.

**Current Program Examples**

Currently, at least seven states, including Arkansas, Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Wisconsin, are exploring the use of bridge programs to assist working or low-skilled adults with gaining the technical and educational knowledge needed to increase their economic standing (CLASP, 2010). With less than 50% of GED students continuing on to college (Nix & Michalak, 2012) and over half of high school graduates being deficient at soft skills and on-the-job training (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006), the need to incorporate programs that improve success rates of GED graduates transitioning on to college or the workforce is clear. To test the theory, Idaho introduced an initiative called Successful Transitions and Retention Track (START) Program which was a two-year pilot program intended to increase retention among GED graduates entering college (Nix & Michalak, 2012). The START program included three components to their holistic approach: classroom instruction, career and personal counseling, and math/English tutoring. These components enhanced students’ abilities to overcome numerous barriers, learn a set of transferable skills, and improve their critical thinking and reflection skills along with math skills used most often in jobs. Early results from the program showed a 70% persistence rate of START students in their first year of college, maintaining a 3.5 GPA or higher (Nix & Michalak, 2012).
Quinsigamond Community College in Massachusetts incorporated a similar program they called the Learner Persistence Project which also incorporated a number of the factors that make bridge programs attractive for adult education (Kefallinou, 2009). The following interventions were incorporated over a five-month period: student/teacher conferences after two consecutive absences, individual and class sessions with counselors, and discussions with students to prevent stopping out. If students did happen to stop out, study plans were developed with each to allow them to come back. The study plans included checklists for students to monitor skills learned, a learner persistence orientation, identification of resources and support, and the use of classmates to support one another (Kefallinou, 2009). The project made a huge difference in educational gains, goal attainment, and student behavior with rates in all three rising over 20% between 2007 and 2008 when the program was implemented. After the project ended, the program kept a number of the interventions due to their ability to create a stronger sense of community, better relationships, and more knowledge of the program (Kefallinou, 2009).

Another successful bridge program is the I-BEST model (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) which is now implemented in all 34 community and technical colleges throughout Washington state (Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011; Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010). The idea behind the I-BEST model is utilizing two teachers in the classroom, a basic skills instructor and a professional-technical faculty member, so students can jointly take college-level occupational classes along with learning basic skills. This structure creates pathways to college-level programs in career fields that offer good wages and opportunities for career advancement (Wachen, et al., 2011). Since its inception in 2004, a number of studies have been conducted on I-BEST including those by Jenkins, Zeidenberg, and Kienzl (2009), Wachen, Jenkins, Belfield, and Van Noy (2012), and Wachen et al. (2011). Research has found I-BEST
students are moderately to substantially more likely than other basic skills students (those working towards a GED diploma) to earn 15 hours of college credit toward a postsecondary credential, much more likely to complete occupational certificate programs, and have greater basic skills gains (Jenkins et al., 2009; Zeidenberg, et al., 2010; Wachen et al., 2011). In Jenkins et al.’s (2009) study, I-BEST students were 23% more likely to earn college credit and on average, earned double the number of credits within the time period studied compared to non-I-BEST participants. Wachen, et al. (2011) identified I-BEST’s structured pathways as one of its most successful features as it lays out next steps for students and takes the guesswork out of continuing their education. Along with its structured pathways, the integrated instructional model and transitional support services are identified as integral to the success of I-BEST programs (Wachen et al., 2011). However, Jenkins et al. (2009) and Wachen et al. (2012) noted some cons of the I-BEST model including the higher funds needed to run such a program, financial aid assistance for students enrolled in college-level courses, the challenge of having two teachers collaborate in one classroom, and integrating basic skills studying with major program studies. The cost of such a program would need to be weighed against the gains made by students within the program setting.

New York has joined other states in creating bridge options for GED students. They launched two programs: GED Bridge to Health and GED Bridge to Business at LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York. In their policy brief on LaGuardia’s health and business bridge programs, Martin and Broadus (2013) identified the struggles students with a GED diploma already face against “success in a labor market that increasingly prizes specialized training and college education” (p. 1). This discovery made an argument for the importance of incorporating the bridge programs which put students on the road to two
successful career paths in either healthcare or business. Their GED Bridge programs’ foundation is contextualized curriculum where skills are built by using them within the context of a specific field of interest to the student (Martin & Broadus, 2013; Sieben, 2011). The program goals include developing general academic habits and skills to use in college courses or training programs at the same time. Martin and Broadus (2013) hypothesized that by teaching core curriculum in relation to a field of study, students are more readily engaged and interested in the work, while also learning about a possible career. The programs’ class structures are similar to those in college courses in order to better prepare students for the transition to college. The use of writing and critical thinking allow students to better prepare for instruction in the college classroom or on the job (Sieben, 2011). Setting goals, looking into higher education benefits, and college registration are addressed by transition advisors. Furthermore, college faculty members come to speak to students about their programs and the nature of the work in their fields giving students the chance to hear about program offerings on the credit side of the college (Martin & Broadus, 2013). Students also receive individual and group advising in and out of the classroom that allows them the opportunity to explore different career options, complete career-interest and skills inventories, do research into local growth industries and postsecondary educational options, and develop plans for their educational and professional growth (Martin & Broadus, 2013; Sieben, 2011). These upgrades to the program seem to be making an impact. In their study, Martin and Broadus (2013) found in regards to completing the program, Bridge students completed at a rate of 68% compared to traditional students at only 47%. Additionally, 44% of the Bridge students passed the GED exam within the first six months after completing the course, with 53% having passed within a year as compared to the Prep (traditional program) students at only 20% and 22%, respectively (Martin & Broadus, 2013). LaGuardia’s bridge program shows
higher success rates than those of traditional GED programs throughout the state of New York. Their GED test pass rate is 70% compared to the state average of 49%, and 65% of the bridge students transition on to college or postsecondary training programs (Sieben, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Initial studies of bridge programs across the United States seem to support the addition of these programs, but there is limited research due to bridge programs being a more recent concept. However, after reviewing studies on programs currently in place, the addition of features such as counseling and transitioning support, tutoring, real-life application of coursework, fast-track options, and internships or similar opportunities seem to have increased the number of GED graduates who then enter college, training programs, and the workforce. Limitations of bridge programs that need to be addressed include the addition of more program/career options for students and how bridge program students persist once they enroll in college or head into the workforce. Future research could address how components of bridge program models assist with student perspective, goals, motivation, and intrinsic and external barriers compared to more traditional adult education programs.

**Challenges Faced by GED Students**

Those who return to adult basic and adult secondary education programs have often led very different lives from traditional high school diploma earners. They have faced and, in many cases, continue to face a number of internal and external barriers that make returning to school and earning a GED diploma difficult. Many times, dropouts face several challenges in school: with the work and people involved, not having a good support network, lacking the motivation and drive to complete school, getting in with the wrong crowd, or having other obligations that are more important to them than earning a high school diploma (Rosenthal, 1998). Groto and
Martin (2009) found these barriers affect students’ high school dropout rates, as well as attribute to continued struggles once pursuing a GED diploma. Returning to the classroom to prepare for the GED test also means facing feelings of failure, inadequacy, and embarrassment at having dropped out of school previously (Groto & Martin, 2009). These barriers continue into their postsecondary careers, leading administrators and policymakers at both the adult education level and college level to identify ways to better prepare and support this group of students (Thompson, 2012).

If researchers can identify barriers and ways to help students overcome them, student enrollment and retention may become more manageable for colleges as they can assist students in facing and overcoming their barriers to receiving a GED diploma and postsecondary credential. Below, I examine a number of the barriers GED recipients face beginning with their internal struggles and moving out towards environmental obstacles that stand in their way towards earning a postsecondary credential.

**Individual Factors**

Regarding students’ individual factors, researchers have mainly focused on personal goals, self-efficacy, and motivation of adult learners and the way these factors influence educational decisions (Groto & Martin, 2009). Researchers have found those who return to adult education programs regularly share similarities in student involvement with education: a lack of motivation, no educational goals, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013; Rosenthal, 1998). Students that left high school demonstrated a negative attitude towards school, activities, and the atmosphere associated with being in school. They showed less interest and participation in class and other activities, were often surrounded by like-minded peers, and had lower levels of academic achievement compared
to those who earned a diploma (Rosenthal, 1998). In relation to personality, Rosenthal (1998) reported that dropouts have lower self-esteem and self-confidence which leads to feelings of uselessness, feeling left out, and hopelessness. Oftentimes, students demonstrate a lack of self-control and are more likely to manifest attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder or depression (Rosenthal, 1998). Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological approach to human development, Rosenthal (1998) linked a number of variables to school dropouts including student involvement with education, a need for autonomy, a lack of interpersonal communication skills, and lower self-confidence and self-esteem. This low regard leads to dropping out and makes it difficult to return to adult basic or secondary education classes later on due to the negative association with schooling.

Previous research shows that intrinsic motivation (personal interest), self-efficacy, and goal orientation are all positively correlated with academic achievement, effort, and learner persistence in school (Bandura, 1997; Groto & Martin, 2009; Mellard et al., 2013; Smith & Locke, 1999). Mellard et al. (2013) noted that approximately a quarter of those who return to adult education programs separate before they are even able to make one level completion. To improve learner persistence, Mellard et al. (2013) used a retrospective study to explore and identify individual dispositional factors related to and influencing students’ motivation, goals, attendance, self-perception, and goal-directed thinking. His goal for the study was to make suggestions for program changes that could lead to future innovations to enhance learner persistence. After sampling 319 students across 13 Midwestern adult education programs for one year, researchers discovered that students who do eventually return to ABE or ASE programs often demonstrate less learner persistence for a number of reasons associated with those that led to their dropping out in the first place. However, students with a goal of earning a GED diploma,
along with having another unspecified goal (did not have to note one), were more likely to have higher attendance hours, which led to level completions (more hours spent studying, more help received), higher intrinsic value, greater life satisfaction, and a decreased perception of limitations to their job opportunities (Mellard et al., 2013). Groto & Martin (2009) found learner persistence was strengthened when students felt they were making progress towards their goals. Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) found specific goals to be associated with better learner persistence as well and identified four supports for persistence: 1) management of positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence; 2) self-efficacy; 3) establishment of a goal by the student; and 4) progress towards reaching a goal. The addition of goal writing within adult education program could potentially improve learner persistence, graduation rates, and transitions to a postsecondary institute.

**Environmental Factors**

Beyond internal influences are those factors surrounding the student and impeding on their rate of success at completing a GED preparation program and earning their diploma. Rosenthal (1998) suggested there is an interaction between internal and external factors that leads to dropping out which needs to be studied more thoroughly, especially in relation to gender, ethnicity, rural versus urban communities, and upper-middle and working-class families. From a mezzo to macro level, there are family relations, roles within the family and society, household stress, socio-economic status, minority group status, and community characteristics that all influence student dropout and continue to make it difficult for students to successfully come back and earn their GED diploma (Rosenthal, 1998). According to research conducted by Rosenthal (1998), “The best documented correlate of school dropout is socioeconomic status” (p. 416), along with minority group status, growing up in an urban area or poorer community with a
large number of female-headed families, having high levels of household stress, and having to take on adult roles within the family early on in life. Along these same lines, family support has been noted as highly correlated to enrollment and persistence in school. Studies show those with educated parents are more likely to receive a diploma while others have discovered achievements increase for students that have involved parents with high expectations and aspirations for them (Desimone, 1999; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Rosenthal, 1998).

Along with those obstacles identified by Rosenthal (1998), Nix and Machalak (2012) found a number of other barriers for students looking to earn a GED credential in order to move on to higher education including recidivism (substance abuse), pressures from being a first-generation diploma earner, and economic or family distress. This is supported by Bozick and DeLuca’s (2011) national study of 13,060 students to see what variables helped to shape students’ decisions not to enter college. One of the main reasons was lack of economic resources and another was social context, in that, those surrounding the students (friends, family, and neighbors) were less supportive of the students continuing their education, partially due to their own lack of academic attainment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2011). Another important factor discovered by Bozick and DeLuca (2011) for students not wanting to continue onto postsecondary was the availability of jobs in their area and their decision to go straight into work at a young age (10th grade). However, increasingly, a number of jobs require a bachelor’s degree and students must return to school if they want to move out of a low to middle level position. Once they decide to return for a GED diploma, adult education programs must stress the importance of a college degree or career training to them to assist in changing their mind frame to looking beyond a GED diploma.
Institutional Factors

How a program treats, encourages, and aids a student in their educational journey can impact whether they earn a diploma or degree. The following study helps to identify characteristics of a program that is successful at student retention, a key factor for adult education programs. Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, and Reno (2013) completed a case study on a charter school in the Midwest to identify reasons attributed to lack of success in students’ previous schooling, their motivations for coming back to school, and the characteristics of their current school that promote success. The researchers discovered that self-determined motivation, wanting a diploma for oneself or others, wanting to change their lives, and wanting to prove they could earn a diploma for themselves, were the reasons students returned to school (Iachini et al., 2013). Those characteristics of the school that continued to improve student motivation throughout were an individualized approach to learning, so students felt they could ask teachers for help at any time and actually understand the material before moving on, allowing students to make choices to increase autonomy, and focusing on the students’ needs first which increased self-worth amongst students (Iachini et al., 2013). It seems individualized attention and focus are what it takes to improve self-motivation of students and in turn, improve retention and graduation rates of students.

While studying a summer bridge program at a technical and vocational college, Hoops and Kutrybala (2015) discovered the same principles. Their qualitative study looked at nontraditional students’ development including both academic and personal growth through a self-regulated learning lens. Utilizing Project LeeWay from Lee College, a six-week summer bridge program for nontraditional students seeking high-wage nontraditional careers, the researchers received 119 essays written by 83 program graduates on instructor impact, most
important lessons learned, and suggestions for improvement. Findings showed that students felt they developed more personally and affectively than academically from the instructors rather than the curriculum of the program (Hoops & Kutrybala, 2015). High intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy were related to higher educational attainment suggesting as others have that internal motivators need to be addressed in programs as well (Hoops & Kutrybala, 2015).

**Conclusion**

While research regarding GED students’ perspectives is limited, available data can shed light on reasons why GED students tend to dropout before ever completing a postsecondary degree. However, many studies are limited by population size or focus specifically on one school. While this information may not be generalizable for all adult education programs, similar findings across these studies support their reliability and assuredness that GED students must overcome multiple individual and environmental hurdles to pass the GED test, successfully transition on to college, and earn a postsecondary credential. How these obstacles interact with one another and ways institutes can aid with overcoming them are key for future research. Identifying ways to make students goal-driven towards a college degree so they have the motivation to continue through an adult education program and onto college is key to increasing GED student persistence and success.

By identifying trends in student barriers, adult education program policies and procedures can be adapted to provide better support to students while working towards their GED diploma and after. If adult education programs focus more on areas where remedial classes are often needed and provide better transitional and counseling services, students may have an increased chance at not only passing the GED test and enrolling in college, but also completing more classes and potentially earning a postsecondary credential. Identifying the factors that influence
persistence and success for GED recipients once in college will be beneficial for all parties involved.

Postsecondary Enrollment of GED Recipients

Since its creation, the GED exam has assisted individuals and veterans who were unable to complete high school with the opportunity to attend college (American Council on Education [ACE], 2011; Thelin, 2004). The goal of providing such a test was to fill the unemployment gap and put American citizens back to work. At the same time, community and technical colleges were thought to offer a better alternative for GED recipients with their open admissions structure. Even today, two-year associate’s colleges continue to be the chosen route for most GED recipients. Today’s community and technical colleges offer the types of programs GED recipients are looking for.

First created in 1901, the purpose of these two-year institutions was to increase higher education access for high school graduates that were unable or did not wish to attend four-year colleges and could not immediately find employment. The success of these junior colleges became an issue for many universities, leading them to focus more on technical career training and skill building instead of academic transfer courses for prospective students (Thelin, 2004). These schools offer a number of credentialing options to prospective students including certificates, diplomas, and associate’s degrees. Coursework can take anywhere from six months of instruction for certificate programs to two or more years for completion of a diploma or degree program (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014).

Patterson, Zhang, Song, and Guidy-Dowdy (2010) found 77.8% of GED recipients decide to enroll in two-year institutes. However, once there, many GED recipients struggle to complete a credential at any level. Another study conducted by Patterson, Song, and Zhang
(2009) found that over 70% GED recipients who enrolled in postsecondary programs dropped out after their first semester, and those who were successful at completing a degree, often times, took twice as long as traditional high school graduates. Since GED recipients most often enroll at two-year institutes, also known as community and/or technical colleges, this review will focus solely on GED recipients’ enrollment at this level. Following, enrollment rates are reviewed for GED recipients who came from a traditional adult education program followed by those who enrolled after partaking in an adult education bridge program.

**Traditional GED Students**

Similar to most nontraditional students, GED recipients are unique in their characteristics, pre-academic experiences, education objectives, and personal lives as compared to traditional high school graduates and frequently have no postsecondary experience. For the majority of GED recipients that decide to go on to college, their goal is to gain work-related experience and professional development to improve career options and economic gains (Patterson, Zhang & Song, 2009; Patterson, Zhang, Song & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). According to the ACE (2011), approximately 60% of GED recipients take the exam in order to enter postsecondary with this number continuing to steadily increase each year. Unfortunately, studies have uncovered disappointing statistics regarding GED recipients’ retention, persistence, and graduation rates once enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

When looking at individual studies, numbers are much lower than predicted regarding college enrollment rates for GED recipients. A report by Patterson (2010) looked at enrollment and graduation patterns of students who passed the GED test during 2003 to 2008 and registered at a two-year institution by 2009. Over 346,000 GED holders and 3,000 postsecondary institutions were used in the analysis. Of those holding a GED credential, only 31.5% enrolled in
an institution offering two-year degrees within the time frame, the majority within three years of passing the test. Furthermore, of those who entered college, only 12% finished with some level of credential (Patterson, 2010). Additionally, Patterson, Zhang, and Song (2009), discovered GED recipients were more likely to enroll just part-time with 77% of the study’s participants dropping out after the first semester. A similar study conducted by Patterson et al. (2010) found over 30% of GED recipients dropped out after their first semester, suggesting dropout rates, while improved, are still a problem for GED recipients who go on to college. Although Tyler (2003) discovered that the ability to enroll in a postsecondary institution was the same for those holding a GED credential as those who earned a high school diploma, he also found GED graduates obtain very little postsecondary education, adding support for the need of adult education programs to better prepare students for college level work.

Another group of reports, entitled Crossing the Bridge (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011), provide three longitudinal studies on postsecondary educational outcomes of adult GED holders. At this time, only the first two reports are available which looked at cohorts from 2003 and 2004 through years 2009 and 2010. Findings from both were similar to those found by Patterson (2010) in that approximately 43% of GED holders entered college while only 12% actually graduated with a certificate, diploma, or degree within the study’s time frame. Over 60% dropped out before the final years of the study with most students being single semester enrollees, suggesting most students struggle with the transition to college (Patterson et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011). Unsurprisingly, the reports showed that GED testing performance was positively correlated to persistence in postsecondary education with those who scored higher on the GED test more likely to persist to postsecondary degree attainment (Patterson et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011).
Finally, the researchers pointed out that GED holders take longer to graduate, often taking less classes at a time than traditional high school graduates, which could be related to the low postsecondary graduation rates they found (Patterson, et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011). This information is valuable to adult education programs, not only for assisting students to pass the GED test, but to improve their persistence rates once in college as well (Patterson et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011).

**Bridge Students**

Some studies have recently reviewed the earning of a GED diploma and enrollment in college between students from bridge programs with those from traditional adult education or GED preparation programs. Martin and Broadus (2013) offered a comparison, using a career bridge program, referred to as “Bridge,” and a traditional GED preparation class which they termed “Prep.” With a sample size of 369 students from Bridge and Prep courses, Martin and Broadus (2013) found Bridge students enroll in college at higher rates than the students within the Prep program. Bridge students were three times more likely to enroll in a community college than Prep students (Martin & Broadus, 2013). Additionally, the Bridge students were more likely to continue into their second semester of college than Prep students at a rate of 12% compared to only 3% (Martin & Broadus, 2013).

Mageehon (2013) found similar results when comparing a 30-week cohort bridge program to Umpqua Community College’s traditional GED program. Mageehon (2013) determined that only 4% of the 400 GED recipients enrolled in postsecondary courses between 2003 and 2008. In light of this data, the college created a bridge program that utilized Oregon Pathways for Adult Basic Skills (OPABS) curriculum to increase the number transitioning from GED program to college courses. Initial results proved promising, suggesting that the program
was much more successful than the traditional GED program, with 80% of the 15 students enrolled in the bridge program continuing on to postsecondary education after the program ended. Students finished the program with a GED diploma and Career and Technical Education (CTE) credits from the postsecondary side which gave them a head start and the motivation to continue with their postsecondary careers (Mageehon, 2013).

**Conclusion**

The data provided by the GEDTS (Patterson et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011) confirms the need for changes to adult education programs in order to improve not only postsecondary enrollment numbers, but also persistence through credentialing as well. Current research suggests Bridge programs are improving college enrollment and success rates for GED students. However, more research is needed in order to assist administrators and policymakers with identifying what structural, practices, and policy changes are needed in adult education programs in order to continue increasing persistence and success for GED recipients once they enroll in college.

**Summary**

The idea of bridge programs is one adult education programs across the country might want to consider to meet the language of WIOA and to provide a holistic approach to educating their students. Bridge programs not only provide traditional GED test preparation, but link lessons to real life applications in careers while also providing counseling and transition help to overcome barriers. The opportunity for job shadowing or internship experiences and more college-like atmosphere also help to better prepare students to take the GED test, pass it, and to successfully transition on to college or career. With college enrollments rates of less than 50% for most adult education programs, new ideas need to be considered if policymakers and
administrators are going to raise the number of GED recipients earning a postsecondary credential.

The addition of curriculum that mimics what students will see in college, the opportunity to earn college credit while working on GED preparation, and the chance to get hands-on experience are all ways adult education programs may better prepare students for the rigors of college. Looking at ways to improve self-efficacy, motivation, and persistence, along with engraining in students the skills needed to pass the GED test and be college and career ready is also important for adult education programs to better serve this population. Initial studies of bridge programs across the United States seem to support them, however, the limited amount of research on both traditional adult education program and bridge program structures make it difficult to identify what policies and procedures of both programs support higher rates of student success.

Using Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) framework allows for research that covers not only personal characteristics, but organizational aspects as well in relation to student outcomes at the postsecondary level. Both need to be addressed if educators are going to better prepare students for not only the GED exam, but for the rigors of college as well. Such findings are beneficial for improving GED recipients’ college experiences, and in turn, increasing their postsecondary outcomes.
Chapter 3 – Research Design

Identifying ways to increase GED recipients’ chances of earning a postsecondary credential has become a pressing issue for those in the field of adult education (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). The sole purpose of adult education programs is no longer to prepare students for the GED test, but to give students the skills needed to be successful in college or a career. The purpose of this study was to explore two types of adult education programs, a traditional program and a bridge program, and how the programs help to prepare students for the rigors of college level work. The main research question guiding this study was: What role does the type of adult education program (career bridge program or GED preparation program) play in the enrollment and persistence rates of GED recipients at the same community college? The collection of data for this study was aimed at identifying which program type is better at preparing students for college and identifying which factors of each contribute most to student success once enrolled in a postsecondary institution. The researcher hoped to identify specific procedures, practices, and curriculum from the two types of programs that led to persistence and success for GED recipients enrolled in postsecondary education. Following, the research method is discussed in depth with the second part of the chapter focusing on the design of the study, including participants, procedures for data collection, potential biases, and possible limitations.

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative methodology was used to provide a holistic view of the instructional and organizational practices for each type of adult education program from the perspectives of students, instructors, and program administrators. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), the use of a qualitative study was appropriate for this type of study due to its ability to identify linkages and processes, even in cases where “variables have yet to be identified” (p. 57). Since
the researcher sought to identify the practices and procedures of the adult education programs that affected GED recipients’ success once in college, a qualitative approach that allowed for identification of these differing factors was appropriate. Along with the ability to identify linkages, Creswell (2012) recommends the use of a qualitative research method when the researcher wants to “empower individuals to share their stories” and “minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants” (p. 48). With the GED recipients’ individual experiences within their respective adult education program and college experiences being a main concern for the researcher, the use of a qualitative research method best aligned with the study’s focus.

With that, the researcher worked within a constructivism-interpretivist paradigm which believes the idea that reality is not a single external entity but is created within the minds of each individual and meaning must be brought to the surface through reflection with others (Ponterotto, 2005). Since the goal of this study was to ascertain what procedures and practices of each adult education program students, instructors, and administrators found the most beneficial to students’ success at the postsecondary level, exploring their realities and interpreting their varying views of the programs was true to a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.

Not only did the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm provide a guide for the researcher to explore the participants’ realities, it also led the researcher to be a co-creator through interactive dialogue and reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). Just as the GED recipients’ experiences within their particular adult education program affected their time as a college student, the researcher’s time as a transition coordinator affected her interpretation and view of the participants’ stories. The researcher had to stay aware of her own background as a transition
coordinator and “bracket” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131) her own position and personal experiences when interpreting participants’ realities.

**Case Study Research Methodology**

**Background on Case Studies**

Case study methodology first appeared around 1900 with a second generation of case study methodology emerging in the 1960s which bridged the gap between positivism’s need for quantitative data with hermeneutics or qualitative methods of understanding a phenomenon (Johansson, 2003). Two key approaches guided the case study methodology: Stake (1995) and Yin (2003). Stake (1995) suggests case studies are used when wanting to study and learn about a specific person, group of people, or an organization, or when there is a specific question a researcher wants to answer. He incorporates a more disciplined, qualitative mode of inquiry compared to Yin (2003) whose focus is more on the method and techniques used when conducting a case study which include a variety of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Each lend important elements in case study research and seek to ensure that the topic of interest is fully explored (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This inclusion of multiple data sources and need for greater understanding of a phenomenon is what makes case study methodology different from many other strategies (Johansson, 2003).

**Rationale for Use of Case Study Methodology**

Qualitative case study methodology is a valuable method for evaluating programs and allows the researcher to study complex phenomena within their contexts using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies are important for research that addresses descriptive or explanatory questions; in other words, the how or why questions (Yin, 2003). For this study, both types of questions were pertinent in order to identify how the adult education programs’
procedures, practices, and curriculum prepared students for college and why students believed their adult education program either helped or hindered their success once in college. Yin (2003) also noted that case studies are an acceptable approach when the behavior of those involved cannot be manipulated, contextual conditions are relevant to the phenomenon being studied, and the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. Since the researcher sought to identify the environment of the adult education programs relevant to student success and persistence in college, but was unsure of the aspects involved, a case study methodology was the appropriate research method to study this phenomenon.

As Stake (1995) notes, the unit studied must be an individual case, making a case study the correct research method to study two different organizations (or units) with their own ways of operating. Once a case study has been determined as the appropriate research method, Baxter and Jack (2008) discuss the need to determine the type of case study to be used. Yin (2003) categorizes case studies as exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive while also differentiating between single, holistic, and multiple case studies. On the other hand, Stake (1995) identifies case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. Zainal (2007) expands upon Yin’s categories, stating that “explanatory cases are also deployed for causal studies where pattern-matching can be used to investigate certain phenomena in very complex and multivariate cases (p. 3). This study encompasses perspectives presented by both Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) as it involves the deep examination and comparison of two types of adult education programs, describing multiple, explanatory, and collective case study approaches. The study can be described as explanatory in nature due to the researcher’s need to explain the phenomena in the data based upon a previously formed theory and collective based upon the collection of data from multiple sources (Zainal, 2007). According to Zainal (2007), the use of a collective case
study may allow for generalizations of findings to bigger populations. A goal for the researcher is to provide other adult education programs with a collection of practices and procedures that best lead to GED recipient success at the postsecondary level. By utilizing a collective approach, along with a multiple case study approach, the researcher will be able to examine multiple practices and procedures used in adult education programs and analyze how varying models prepare GED recipients for success at the postsecondary level.

Complementing Yin’s (2003) and Stake’s (1995) case study approaches, Goodrick (2014) discusses comparative case studies in which two or more cases are covered in order to produce more generalizable knowledge about causal questions – the how and why particular programs work or fail to work. The intended outcome of such a study is to determine the effects of a program or policy’s outputs (Goodrick, 2014). A comparative case study research design will be utilized as it allows the researcher to note differences and similarities between a career bridge program and traditional GED preparation program, along with comparing enrollment and success rates of GED recipients after their first year in postsecondary education. Yin (2003) and Baxter and Jack (2008) state that a comparative case study allows a researcher to note differences and similarities within and between cases, allowing the scholar to draw comparisons or predict contrasting results based on theory. Huberman and Miles (2002) support the use of a comparative case study for this purpose as the researcher can view multiple cases, compare their processes, and construct explanations as to why relationships may be identified in one case but not another. One benefit of a comparative case study in this instance is the use of qualitative and quantitative data in order to compare postsecondary outcomes of students from each program type, while also identifying and noting the program variables participants perceive as influential to GED recipients’ postsecondary outcomes (Goodrick, 2014). According to Goodrick (2014), a
comparative case study approach is also necessary due to the study’s need to understand the success or failure of each type of adult education program in relation to students’ persistence and success once enrolled in college.

Collection of data in the phenomenon’s natural setting is another trademark of case study methodology, along with the use of multiple data sources (Yin, 2003). For this study, several sources will be utilized to understand the phenomenon being studied including interviews, school records, and program materials. By incorporating qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher can gain a more holistic understanding of how the adult education programs operate and how they prepare students to continue on with their education once they have passed the GED exam. While case studies provide a more holistic view of a phenomenon through their data collection approach, Yin (2003) and Baxter and Jack (2008) warn of the dangers of such a method and advise against collecting overwhelming amounts of data that cannot be managed or analyzed.

In respect to data analysis, Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) both recommend utilizing a database to effectively organize data. Databases improve the reliability of case studies as they enable the researcher to easily track and organize a large number of sources in “bins” that can later be retrieved and analyzed (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As with other qualitative methods, data collection and analysis occur concurrently in case studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) provide several different techniques for data analysis. First, Yin (2003) suggests having a protocol to mentally follow while collecting data to entertain multiple lines of inquiry. Protocols would allow the researcher to explore the many possibilities of each program that could affect their success once in college. For this study, Yin’s (2003) pattern-matching and explanation-building techniques were most valuable as they allowed the researcher to compare the empirically based patterns collected from the data to the researcher’s predictions regarding
which program type better prepares students for college success. They also allowed the researcher to then identify and explain the how and why of these affected trends after examining rival explanations (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) and Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest using triangulation of data sources to improve credibility and quality of data collected. Finally, replication logic must be applied across the multiple cases within the study to address whether the findings from the smaller population sizes can support broader pattern conclusions (Yin, 2003).

Research

Research Site

The study site chosen is a public two-year technical college located in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The college is comprised of three campus locations and five regional learning centers and offers over 200 career-focused degree, diploma, and certificate programs. The college offers several options for increasing student success including financial aid, student involvement opportunities, academic coaching, tutoring, and professional counseling. The college also boasts the title of being an Achieving the Dream Leader College and ranks in the top one percent of U.S. colleges awarding two-year certificates and associate’s degrees according to the U.S. Department of Education (Achieving the Dream, 2018).

Along with the credit side, this college serves approximately 1,000-1,200 GED students a semester at its numerous locations across the area. The college has the highest GED exam pass rate of all Wisconsin technical colleges and is one of very few technical colleges offering this new bridge program format that incorporates contextualized instruction with career insight. Their program is structured after the successful GED Bridge Program pioneered by LaGuardia
Community College. At the time of this study, the program was in its second year of providing the two different options for GED completion.

The GED classes are separated into GED Prep and GED Bridge, allowing students different learning opportunities. The GED Prep program follows a more traditional style of GED instruction, using GED testing materials and books to prepare students for the GED exam. The GED Bridge program, on the other hand, uses a career pathway to help teach students concepts needed to pass the GED exam while also allowing them to explore careers in healthcare, manufacturing, business, and other industries in their area. To be considered for GED Prep II (the GED Prep I class is for lower level learners) and GED Bridge, students must score at least a 6.0 on the TABE test before being randomly assigned to one of the two groups. Once enrolled, students have as much time as they need to work towards their GED diploma through structured class times offered in the morning and evening in 4-hour chunks of time. Additionally, students may attend an optional math support class. Students can attend classes based on their own schedules and do not have to adhere to an attendance policy. Students also have access to the library and other support services offered by the college.

Participants

Students. To assess how adult education programs assist GED recipients with continued success at the postsecondary level, participants were chosen from the college based upon their participation in one of the two adult education programs and completion of a GED diploma before enrolling at the college. To gain participants from each adult education program type, purposeful sampling was used. As Creswell (2012) mentions, using purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to intentionally select individuals that would help in understanding the central phenomena (in this case, how adult education programs prepare students for postsecondary
education). Creswell (2012) also discusses the need for sampling strategies and notes that more than one strategy may be used when selecting participants. For this study, the researcher used maximal variation sampling and homogeneous sampling for selecting student participants based upon the need to have participants that hold a GED credential, but that participated in two different types of adult education programs before entering college (Creswell, 2012).

Students were selected based on the following criteria: (a) students completed their GED diploma through either the GED Prep II (traditional) program or the GED Bridge program in fiscal years 2016 or 2017 and enrolled in college by the fall of 2017; (b) students were at least 18 years of age; (c) students were enrolled at least part time at the community college, and (d) students had participated in at least two semesters of college. Due to the interest of the researcher in gaining a deep understanding and viewpoint of each students’ experiences, the researcher interviewed 10 participants, five students from each adult education program type. Creswell (2012) and Maxwell (2008) suggest using a small number of individuals in order to provide in-depth detail of a phenomena and note that each additional participant can diminish the perspectives and information provided by each individual.

Following approval of the research proposal by the Institutional Review Board, recruitment of student participants for interviews began. The school provided a list of students meeting the requirements and an email was sent to the students explaining the purpose and scope of the study, confidentiality, and possible risks and benefits. The email asked students to self-disclose their participation in either the GED Prep program or the GED Bridge program and their willingness to participate in one semi-structured interview with the researcher (Appendices A & B). Student participants were diverse, varying in age from early 20’s to mid-50’s and encompassing different genders, ethnicities, family lives, and program majors. To protect the
confidentiality of student participants, along with administrator and instructor participants, pseudonyms were given to all involved in the interview process.

**Instructors.** Instructor participants were chosen based on website review, administrator recommendation, and their experience teaching in both programs and were sent a recruitment email as well (Appendix C). The instructors interviewed were the only two who responded to the email. Hannah has been teaching at the college for 14 years while Brian has been there the past three years. Both started teaching for the adult education program at one of the school’s regional centers before moving to the main campus. Hannah was one of the three main instructors to participate in training sessions for contextualized instruction and the development of the Bridge program. Brian has taught for the Prep program since starting with the college and the past summer, taught for the Bridge program as well. Both were and continue to be highly involved with the curriculum and orientation development for each program.

The instructors were interviewed using a paired interview technique. According to Houssart and Evens (2011), paired interviewing is defined as one researcher interviewing two people simultaneously for the purpose of collecting data about the same perceived event or phenomena (Arksey, 1996). Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning (2016) support the use of paired interviewing when a pre-established relationship exists (co-workers), when interviewees can provide missing pieces or fill in gaps to each other’s stories, and when there can be frequent and sustained dialogue between the participants. Since the instructors were each well-versed in the day-to-day running of the programs and instructional strategies utilized, the paired interview allowed for better clarification and coverage of the topics in order to best understand how the programs are designed and run in order to assist students in passing the GED exam and continuing on to be successful at the postsecondary level. The instructors were able to fill in gaps
for each other, expand upon thoughts, and offer differing points of view concerning the instructional strategies and student learning outcomes.

**Administrator.** The program administrator was identified from the school’s website and an email was sent to her detailing the study and asking for her participation in the study (Appendix D). Shelly has been with the college for eight years and serves as a supervisor for the adult basic education and college success programs under the general studies department. Shelly’s interview was pertinent for obtaining the knowledge of the college’s adult education program history, the addition of the Bridge program, and changes they’ve noticed since incorporating the Bridge program. Shelly was also paramount in providing the student data and contact information for recruitment of student participants, along with enrollment data of GED recipients into the college for triangulation purposes.

**Procedures**

Once approval from the Institutional Review Board was received, the researcher began to gather data for the study. The procedures for data collection included interviews with students, GED instructors, and the adult education program administrator, along with the collection of supporting documents to including adult education instructional materials and enrollment data for GED holders entering the college. Below, is an in-depth review of the data collection procedures.

**Data Collection**

**Interviews.** A semi-structured interview approach was taken for each interview due to the qualitative nature of the study and the need to better understand each individual’s experiences, values, and beliefs. The interviews followed a protocol designed by the researcher with open-ended questions (Appendices E-G). In addition to questions specific to the research
topic of adult education program practices, procedures, and instructional strategies, the interviews included some demographic questions. Additionally, each interview was audio-recorded, along with the researcher taking detailed notes throughout. Before beginning, the researcher reminded participants of the purpose of the study, confidentiality, risks and benefits, and their ability to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time and had them sign the consent form.

All interviews took place at the college in a private conference room. Interviews with students and the program administrator were conducted individually and lasted between 20-45 minutes each. The paired interview with the instructors lasted approximately one and a half hours. The researcher used questions to guide the interviews but allowed for participants to add other information and asked sub-questions throughout related to information provided by the participants. Once transcripts were completed, the researcher emailed them to participants for review and any further information or clarification they wanted to provide.

Documents. Curricula documents from the adult education programs were used for supplementary and triangulation purposes. Documents included books, instructional materials, examples from online learning platforms, and lesson plans. Analysis of instructional documents from both adult education programs were used to assist with identifying similarities and differences between the instructional strategies and teaching methods used within each program. The documents also supported information mentioned by instructors and students and provided a clearer picture for the researcher.

Enrollment rates for those entering the college with the use of a GED diploma was also reviewed for the two semesters available during the study’s time frame. This data was used to
support findings from the interviews about time to complete the GED test and the probability of students continuing to college classes.

Data Analysis

Coding and themes. Following the interviews and data collection, analysis and coding took place. Once interview transcripts were transcribed and reviewed by participants, the researcher analyzed and coded them by hand, utilizing a color-coding process to identify emerging themes and similarities among the texts. The researcher started with an initial reading of all transcripts to familiarize herself with them and wrote memos for each. The next reading involved looking for and color-coding transcripts by similar words, phrases, and remarks which the researcher put into an excel sheet. The researcher noticed the highlighted sections related to adult education program structure, perceptions of time spent in adult education, and perceptions of time spent in college. From there, the researcher started looking for more individualized themes within each area discussed above and tried separate themes by program. These emerging patterns from each program became eight workable themes. Through the final reading and round of analysis, the researcher pared the eight themes down to four major themes and nine sub-themes by grouping similar thoughts and ideas that seemed to have a cause and effect relationship. The original three broad areas provided the basis for how the researcher broke each major theme down into sub-themes. That is to say, program structure and personal experience both contributed to the sub-themes identified under each theme.

Data triangulation. Along with the interviews, instructional materials were analyzed including reading materials, textbooks, and internet resources to further explain the differences between the two types of adult education programs. The collection of enrollment data was also used for triangulation purposes and showed that double the number of Bridge students had
enrolled in college during the time of this study as the Prep students. Triangulation involves the collection of different data sources (both qualitative and quantitative) and cross-checking the consistency of specific and factual findings from the various data sources (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1995; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A comparative analysis of interview datasets with documentation datasets and enrollment numbers helped to increase the comprehension of findings and improved their validity. Evidence suggests students not only need well-rounded instruction to be successful in college, but they also need support services outside of the classroom. Those who received support services, had a goal of entering college, and had more rigorous curricula matriculated to college at higher rates and seemed more prepared for their college courses. Additionally, several changes adult education programs can make to improve college readiness for GED recipients were identified and will be discussed in the next chapters.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations and protection of human subjects was executed at every stage of the study beginning with permission to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board. As mentioned previously, consent forms were provided to participants detailing the reasons for the research, risks and benefits, and their ability to withdrawal from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were given to all participants and all documentation related to participants has been secured through a numbering system and is kept in a locked file drawer or on a password protected computer. All documentation will be safely destroyed after a reasonable length of time has passed.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of data and findings in qualitative research is evidenced by the following: transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unfortunately, trustworthiness and credibility are often questioned in case study methodology (Bryar, 2000; Pegram, 2000; Zucker, 2001). However, Mitchell (1983) and Polit and Hungler (2003) argue that the real-life situation in which a case study is carried out, enhances the credibility and truth value of the findings through the multitude of methods used to collect data. For this study, the use of triangulation between student interviews, instructor and administrative interviews, analysis of instructional materials, and inclusion of enrollment rates added to the trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the study. The instructor and administrator interviews enhanced the trustworthiness by offering additional views of the programs and support of the students’ experiences beyond what the researcher previously knew about the programs (Palmquist, 2006). Also, by allowing the participants to review and correct their transcripts before coding, credibility was enhanced by the participants ensuring the researcher’s interpretations of their realities were correctly understood (Trochim, 2006). The coding and re-coding process, along with convergence of multiple data sources through the triangulation process also increased the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Transferability is widely argued against in case studies due to the small sample sizes and findings being specific to just one setting (Burns & Grove, 1997; Woods, 1997; Yin, 1994; Yin, 2003). In order to increase transferability, Trochim (2006) argued that the researcher must do a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions central to the research. In this case, the transferability to other programs is based upon their likeness to the programs used in this study and the ability of other researchers to sensibly transfer the findings to settings that
might be dissimilar. Along with transferability, confirmability is obtained through the use of detailed documentation of how the data was analyzed and describing any negative instances discovered throughout the process (Trochim, 2006). Thorough documentation through notes and memos allowed the researcher to increase the study’s transferability and confirmability. Finally, confirmability is increased through objectivity and control of researcher bias. Below, researcher biases and ways of limiting them are discussed.

**Potential Research Bias**

Machi and McEvoy (2009) discuss the need for researchers to be introspective throughout the process to identify and control biases they may have. Through my own self-reflection, I identified several biases to be continuously aware during the conduction of this study. My own background and position as a transition coordinator within an adult education program both added to the biases I could have had in this situation.

Getting to work with all our students and learning about them on a more personal level has definitely created a bias for me in wanting to see GED recipients succeed. As the person responsible for making sure our GED students successfully transition on to college or start a career, I have a bias towards bridge programs and the extra measures they incorporate beyond just GED preparation. Machi and McEvoy (2009) discuss the need to be aware of personal attachments to a topic to control one’s bias, if it cannot be removed altogether. Having not only a personal attachment to the students, but also to the curriculum provided by bridge programs, was something I had to be continuously be aware of, so as not to have a positive bias towards the Bridge program over the Prep program.

Limiting bias. One way to limit my bias in this study was using a college and adult education program that I had zero attachment too. Machi and McEvoy (2009) mention a
commitment to being open-minded, skeptical, and considerate of research data which were easier with an unfamiliar program and student population. Staying mindful of my biases throughout the entire research process was essential. Reviewing the interview questions and making sure there were no leading questions was one way to make sure my bias towards bridge programs did not affect the study outcomes. Another was looking for contradictory evidence to my own hypothesis during the analysis process. Finally, the use of triangulation and collection of multiple datasets helped to decrease bias in the findings and support their trustworthiness.

**Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations needed to be considered within this study. As a case study, the generalizability was low due to small sample sizes and dependence on accurate information from interviews. Also, not all adult education programs are the same – they can differ in size, student demographics, instructional strategies, connection to a college for students to easily transition to, and funding. Since programs differ drastically across the board, not all programs may be able to use the information found in this study to improve their own success rates of students transitioning on to college and persisting through to a postsecondary credential.

Along with limitations associated with the adult education programs, other limitations of the study to consider related to the college. Students may choose different majors or career pathways that may impact their success once in college. Also, there is no way to account for the different teaching styles of the college instructors that students encounter. This study was limited to how students persevere through a two-year technical college as well. Study findings may change if one were to look at success rates of GED recipients in a four-year college setting. Although there were limitations to this study, the findings that were discovered are discussed in the following chapter.
The purpose of this comparative case study was to discover which type of adult education program better prepares GED holders for college and what about each program supports students’ success. Two types of programs were studied, a traditional adult education program and a career bridge program. Traditional adult education programs take a systematic approach to preparing students for the GED exam. In general, they prepare students one test at a time and use GED study materials that mimic exactly what students will see on the GED exam. Bridge programs are a more recent approach to GED preparation that utilize a contextualized curriculum to teach students about different career fields while also developing the skills needed to pass the GED exam. This study sought to identify specific characteristics of each program that students found most helpful in college and to identify areas where adult education programs could still improve to help students be more successful at the postsecondary level.

To accomplish this task, Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) integrated model of influences on student learning and persistence was used to frame the analysis of the data for this study based on its ability to account for multiple interrelated factors that influence college success. This model accommodated not only the various types of data collected, but also the internal and external factors affecting student success. The primary research question influencing this research was: What role does the type of adult education program completed (career bridge program or traditional adult education program) play in the success of GED recipients enrolled at the same community college? The sub-questions guiding the study were: Are there differences in pre-college academic preparedness (GED instructional materials and teaching methods) of GED recipients from a career bridge program versus a traditional adult education program? How prepared for and successful are GED recipients once enrolled in a college program?
Following the interviews and data collection, analysis and coding took place according to the procedures outlined in Chapter Three. Through the several rounds of analysis, the researcher identified four major themes and nine sub-themes by grouping similar thoughts and those ideas that seemed to have a cause and effect relationship. Along with the interviews, instructional materials were analyzed including reading materials, textbooks, and internet resources to further explain the differences between the two types of adult education programs. The final dataset involved enrollment records of GED recipients into the college. Evidence suggests students not only need well-rounded instruction to be successful in college, but they also need support services outside of the classroom. Additionally, there are several changes adult education programs can make to improve college readiness for GED recipients.

This chapter is split into a discussion of each of the four primary themes: pre-academic factors, adult education policies and procedures, support services, and college persistence, along with their associated sub-themes. Following the discussion of each theme, a summary of the findings and how they tie back to the original research question is provided.

Theme One: Pre-Academic Factors and Experiences

Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) model begins with the understanding that students enter college with an array of pre-academic background characteristics. These factors influence student persistence, retention, and success in academics (Terenzini, 2009). In this case, these pre-academic characteristics not only apply to entering college, but to returning to an adult education program as well. Student participants interviewed involved a number of differing factors including sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and personal dispositions that played a role in their success at earning a GED diploma and transitioning on to college. Following, these prevalent sub-themes are discussed in more detail.
Sociodemographic Factors

There were four females and one male interviewed per program. Participants were racially diverse and ranged in age from early 20’s to mid-50’s. This expanse of age range accounted for several differences between participant experiences including time away from school, family and work obligations, technical abilities, learning styles, and varying degrees of information previously learned in school.

School reentrance. All student participants dropped out of high school between 8th and 11th grade and returned to earn their GED diploma at different points in their lives. Some students returned within just a few years while others had been out 30 or more years before returning for their GED diploma. One discovery during analysis was how uncomfortable and inadequate students felt returning to school, especially against their counterparts of regular high school graduates once they entered college. Several students commented that they felt they lacked skills high school graduates had learned in their later years of schooling. They also noted how much better prepared they perceived regular high school graduates to be when entering college due to their consistent participation in education. Remarkably, this finding was evident across the different age ranges – those in their early 20’s were just as likely to have this perception as those in their 40’s or older – suggesting that regardless of age, life or work experiences, all students felt unsure of their abilities to succeed in the classroom. When discussing the return to school, one student stated when talking about returning to school, “come on, I’m over 30. I’m not doing that” but followed it up by saying her instructor for College 101 really motivated her to continue and make sure she was not afraid to ask questions in class when she did not understand a topic. Another student stated, “I’m older… I don’t see things the same way as younger people do. I don’t think I’m not as smart as them, but it’s a different culture and
I struggle with that sometimes.” He noted his success is due to having the mindset that “all of this is a new experience and I treat it all that way as I’m going to learn something new today.”

Instructors were aware of the pre-academic characteristics and challenges that adult education students face. They recognized the ambition and apprehension of students entering the adult education program. Hannah stated, “They’ve failed at school once before, in their eyes. It’s hard for them to come back, especially when it’s been a while since they were in school. It’s our job to help keep them in the door once they walk through and build their confidence.” They consider it part of their job to not only instill in students the skills they need to pass the GED exam, but to also do what they can to help improve students’ life situations, from teaching employability and financial skills, to helping students recognize and overcome barriers that may come up in their lives. “As instructors, we wear many different hats. At one point, we may be teaching algebra and the next playing counselor and listening to a student’s problems. You just never know what your day’s going to hold.” From the first day, instructors are working to build and improve students’ life skills along with the technical skills they will need to pass the GED exam. They recognize that students need to learn these skills in order to continue onto college and increase their chances of success. They will not always be there to hold their hand, which they find, oftentimes, students are looking for. “Our goal when they leave, is that they’ve got their diploma in hand, but can also advocate for themselves at the next level.”

**Family and work obligations.** One prevalent difference for nontraditional students compared to their traditional counterparts is the addition of work and family obligations in conjunction with their schoolwork. Out of the students interviewed, only four were single while the others were married with varying numbers of children. For those who were older with families, the perceived struggle of raising a family while attending school was notable. In fact, a
couple of students conveyed that they waited a longer time before entering an adult education because they did not feel they could handle schoolwork at the same time they were raising a family. One student stated, “It was my husband that talked me into going back to school. I didn’t think it was possible. I didn’t think I had enough time in my day to fit in school with making meals, cleaning the house, raising three children, and working two part-time jobs.” Another student mentioned that she waited until her children were older before going back to school. Her children were actually her motivation for going back for her GED diploma:

I wasn’t able to help my kids with their homework anymore. I came back to school to learn how to do math and improve my vocabulary to help with their homework. It was embarrassing not knowing things. I then decided to continue on because I wanted to set the example for them that they could go to college too and to not think they couldn’t.

Work obligations were also prevalent across the students interviewed. While two students did not have jobs at the time, the others worked either part-time or full-time jobs while pursuing their education. Having a job and limited time was a common reason across participants for waiting to return to school. Thoughts expressed on going back to school while working included:

- I couldn’t balance both.
- I didn’t think I had the time to return to school when I was working all day.
- I felt overwhelmed thinking about going back to school. I already had a part-time job and a family to care for, so basically two part-time jobs.

However, the morning and night time offerings for classes allowed students to go back to school while continuing to work and care for their families. In cases where students could not always attend class, instructors made the effort to give students work to do at home that would keep them on schedule. The transition specialist also played a role in helping students continue to
be successful in the classroom while attending work. One student expressed his gratitude for the transition specialist saying, “I was working nights and it was hard to come to class some mornings. All I wanted to do was go home and crash, but Julie would call and talk me into making it to class. I owe her.” One development, noted by Hannah, was the improvement to students’ time management skills. Students had to actively engage in creating calendars, planning time for studying, and plan ahead for the week to make sure they were able to fit in work, class, and family time, a skill they could carry on to their time in college.

**Academic Preparedness**

According to the ACT Board (2007), academic preparation and performance, including successful completion of high school coursework, are some of the strongest predictors of college persistence and success. For adult education students that never completed high school, the need to review or learn these skills while in an adult education program to increase their chances of success at the postsecondary level is astronomical. While all adult education students missed out on some level of valuable information and skills taught in high school, some students also face a time barrier. That is, even where students learned skills, their time away from school has diminished their ability to remember information, in turn, lessening their academic preparedness for returning to school.

For instance, three of the students admitted they made multiple returns to education before completing a GED diploma. While motivation was part of the reason they were not successful the first time, two of the three students also noted that preparation was a factor. One student commented, “Math is what got me. I struggle with math, always have.” Similarly, another student mentioned the need for the extra math classes because of her inadequacy with the
subject: “I needed to be older and be more motivated before I was able to pass the math section to get my GED [diploma].”

Along with difficulties in specific subject areas, students, especially those over 35 years of age, identified changing curriculum as a struggle for them when re-entering school. Three students discussed not only their inability to remember how to do certain problems, but also how approaches to solving problems have changed since their time in secondary school. For instance, one student mentioned, “When I was in grade school, they showed us how to add and subtract with an abacus, you know? They don’t do that anymore.” This student was not the only one to notice the changes to curriculum. Another student talked about citations when writing papers, saying, “Yeah, we didn’t have those when I was in school. We didn’t have to cite our information back then. Now, you have to cite everything it seems.” Although students acknowledge these setbacks when returning to school, most kept a positive attitude, making comments such as:

● It’s easier to learn the second time around.

● I think I pick things up faster than I did in high school.

● It’s all new knowledge. I just look at it as continuing to learn something new each day.

This continued positive attitude towards dusting off old skills and learning new ones, helped to increase academic preparedness for students as they adjusted to being a student again and also speaks to their personal disposition.

**Personal Dispositions**

The effects of self-efficacy, goal attainment, and motivation are found to be positively correlated with academic persistence and success (Terenzini, 2009). Often overlooked, a
student’s disposition can account for many differences between adult education students. As mentioned by three students who chose to leave and return to adult education multiple times before finally completing their GED diploma: “where I was at in life before wasn’t the right time,” “I wasn’t ready to handle school yet,” and “I had other things going on in life that were more important to me at the time” support this notion that students have to have the right motivation and frame of mind in order to be successful in education.

Along these same lines, self-discipline, self-confidence, and self-motivation also played a role in students’ return to adult education and college. Where these students admitted to not being ready before now, they acknowledged how time, growing up, and having different goals for their lives changed their perceptions of returning for a GED diploma and wanting to go to college. For one student, setting a good example for her children became the motivation behind her return to school. For another, it was the desire to learn new skills after working in the same paper mill for over 30 years of his life. Finally, the last student wanted better job opportunities and found she had “a real knack for helping people” which made her want to pursue social work as a career choice.

Students’ disposition continued to play a role in their schooling as they continued onto their college classes. Goal attainment seemed the most prevalent among students once they enrolled in college pertaining to their persistence and success. Every student interviewed spoke of their determination to complete the credential they were working towards. Even in cases where students were only taking classes part-time due to job and family obligations, students still planned to complete their classes within three years of starting the program. Self-esteem was another prevalent factor in student’s persistence and success once enrolled in college. One student noted her comfortability asking questions in class due to her time in adult education as
part of her success in her college classes. For others, just the ability to attend classes without comparing themselves to other students was enough to impact their success and persistence.

**Conclusion**

In this section the theme of pre-academic characteristics and experiences was investigated through the perceptions of students and instructors. Terenzini and Reason (2005) suggest that a student’s lived experiences prior to entering college play a massive role in how well they will succeed. In this case, students’ pre-academic factors came into play twice: prior to entering the adult education program and again when they entered college. Adult education students bring with them unique experiences and life stories that affect their ability to attend and persist through their educational goals. Students entered the adult education program with several other concerns and factors to deal with in their lives including family and work obligations. Their self-efficacy and self-esteem were usually low regarding academic attainment.

Instructors’ abilities to recognize struggles students are having and to instill in them the skills to overcome their barriers were important to students’ success. The approach to instruction and guidance displayed by the instructors played a significant role in building the self-esteem of these students and gave them the necessary tools to attain their educational goals. Their experiences in adult education influenced and continue to affect their time spent working towards their college credentials. The most important takeaways from this section were the need for students to have educational goals, have the motivation and drive to attain them, and the means to attain them with, including the life skills to overcome barriers and the self-esteem to persist when they may not feel confident.
Theme Two: Adult Education Policies and Procedures

According to the GEDTS (2014), most individuals across the nation who take the GED test spend three months or less preparing. The length of time it takes to earn a GED diploma depends largely on the approach taken to prepare for the exam. One of the most common ways of preparing for the exam is by participating in an adult education program which offers classes on a consistent schedule or as a self-paced instructional option (GEDTS, 2014). The difference in these two ways of preparing were most notable when comparing GED completion time for students in each program. For those in the Bridge program, the time from entering the program to earning a GED diploma was three months or less. For those participating in the Prep program, completion of a GED diploma took six months to a year. This discrepancy in GED completion time can be attributed to differences in academic preparation and curriculum as noted by Terenzini (2009). Students and instructors interviewed for this study noted the differences between instructional approaches and focuses for each program and their influence on how quickly students were able to take the GED test. Below, the structure, curriculum, and instructional strategies of each type of adult education program are discussed in regard to their influence on academic preparation and student experiences. These factors not only affected how quickly students passed the GED test, but also heavily influenced their persistence and success in college.

Program Structure

Entrance into the programs began the same for students. To be chosen for either program, students had to score at least a 6.0 on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) test. Students were then placed in a lottery system to be randomly placed in one of the two programs. Class time offerings were the same for both groups, with classes being held twice a week for four
hours with an optional math seminar class that’s available 6-8 hours each week. Programs having the same entrance requirements and class time structure helped to strengthen the validity and reliability of this study while also making the differences between programs easier to identify and attribute to completion times.

**Enrollment and orientation.** Once selected into a program, those that entered the Bridge program participated in a managed enrollment plan which had a new group of students begin together as a cohort every seven weeks. Their first week in the program consisted of an orientation week and for those hitting their seventh week in the program, a transition week. In contrast, those that participated in the Prep program could begin right away through a continuous enrollment process that did not include an orientation. Students were able to enter and exit the program as they completed their GED diploma or for any other reasons they might have for leaving classes.

This difference in enrollment practices played a role in student persistence. According to Hannah, being part of a cohort created a sense of family and comradery among students: “They supported each other through struggles, called each other when they missed class, and took sections of the GED exam together. This sense of togetherness led to students wanting to succeed and earn they GED diploma quickly as to not be left behind by others in their class.” On the contrary, Brian discussed the high turnover rate in the Prep program, saying:

A student might be with us one week and be gone the next because they went and took all four sections of the GED exam one day and passed. In the same way, we might have a student that’s with us for a week and then quits coming back to class the next and we never hear from them again or they might show back up months or years later. You just never know who is going to be there or be gone the next day.
This lack of connection between students and high turnover rate contributes to the extended time it takes for them to earn a GED diploma as students do not feel the need to come to class to see their “friends” and may find other events take priority over their education. Over half of the Prep students interviewed noted they had attempted to get their GED diploma at least once before coming back to earn it this time, lending support to this conclusion.

Orientation practices varied drastically for each program. Instructors and students discussed the importance of the orientation/transition week for students in the Bridge program. Once the new cohort begins, the students spend their first week of class in an orientation process. Orientation consists of career exploration where students take tests to identify which career pathways they are best suited to and they must also do an exploration project where they identify and do a study on two different majors offered by the college that relate to their identified career opportunities. As Brian stated, “the orientation week really sets students up for success and continuing onto college. That seed is already planted and students start getting excited.” The orientation week also gives students a chance to build relationships and begin some remedial work in areas where they scored lower. The only setback identified by the instructors about the Bridge orientation process was the number of contact hours spent on orientation. According to Brian, “there’s been some discussion of changing the orientation process to a one day event instead of two day due to the contact hours. Once students hit 12 hours, they are counted in our denominator, so students could attend orientation week, one day of class, then decide to never come back and that hurts our numbers.” The number of hours spent on orientation was also a concern for students. One student explained, “the long orientation process was actually intimidating to me. I held off on getting my GED [diploma] for a long time because I was too scared to be back in the classroom, be around people I don’t know, and just participating in
something I had failed at before.” Another student expressed, “Yeah, I thought the orientation process was really long. I just wanted to get started on the classes to pass the test. After going through it though, I really appreciated it and saw its importance more.”

While the new students are participating in orientation week, the past starters who are nearing the end of their time in the program, participate in a transitions week. Instructors called this week “Getting Started,” a session for the Bridge students which includes career exploration, career services, and the transition to college including filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), applying for scholarships, and getting a tour of the college campus and student services. The week is led by the transition coordinator. Students get a backstage tour of the campus, are introduced to the advisors for their programs of interest, and begin the financial aid process. Bridge students are approached with the mindset that “the GED is just part of the process. That it’s part of their pathway towards college entrance… even before they take their final test, they’ve already started applying and doing their FAFSA.”

Unfortunately, for the Prep students, Brian stated “there’s certainly not as much of a purposeful focus with the Prep II” program on college readiness. The Prep students do not participate in an orientation week or a transition week. Once students have taken the TABE test and are selected for the Prep program, students just begin attending class. Brian noted that he has begun incorporating some career exploration with his Prep students, but he admitted it’s not anywhere near the level of exploration done with the Bridge students. Prep students also miss out on the opportunity of participating in the transition week, making their transition to college more difficult. Prep students have to take initiative to find the financial aid and student services offices, complete their applications and FAFSA forms, and make contact with an advisor all on their own which seemed to limit student persistence and success at continuing on to college after
reviewing enrollment data presented by the college. Instructors have recognized this limitation and are working to adjust the orientation process in coming years for both programs.

Student interviews echoed the same sentiments as the instructors when it came to the orientation/transition week. The first three Prep students interviewed revealed there was a lack of discussion and resources concerning the transition to college and that they wished they had known more about college before attending. One student in the Prep program stated:

In the GED classes they focus on one subject at a time. In college, you learn a lot of different subjects in one class. I also didn’t know about attendance policies or how to learn and how to be a college student. There was no real discussion about the resources available to help students in college.

On the other hand, all five Bridge interviewees praised the amount of information and leadership provided in deciding on a major and entering college, including being connected to an advisor before finishing their GED diploma. One Bridge student said:

Every step, there’s assistance offered, and I think that makes a huge difference. Like I said, everybody’s just been super encouraging and offered plenty of help and resources. Our orientation, they made it very clear that there’s resources for anything and everything that you need. They explained some stuff, and then they took us on a tour…they did go through some financial aid stuff and … walked us through everything the school had to offer, so that was helpful and it actually got you excited to become a student here.

In support of the advisor connection, another Bridge student stated:

Right after completing my GED, my instructor for the GED program, he connected me with the advisor for the Human Services program because he knew that’s what I wanted to do… getting into the program, signing up for classes, I had no idea how to do any of
that, and he got me in touch with everyone who helped me through that.

**Transition specialist.** The transition specialist is a distinct part of the Bridge program. The transition specialist’s role for the program includes the transition week, connecting students to college program advisors, following up with students on attendance, and linking students to any outside resources they may need. Brian talked about Julie’s role as the transition specialist, saying:

In her role, she oversees the transition week. She also oversees students who have one remaining test. She is contacting students who aren’t attending well, but her role really kicks into gear when students get down to their last test. It’s her job to connect them to our welcome center and the academic advisor who’s also a financial aid specialist and all of that.

One Bridge student stated that it was Julie who called him and got him coming back to the program after he stopped attending for a few days due to being tired from work. He appreciated that they really cared about him and his success which got him to return and complete his GED diploma. Several other students found Julie to be extremely important to the transitioning process and had the following to say about her role:

- Julie was there when I was about to finish my last test. She took me across campus introduced me to the people in the financial aid office. I liked not having to go alone.

- The transition specialist, I think her name was [Julie], really helped me! She got me connected to my advisor to get my college classes scheduled!
- I still run into Julie sometimes walking down the halls. She makes me feel good because she always asks how my classes are going and asks if I need anything. It makes me feel special that she remembers me and still cares about me, you know?

The transition specialist role continues to grow and validate the importance of having someone to support students in the transition to college from adult education. The transition specialist offers support in the non-academic areas that are still essential for student success. Julie is that final step for students in adult education before they make the giant leap to their postsecondary education. Having a transition specialist that students feel comfortable with, that is checking up on them, and helping them to eliminate any barriers in their way, continues to promote student persistence and success.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

Another major difference between the two programs was the approach to instruction and types of materials used for curriculum. According to Berger (2001, 2002), organizations that are perceived as exhibiting collegial and systematic characteristics enhance a student’s chances of persisting by increasing their satisfaction, communication, inclusion, and participation. The ability of adult education programs to mimic regular college coursework was perceived by students, instructors, and the administrator alike, to be somewhat critical to student success in college.

**Online learning.** The number of students taking online classes has continued to rise in past years, making the need to learn basic computer skills a necessity for students entering college (DOE, 2018). To address this skill, both adult education programs incorporated assignments using OnCourse Learning and Blackboard Learning Management System.
According to the website, OnCourse Learning (2018) “is an e-learning partner that empowers companies and professionals to improve, achieve, and aspire.” OnCourse Learning offers continuing education and career training through the use of over 11,000 courses. The adult education programs utilize OnCourse for the health and employability skills components of the programs as Wisconsin requires students to take a civics or naturalization test. To help improve students’ computer efficiency, these skills and training programs are presented using OnCourse’s learning technology platform. Hannah mentioned OnCourse not only helps improve students’ computer skills, but also helps to get students in the mindset of thinking beyond a GED diploma and looking at potential job opportunities. “We’re not only preparing them for the civics test, but we’re planting these skills and getting them to think beyond it [GED test], especially with these employability skills,” Hannah stated.

Although the instructors touted the significance of OnCourse Learning, students did not seem to appreciate the courses as much. None of the students interviewed mentioned OnCourse or it’s instruction in employability skills as an important component of their adult education experience. However, several students from both groups supported the use of Blackboard as a vital part of their adult education experience in helping them prepare for college.

According to the website, Blackboard (2018) is the number one global education software provider and believes in:

- Providing the technology, tools, and support to meet the specific needs of students
- Everyone, regardless of geography, financial situation, stage of life or disability, deserves access to education
- Fostering an engaged community and personalized learning that drives student success in the midst of rapid change
- Providing a connected learning experience and support network and working to create a seamless, intuitive, and insightful experience learners need for success
- And providing data-driven insights that can be the difference between at-risk students and student success

The college utilizes Blackboard for their online and hybrid classes. Brian, Hannah, and Shelly discussed the need to incorporate Blackboard into the adult education programs to get students comfortable with an online learning platform and to prepare them for college classes. Blackboard serves multiple purposes in the programs: teaching basic computer skills such as properly using the mouse for clicking, how to do internet searches, and how to type, as well as serves as the basis for the Prep program’s in-class instruction. According to Brian, all of the instructional materials used in the Prep program are linked to and accessed through Blackboard. Students are able to study different subjects and Brian is able to upload new materials easily for students to use.

Students found Blackboard to be one of the most crucial skills they learned in adult education. Several students mentioned that they had to take online classes in college either because the classes they needed were only offered online or because online classes were easier to fit into their busy schedules. Concerning the use of Blackboard, students expressed views such as:

- I prefer the online classes because I can work on the classwork whenever I have time which is usually late at night after I get home from work.
- I like getting to work ahead in my online classes.
I still struggle with Blackboard, but the teachers in the GED program gave me a lot of help in learning it. I definitely feel more comfortable with it now, in my college classes, because of them.

While technology in the classroom seems to be a shared approach to education for both adult education programs, beyond the utilization of OnCourse and Blackboard, the programs have very different approaches to instructional strategies. Following, the instructional approaches taken by each program are reviewed.

**Traditional instruction.** The Prep program utilizes a traditional content-based instructional model in the classroom. According to Brian, “The decision of which subjects to teach at any given time really primarily hinge on the students that are in the classroom at the time.” In the Prep class, students are working at their own pace, so each student may be studying for a different test and have already taken different tests than they peers. What they might study as a group depends on what subject most of the students in the class still need to pass.

In class, students utilize Blackboard, a learning platform system, that some of their instructional materials are based out of, including content instructors have developed, PDF documents, or open-educational resources. Brian mentioned they do not have textbooks in the classroom. However, other instructional materials include Steck-Vaughn GED study booklets for homework and IXL software for remediation. Regarding the use of the context-based books and online learning platforms, Brian stated:

I like to give them [Steck-Vaughn book] as assigned practice for students because the wording of the questions is very similar to how they would appear on the GED test along with the format of answering a similar question. We do use IXL software for skills remediation for mostly math and language arts. There’s social studies and science options
on there too. We also use Blackboard in the classroom to get them [the students]
interacting with it because their digital skills are sometimes so low that they need support
on how to click, how to go back, how to follow the breadcrumbs.

He also talked about the mechanical, methodical approach they take to teaching the
material needed for the GED test, stating, “It’s still just going through the steps. Like with
science, we have life science, physical science, and earth and space. Then you’re touching on
human biology, ecology, physics, and chemistry.” Materials used do not encompass multiple
parts of the test at one time, increasing the amount of time it takes students to learn material and
take parts of the GED test.

These sentiments were echoed by several students. A positive of the Prep program that a
few students mentioned as helping them complete their GED diploma, was the amount of one-
on-one instruction time they received. Each student was able to focus on the part of the GED test
they were planning to take next and receive extra help in areas where they were struggling. Two
students talked about their appreciation for having the instructor breakdown material for them
and then give them the chance to practice it on their own until they understood it. For instance,
one student stated about working at his own pace, “I liked the individual approach. I wasn’t
getting held up by others that couldn’t understand stuff as fast as I could or the other way
around.” Another student praised the one-on-one time Hannah spent working with her to prepare
her for her last test in math which was her weakest subject area. Speaking about the individual
attention she stated, “I liked all the individual attention Hannah gave me. She would work one on
one showing me something and then give me a chance to practice it on my own.” The majority
appreciated the ability to work on one subject at a time and at their own pace; although, one
wished they had studied more components at once to help better prepare them for the rigors of
taking multiple college classes during the same semester. While students seemed to appreciate this individual, guided approach to learning, this single subject approach also contributed to the longer GED completion time for Prep students as they would study for one test, take it, then study for the next test and take it, until they completed all four sections.

**Contextualized instruction.** Conversely, the Bridge program took a different approach to instruction, allowing students to take more than one test at a time. The Bridge program employs a contextualized curriculum that develops instructional materials around a career pathway. According to Equipped for the Future:

In adult education, the term “Contextualized Instruction” describes a set of teaching, learning and assessment practices that:

- are aimed directly at developing the skills and knowledge that adults need to deal with *specific situations* or *perform specific tasks*, and
- that they have identified as *important and meaningful* to themselves “right now” in their *everyday* lives.
- In addition, rather than focus only on the *possession* of basic skills and knowledge, contextualized instruction focuses on the *active application* of those skills and that knowledge “in a context”. This context should be as “real-world” as is feasible. (Gillespie, n.d., p.1)

To make instruction meaningful and important to students and to have them apply skills to their everyday lives, Hannah mentioned six career pathways: Health I and II, Trades I and II, Business, and Public Safety that classes are based around. They pair two pathways together each cohort to give students a look at different career paths they may be interested in, for example
paring Trades I with Health II. These pathways were developed based on the needs of employers and job availability in their area.

Instead of using GED study materials to prepare for the test, students read and write on career materials such as medical documents and county water reports to not only learn the skills needed to pass the GED exam, but to also increase life skills and explore different career fields for after graduation. Another example involved practicing math skills through the trades lens by identifying how much square-footage is in a given room and how much flooring they would need to purchase in order to cover the space. One student excitedly mentioned this use of real life materials for studying saying, “I loved how we got to look at different documents. It was reading legal documents, legal cases, that made me want to pursue paralegal.”

Along with the use of real life documents, Hannah spoke extensively on the program’s use of reading non-fiction books related to particular career fields such as 9-11 Commission Report in relation to their public safety track. “Each book is tied to a specific segment and it serves as the core text.” The non-fiction books are used to cover multiple subject areas at one time, encourage participation and increase attendance in class, and to build reading stamina. Hannah exclaimed, “Students are excited to come to class and find out what happens next. They don’t want to fall behind or be left out. I think reading these texts in class really creates a sense of community and engagement.”

Hannah revealed several examples of books they use and their reason for using them, saying:

Something I felt was really important…was that students be exposed to textbooks that were worth reading. We use texts that are non-fiction that have a historical context like The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks or The Ghost Map. We’re also looking for texts that
allow us to integrate science and social studies. Obviously, reading and writing are
throughout. We use a book called *Rise of the Rocket Girls*, which is a really interesting
story about women working for Jet Propulsion League, who were responsible for all the
mathematical calculations that put astronauts into outer space. The goal is to get students
actually engaging in and reading a book.

By utilizing these non-fiction readings and contextualized instruction, the Bridge
program was able to shorten the time frame it took students to pass the GED test. Hannah and
students mentioned they were able to take their science, social studies, and language arts sections
at the same time with this instructional approach, before focusing on and taking the math section.
By preparing for three tests at once, students were able earn their GED diploma in a much
shorter amount of time than those in the Prep program.

One final thought on the Bridge program curriculum that Hannah felt strongly about was
the direct instructional approach taken, stating, “I have found that the more direct instruction, the
more focus we get, the more students feel the need to be in class. They feel like there’s a purpose
for coming. They’re not just wasting their time.” She further broke this sentiment down:

What I have understood is that value times expectation is huge because what
value do they perceive they’re getting out of class and what expectations do they perceive
are upon them. And the more value you can provide, the greater sense they have that
there’s an expectation here. The more value increase that they see that there is and the
fact that there’s an expectation, the more motivated they are to want to come, if that
makes sense?

Hannah’s thoughts echo those of Tinto’s (2017) trilogy of motivation construct—student
self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perceived value of the curriculum. Both understand the
need for students to feel important and feel the work they are doing is important to be successful students. By contextualizing the curriculum and giving it importance in students’ lives through the use of real world situations and covering material only in class that students have to present for, students find more value to being in class and learning the material.

Conclusion

Analysis of instructional materials and data reports showed a very diverse image for each type of adult education program. The Prep and Bridge programs have vastly different approaches to the way they teach students, prepare them for the GED test, and assist them with the transition to college. Analysis of the interviews supported the same picture as the documents, indicating several key differences between instruction and materials that affected student success and how quickly they were able to prepare for and pass the GED test. Students and instructors described different end goals for each program: the Prep program focused on passing the GED test while the Bridge program viewed the GED test as a stepping stone towards the end goal of college. This mindset, along with the sense of inclusion and family built in the Bridge program versus the Prep program’s individual mentality and instructional approach taken, had a significant impact on how quickly students were able to take the parts of the GED test and earn a diploma.

The Bridge program’s contextualized approach to instruction far exceeded the Prep program’s traditional approach to GED instruction. By preparing students for more sections at one time, it significantly decreased the amount of time students spent in the program and decreased the risk of students stopping or dropping out before earning their GED diploma. This discovery is supported by student interviews. None of the Bridge students mentioned stopping out and returning to the GED program, whereas three of the Prep students had attended the
program multiple times at different points in their lives before finally completing the GED test and earning their diploma.

Finally, both programs had to deal with outside influencers and barriers to success faced by students. The Bridge program tackled these issues by providing a transition specialist that served to meet students’ needs and assisted in keeping them in the program, while the Prep students let these factors affect their attendance and ability to quickly earn a GED diploma. This last takeaway led to the next emerging theme found in the evidence: students have a significant number of barriers to their education and need an immense amount of support to overcome them and be successful in the classroom.

Theme Three: Barriers and Need for Support Services

The third theme to emerge from the findings was the students’ need for support services. The majority of students from both programs mentioned a physical or mental health issue as their biggest barrier in response to the question, “What are your biggest barriers to completing your college credential?” Other students encountered technical and skill set barriers after returning to the classroom in an age where technology is a main component of instruction.

Personal Barriers

Besides the significant differences between the instructional methods and additional services provided by the programs, another common factor that emerged through the interviews was outside barriers leading to students stopping out and returning to the program multiple times. This was common among the Prep students. One student mentioned that she first attempted to get her GED diploma when she was 18 but didn’t have the drive to stay. She ended up coming back and trying again twice in her 30’s before earning her diploma. Another Prep student said she stopped out multiple times over a long period of time due to having multiple surgeries on her
hands which left her discouraged. Finally, one student also mentioned stopping out in his 20’s after attempting to get his GED diploma because he thought it was more important to go to work at the time. Now he’s completed his GED diploma and entered college in his 50’s. Students were able to overcome these outside barriers, complete their GED diploma, and enroll in college, even though it extended the time it took them to finish.

**Physical and mental disabilities.** In addition to family and work obligations that made earning a GED diploma difficult, half of the students interviewed also suffer from a number of mental and physical disabilities. One student mentioned she has fibromyalgia which made completing her GED diploma and attending college difficult for her as it affects the use of her hands and she had to take breaks from school for several surgeries on them. She also mentioned she saw a school counselor two or three times to help her manage her anxiety and depression over returning to school.

Another student stated they have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) that interferes with their success in school. She mentioned the time spent on learning study skills and taking notes in the adult education program assisted her with managing her ADHD symptoms in the classroom. Additionally, one student stated he has bipolar disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder for which he receives accommodations. However, he also noted that he did not know about these services as a GED student and did not start receiving his accommodations of extended testing time and read aloud assistance until after he was a college student. He was part of the Prep program. The need for support services was evident from the student interviews. Being able to work through and overcome an assortment of barriers was a great need for GED students from both programs. The programs’ and college’s ability to identify
services for students and assist them with overcoming barriers made the difference in how successful they were.

In further discussion, the researcher found that Bridge students praised the support services available to them, whereas, the Prep students noted that they did not receive services until after the first semester of college or later due to not knowing about support services. This discrepancy can be attributed to the transition week that Bridge students participate in that Prep students do not have. Three of the five bridge students interviewed mentioned the transition specialist and the role she played in connecting them to support services, while all five spoke about the tour they took of the college and being able to learn about, meet the staff, and see the location of student services. Four of the five Prep students said they needed support services but were unaware they were available until after they had been enrolled for a semester or longer of college. The fifth Prep student said she knew of some support services but was not aware of all services available to students. This lack of support services contributed to the higher rate of stopping out and returning before earning a GED diploma in the Prep program students.

Support services. The instructors also discussed barriers and noted the major ones they see as childcare and financial issues. Although, it must be noted, neither of these were mentioned by any of the students. Concerning student barriers, the instructors talked about programs they have students go through early on called OnCourse and College 101. According to Brian:

…so often, many of our students are in crisis that those life circumstances become a barrier. A big focus in our programming, and the college, is incorporating those principles… and to working with them about, well, regardless of your circumstances, how do you stay on course? How do you identify the bumps in the road that you know your potentially going to have and make a plan so that when they do happen, you already
have a go-to plan, so you don’t let it derail you? That’s a big piece of what we do early on with our students.

Brian also stated beyond what they teach the students in the classroom, the college itself is phenomenal in its support for students. Brian also noted that “90% of the services on campus are available to our GED students. They get an ID card. They have access to just about everything our full-time students have access too.” Hannah followed that up with, “If you don’t integrate your students into the culture of the campus, there’s nothing that’s going to be pulling them to want to be a part of that culture.” The services offered by the college include a foundation for financial assistance, a closet for interview clothes, laptop rentals, and a food pantry, along with the academic and disability service divisions previously mentioned. These services were a major part of the GED recipients’ abilities to overcome barriers and persist with their education once they knew about them and were able to take advantage of the services provided. Hannah’s comment furthered the idea that support services were a large part of student success. By providing services to students while they were in the adult education program, the college built that connection and comfortability for students, increasing the chance they would enroll in the college after earning their GED diploma.

School-Related Barriers

In addition to personal disabilities faced by students, participants also noted struggles they faced in the classroom. Many students felt self-conscious and inadequate when returning to school, feeling they lacked the skills needed to be successful in the classroom or the ability to learn and retain the information being taught.

Classroom skills. Once again, those students interviewed over the age of 35, stated they felt school was harder for them after being away for so long. Two others also mentioned their
struggle with the technology aspect of completing college classes. However, they remained positive, stating they continue to learn new skills and grow in their classes. One even mentioned that her newly learned computer skills for the classroom have helped her at work as well.

Along with technological barriers in the classroom, the majority of students revealed their lack of knowledge about citations and writing styles. Three students stated one part they felt behind on as a GED student instead of being a regular high school admitted student, was the lack of preparedness they felt when it came to their writing. When discussing citations and MLA or APA formatting, comments from several students included:

- I didn’t get that far [in high school].
- I never learned that.
- The only part they [GED instructors] didn’t help with was citations.
- I struggle writing papers.

The instructors also agreed that citations and writing papers was an area where they need to improve. Brian stated that it is something they are thinking about for the future as they continue to change and improve their curriculum, but since it is not a skill needed to pass the GED test, at the moment, it is not a skill they teach in their classes.

**Environment.** Peer environment is presumed to have a positively correlated effect on student persistence. The more students have a “sense of place” and are socially integrated into their college environment, the more likely they are to persist towards degree completion (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 1993). The instructors and administrator echoed these findings, discussing several times the need to make GED students feel a part of the campus and to integrate them into the campus environment as quickly as possible. Shelly shared that one step
the school has taken towards integration is offering the same support services to their adult
education students as their traditional college students have.

Students recognition of the college’s attempts at integration and feelings of being part of
the college were diverse. These differences in sentiments can be partly attributed to the adult
education program students participated in. The extra steps taken with the Bridge students to
give them a tour of the campus and introduce them to employees in the financial aid office,
disability services office, and student support center increased their feelings of being part of the
campus environment. One student expressed, “I’m comfortable going to the different
departments on my own” while another stated, “Getting around campus is easy now. Everyone
has been nice and helpful too, like, I can ask anyone for help without being embarrassed or
feeling like I don’t know anything.” Conversely, Prep students seemed to feel more segregated
from the college. One student mentioned there were parts of campus he had never been to and
that he rarely participated in on-campus events because he was unaware of them. Another voiced
his preference for keeping to himself, stating, “I’m just here to go to class and get my degree.
I’m not worried about making friends. Most students are younger than me anyway and there’s
differences in our generations I don’t care to get into.”

The extent to which students need to feel integrated and apart of the school, seemed to
vary depending on the student. Besides the role played by participation in one of the two adult
education programs, age and student goals seemed to be the most notable when it came to how
students viewed environment and cultural influence on their own college persistence. One
student made the statement: “I don’t think I’m the same as most people, but I’m older, so I think
that’s kind of a barrier in itself, that I don’t see things the same way younger people do… it’s a
different culture and I struggle with that sometimes…” On the other hand, all being
nontraditional students could account for the similar feelings expressed by students from both
groups that they were going to successfully complete their college credential, whether they felt a
part of the college or not.

**Conclusion**

Barriers are the largest hindrance to student success in earning a GED diploma,
transitioning to college, and completing a postsecondary credential. In order for students to be
successful, programs need to identify ways to either remove these barriers or teach students how
to overcome them. According to students and instructors, there are an extensive number of
services available to students through classes and administrative and financial support services.
In cases where there are services available through the school, a greater effort needs to be made
to make students aware of and connect them to these services, especially Prep students.
Regarding personal barriers outside of the school, it’s important for instructors to help instill the
skills students need to overcome these barriers on their own. While it’s not possible to attend to
all the barriers students may face, by providing assistance to as many as possible, graduation and
transition rates can be increased for GED recipients. Once students have more proactive instead
of reactive responses to barriers they face, they increase their likelihood of being successful at
the college level.

**Theme Four: College Persistence and Outcomes**

According to Terenzini (2009), the strongest predictors of college persistence and degree
attainment are academic preparation and performance. Furthermore, a more rigorous secondary
curriculum has a profound influence on a student’s early college career and continued
persistence (Adelman, 2006). These ideas were most notable when looking at college enrollment
rates for GED recipients from each program and when discussing college success with the
students. Although the students interviewed were all successful at transitioning to college, differences in their pre-college activities (participation in one of the adult education programs) were evident in their discussions and perceptions of difficulties in college. Study skills and technical knowledge stood out the most when discussing student experiences once enrolled in college.

The final theme that emerged from the findings was the determination of all students to complete the postsecondary credential they were working on. When asked, “Do you intend to continue taking classes next semester and/or until you complete you program?” - all students answered in the affirmative. Eight of the 10 students interviewed were working towards an associate’s degree, while the last two, one from each group, were working towards a diploma in their field of choice. Most will graduate within the next year, although, one student stated he would be taking three years to finish his degree instead of two, due to working full-time and only taking classes part-time. The determination to successfully complete the credential of their choice was evident across the board.

One reason for their success, students noted, was their decision to enroll in college right away. All students began taking college classes part-time within two semesters of completing their GED diploma with most starting the following semester after earning their GED diploma. The administrator noted the school’s readiness to help GED recipients by using their GED scores as their placement scores for entrance into the college and helping them complete their financial aid paperwork. By starting right away, students were able to continue with their routine of attending classes, keep their educational skills active, and limit the amount of time barriers had to distract them away from school, potentially decreasing their chances of not enrolling in
college. Once enrolled in college, students identified several key factors related to their persistence through college classes and success at degree completion.

**Study Skills**

Several students talked about the difficulty of their college classes and adjustments they had to make from their GED classes. The two biggest changes mentioned by eight of the students were the need to take notes in class and learning to take tests over lots of material every couple of weeks. As one student noted, “I’ve had to learn to highlight and reread material and rewrite material until I understand it and have it memorized.” Another student stated, “I’ve had to adjust to following a schedule and taking a test every few weeks. It’s been hard keeping up with the material and knowing you have to pass the test on the first try. There are no redo’s.” Some have implemented skills they learned in their adult education program. Hannah mentioned what she calls “interrogating the text” with instructors often modeling skills and “not just teaching but teaching how to learn.” One student commented on this skill, saying:

I think it helped a lot. To prepare you for college, they show you how to write notes. When you read an article or you’re reading something else, they teach you how to do side notes or to write your questions out to the side. I had this problem where I would read and I would forget everything. She [the instructor] said, “You know how each article is in paragraphs? From, there, highlight the main idea and then write your notes.” They teach you words you don’t know the meaning of and how to write notes on the side of the paragraphs. That’s one thing they showed you a lot there.

Once again, the skills taught in the Bridge program helped improve the success of GED recipients by teaching them skills not only needed to pass to the GED test, but ones that can be
carried over to their college classes, increasing their chances of success at earning a postsecondary credential.

For middle-aged students, not only were lack of study skills an issue, but the changes to curriculum, instruction, and how to solve problems also presented some challenges. For instance, one student mentioned that his math classes were difficult because the approach to solving problems was different than what he had previously learned in school. He noted several of the tools they used during his grade school days were no longer relevant and that graphing calculators were difficult to learn how to use. Two other students talked about writing papers and the use of writing styles that were new to them. One stated, “I don’t know how to do the citation stuff. Looking up research and noting it in your papers wasn’t something I had to do growing up.” New approaches to learning were not the only complaints mentioned. Several students also talked about the use of technology as a barrier to their learning.

**Technology.** With the growth of technology in the classroom, it’s becoming more important for students to have computer skills before entering college. In order to help prepare students for college classes, both adult education programs included online components in their instruction. However, some students noted it was not enough. Three students mentioned their struggles with technology in the classroom including not knowing how to navigate sites and having poor typing skills. Writing papers and making presentations using applications such as PowerPoint were hindrances for a number of students interviewed. Skills other students had the chance to learn in secondary school, GED students missed out on.

The administrator and instructors agreed that technical writing skills and computer literacy were areas they could improve upon, also noting that college professors often expect students to already possess these skills prior to entering college and do not always make
necessary adjustments to help those who do not. Even though the students had access to computer literacy programs during their time in adult education, the time devoted to these skills was not always enough for students to become adequate with those skills. Then, once in college, students were no longer provided programs to help improve their skills but were expected to complete assignments using skills they did not possess without a way to get them.

For some students, lack of computer skills was not the only issue. For two students, lack of access to internet and a reliable computer made college classes difficult. One student talked about the extra time he had to spend on campus each week to use a library computer for some of his work due to not having a computer or internet access at his home. This lack of sources causes extra stress for students as they try to work around competing schedules, due dates, and time constraints. While the school is aware of this setback, there does not seem to be much they can do at this point to help eliminate this barrier to student success.

Conclusion

The Bridge program not only shortened the time frame it took for students to complete the GED test, but it also provided a better skill set for becoming college students. Instructors and students talked extensively about learning how to “interrogate the text,” not only improving students’ note-taking skills, but also extending their reading stamina and ability to comprehend and remember what they’ve read. The Prep students did not share these same sentiments with a couple noting their inexperience with taking notes and being able to comprehend what they’re reading. One Prep student communicated his wish to have learned note-taking and study skills for his college classes.

While study skills were not equal across programs once students enrolled in college, there was a similarity in enrollment patterns for students which has assisted with their college success.
By enrolling right away, students increased their chances of transitioning to college and continuing towards their degree or diploma completion. Likewise, students’ choice to take classes part-time their first semester contributed to their success. By taking fewer classes, students were able to adjust to college classes without being overwhelmed, increase their confidence levels, and identify their strengths and weaknesses to work on. Students made the correct decision for themselves as well with some increasing their class load to full-time while others continued part-time in consequent semesters.

Given these points, schools should think about adding classes or workshops that provide students with the necessary tools needed to succeed including study skills and computer literacy skills to support GED recipients continued persistence and success. Students need to be able to manage learning about and completing assignments for multiple subjects at once and have the skills to complete their assignments. Lack of such skills can be detrimental to the continued success of these students.

**Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to identify the similarities and differences between two types of adult education programs and how well they prepare GED recipients for college. The primary question guiding this research was: What role does the type of adult education program completed (career bridge program or traditional adult education program) play in the success of GED recipients enrolled at the same community college? The sub-questions directing the study were: Are there differences in pre-college academic preparedness (personal characteristics, GED instructional materials and teaching methods) of GED recipients from a career bridge program versus a traditional adult education program? How prepared for and successful are GED recipients once enrolled in a college program?
Findings support earlier literature, suggesting that bridge programs not only have more students transition to postsecondary education after receiving their GED diploma, but they also provide students with more skills needed to be successful once enrolled in college. Through analysis of the data including student, instructor, and administrator interviews, instructional materials, and college reports, several key themes emerged, including the extensive pre-academic characteristics GED students possess, the differences between instructional strategies and materials and how quickly they prepared students to take the GED test, students need for assistance with overcoming challenges or barriers to their educational success, and their determination once making it to college to persist through to degree or diploma completion.

Even though this case study involved a low number of student participants, the triangulation of data sets including class materials, college reports, and interviews with instructors and a program administrator, helped to improve the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation showed the same findings across the different groups of datasets, supporting the trustworthiness of findings. The similarities across student responses from each program increased the external validity to larger groups of GED students. By keeping sampling open to any student within each program that had transitioned to college, the researcher was able to interview a diverse group of students to include different backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and ages, allowing for findings to be applied to other groups of GED recipients as well. One drawback to the study that would limit its external validity was the use of a single school and program. If other schools differ in services and program structures, the results may vary.

**Finding One: Student Disposition Affects Persistence**

Generally speaking, students entered the adult education program and college with a variety of pre-academic factors. Those that were successful at completing a GED diploma and
persisting through to college, were able to overcome feelings of doubt, work and family obligations, and new instructional strategies. Instructors and the transition specialist played a significant role in students attaining their goals. Not only did they provide the skills needed for passing the GED test, they also taught students life skills and provided the support needed to get students connected to and looking forward to college. By helping students eliminate barriers, instructors and the transition specialist opened the doors for students to increase their self-confidence and become successful college students.

Students’ self-esteem and own goals also played a significant role in their ability to persist through earning a GED diploma and continuing onto college. Where students entered the adult education program with doubts and apprehension, they were able to build skills inside and outside of the classroom that helped to improve their self-confidence and ability to be ideal students. Once they had the self-confidence to continue, goal-setting became the number one factor influencing their persistence and success. Instructors and the transition specialist were able to assist students with coming up with and planning for their educational goals, starting with career and program exploration and ending with setting them up with college advisors to help them continue reaching their goals.

**Finding Two: Contextualized Instruction Proved Superior**

Findings supported the researcher’s initial thoughts that the Bridge program would be better at preparing GED students for college level work. There was no doubt in the minds of the instructors and the administrator that the Bridge program was better at preparing students for college compared to the Prep program. Documentation showed during the time frame of the study, 30 Bridge students had transitioned to the college while only 14 of the Prep students had enrolled. Interviews with the students and instructors and document analysis helped to pinpoint
the exact differences between the adult education programs that led to such discrepancies in GED completion time and college enrollment.

The results showed the reading materials, contextualized teaching approach, and ability to study for multiple test sections at one time in the Bridge program made for a shorter amount of time before GED test completion while the one-on-one teaching strategy and singular subject focus of the Prep program not only made for longer completion times, but also led to more stopping out and returning to the program before GED completion. However, for some students, the individualized teaching approach taken in the Prep program was preferred over the group setting of the Bridge program.

The mention of support services and praise from the Bridge students suggest that the Bridge program is better at preparing students for college. This was supported by documentation, the instructors, and the administrator, who said they plan to move their entire adult education program to a contextualized learning model in the future due to the increased success of the Bridge students over the Prep students in not only completing the GED test, but also transitioning to college.

**Finding Three: GED Students Need Extra Support Services**

Even though barriers continued to persist for students, the support services offered through the college helped to alleviate some of their burdens and made not only the transition to college, but the continuation of taking classes, easier and more manageable for students, lending to their success. The Bridge students had an added advantage in the transition specialist and transition week that spent time teaching students about and connecting them to the support services offered by the school. Mental and physical disabilities were the number one stressors
and barriers for students. Once students had access to counselors and accommodation services, their confidence and ability to complete classwork increased significantly.

However, for students to be successful, they had to know about the opportunities available to them. This was not always the case for the Prep students who did not participate in a transition week that connected them to the support services offered by the school. To overcome their barriers, students had to take steps on their own to find and receive the accommodations or extra support they needed to succeed. This took longer as they were unaware of the services until later on in the college careers and could account for the lower rate of Prep students transitioning to college.

**Finding Four: College Success Hinges on Pre-Academic Factors and Continued Learning**

Although, there was a difference of opinion on the importance of college for the two groups, for those that did make the transition to college, the time frame with which they enrolled in college after completing their GED diploma was the same for both groups. Students interviewed had all enrolled in the college within two semesters of earning a GED diploma, decreasing the chances of them changing their minds or letting barriers get in their way. Once enrolled, students’ part-time status continued to improve their confidence and success at working towards a college diploma or degree.

Furthermore, once students accomplished their goal of earning a GED diploma, they were more motivated to complete a degree or diploma at the college. However, for them to continue being successful, colleges need to continue providing students with opportunities to improve the skills they learned in the adult education program including study skills, time management, and computer literacy skills. Once students adjusted to having multiple classes, instructors, teaching methods, and assignments, their confidence and persistence continued.
Finally, adult education programs across the nation can use these findings to help improve their own programs and the success of GED recipients in college. Findings suggest adult education programs need to improve support services, employ a contextualized curriculum, include extra training in study skills, writing, and technology, shorten the amount of time it takes students to complete the GED test, and improve the connection between GED students and colleges before they earn their GED diploma making the transition to college easier for students. Once enrolled in college, student confidence, determination, and skill sets seem to be the main factors in their success towards a college credential.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to discover if one type of adult education program is better at preparing GED recipients for postsecondary education over another. The two types of programs studied were a Bridge program and a traditional program, in this case, referred to as a Prep program. Previous research on Bridge programs is limited due to their more recent creation, and available research is limited to just students transitioning on to college. This study takes previous research a step further by looking at the correlation between type of adult education program participated in and college persistence. Listening to the lived experiences of college students who graduated from one of the programs, along with the instructors, allowed for recognition of how each program prepared students for college classes, what challenges students still face, and ways adult education programs can make improvements.

To identify which program better prepared students for college level coursework, a qualitative research approach utilizing a comparative case study was chosen to allow for experiential understanding through the experiences of students, instructors, and the program administrator. To study this phenomenon, Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) integrated model of influences on student learning and persistence was used. The model suggests students’ precollege characteristics shape their college experiences including interactions with the institution’s environment and agents of socialization (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). This framework allowed for deeper understanding of the complexities GED students face when returning to school and how their experiences with the adult education program and college’s policies and procedures lent to their continued persistence towards diploma or degree completion.
This chapter is organized by the four major themes identified: pre-academic factors, adult education policies and procedures, support services, and college persistence. Findings from each theme will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework, along with previous and current research, allowing for evaluation of how this study relates to, supports, or contradicts prior research. Next, implications for future research are examined, along with specific examples of how these implications may be used in the practice setting. Finally, the chapter concludes with suggested areas for future research, allowing for continued exploration into GED recipients’ college experiences.

**Pre-Academic Factors and Experiences**

The first theme’s findings revealed that students’ pre-academic factors such as background, age, marital status, self-esteem, and last grade completed before dropping out affected their persistence through the adult education program as well as college. Students returned to school with several obstacles to overcome along their educational journey including learning how to balance family, work, and school, working with physical and mental disabilities, and beating thoughts of self-doubt. These findings resemble earlier findings from Groto and Martin (2009) and Rosenthal (1998) who suggested GED students lack self-efficacy and motivation which affects their persistence and retention rates. Along with intrinsic values, Nix and Machalak (2012) identified economic and family distress, work obligations, and pressures from being a first-generation college student as pre-academic factors affecting GED students’ success. These background characteristics fit within the first section of Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) conceptual framework which suggests that differences amongst students’ backgrounds prior to entering school will affect their likelihood of persisting through college. Often times, students need assistance in learning how to work with their pre-academic factors and experiences.
if they are to be successful at a postsecondary institution. Without them, students will continue to struggle along their educational journeys, decreasing their chances of successfully completing a college credential.

**Sociodemographic Factors**

Although research on individual sociodemographic traits in relation to student persistence has diminished in recent years, the importance of such research continues to weigh heavily on those looking for interventions and ways to increase student persistence (Terenzini, 2009). As Rosenthal (1998) found, GED students have already experienced negative encounters with school, leading to feelings of uncertainty, shame, lack of motivation, and low self-esteem, making the decision to return to school more difficult. Student participants supported this earlier finding, admitting to some of these same feelings of nervousness, uncertainty, and lowered self-esteem in their ability to do well in school. However, as they made level completions and passed sections of the GED test, students stated their confidence grew. A couple of students also noted the impact instructors made on their confidence levels and self-esteem, giving them a voice to speak up in the classroom and ask questions.

Another factor that changed related to their ability to succeed in school, even though self-esteem was low, was the change in their motivation and goal setting from their previous years in school. Several students admitted this was not their first attempt at returning to school. These students noted it was a change in their motivation and dedication to school that allowed them to successfully complete a GED diploma this time and continue onto college. Some students, along with the instructors, noted goal attainment as an important factor in their persistence through the adult education program and on to college. Groto and Martin (2009) and Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) found persistence increased when students set goals and felt they were making...
progress towards their goals. Every student participant stated a goal of completing the program they were in and earning either a degree or diploma. Most students had a timeline of when they wanted to complete their credential as well which helps keep them on track and motivated to continue their classes each semester.

The final sociodemographic factor affecting student persistence was noted in previous research by Rosenthal (1998), Desimone (1999), and Nix and Machalak (2012): work and family obligations and household stress. Over half of the students interviewed had family and work obligations to manage while attending school. Even though previous research discussed the effects of such stressors on dropout rates, in this case, these factors affected students’ return to school. Two students noted that family obligations are what kept them from returning in the first place, but support from spouses and wanting to set an example for children were also noted as reasons for continuing their education. Others did not believe they could take on school while working full-time. However, the adult education program offered morning and night time class offerings, making the ability to return to school easier for students that had the motivation and willingness to succeed.

Academic Preparedness

Terenzini and Reason (2005) included academic preparedness in their first construct, along with sociodemographic factors and disposition. The reason being that previous research shows academic preparation and performance are the strongest predictors of college persistence and degree attainment (ACT, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rosenthal 1998). These factors affect GED students at two points throughout their educational careers: entering the GED program and entering college. Student and instructor participants noted the role academic preparation played in their success at completing a GED diploma. Students who reached a higher
grade level before dropping out and those who returned after a shorter period of time away from school seemed to be better prepared when entering adult education. Students tested higher on the TABE test and were able to enter either the Prep or Bridge programs without participating in the lower level classes first.

Academic preparation was noticeable a second time for students once they entered college. Here, their academic preparation takes on a closer role to the one mentioned by Terenzini and Reason (2005) in how their secondary education experiences affect their college persistence. For GED recipients, their most recent secondary education experiences take place in the adult education program. The model suggests those with a more rigorous and difficult secondary curriculum are more likely to persist through college (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Shared experiences from student participants support this suggestion. Bridge students more often mentioned feelings of preparedness for their college classes than Prep students, leading to the second finding of differences between academics for each program and how they prepared students.

**Adult Education Policies and Procedures**

The second finding showed that each adult education program’s policies, procedures, and instructional strategies greatly influenced students’ matriculation to college and persistence. According to enrollment rates, nearly twice as many students from the Bridge program enrolled in college within the same time frame as those from the Prep program. Students, instructors, and the program administrator identified several key differences between the two programs that could account for the drastic difference in matriculation numbers and student persistence once in college. These included: instructional approaches to studying for the GED test, enrollment procedures, orientation and transition weeks, and the addition of a transition specialist for the
Bridge program. The instructors found the instructional strategies and orientation process to account for the most difference between GED completion time and college enrollment. Bridge students identified the orientation and transition weeks to be the most important to their persistence and success at obtaining a GED diploma and moving on to college, while Prep students believed their individualized instruction was the reason for their success. These beliefs align with Terenzini and Reason’s model that states organizational factors such as culture, behavior, and structural demographics have the power to shape student behavior and influence their success (Terenzini, 2009).

**Program Structure**

The adult education programs reviewed for this study shared some similarities in the way they were structured, but also varied drastically in how they approached sharing information with students. Students had the same score requirements and class time offerings for each program, along with an optional math support class. From there, programs differed in enrollment management, instructional strategies, and sharing of support services with students. Instructors and the administrator noticed the impact these differences have made on student persistence and matriculation to college and are taking steps towards a more streamlined process for all adult education students within the coming years.

**Enrollment.** The programs each took a different approach to enrollment strategies. The Prep program offered a continuous or open enrollment policy, allowing students to enter the program and start working towards their GED diploma right away. An open or continuous enrollment policy can have several benefits for students and programs alike. For example, Gopalakrishnan (2008) and Haley (2008) found that continuous enrollment policies increased the number of students entering adult education programs and allowed them to start immediately.
towards their educational goals. This type of enrollment also allows students to work towards their GED diploma at their own pace, focus on one subject at a time, and “stop out” and return as needed when dealing with life circumstances. This can be a positive attribute for some students. However, continuous enrollment can also hurt programs’ retention rates and increase the length of time it takes a student to earn a GED diploma (Haley, 2008). As this study found, the amount of time it took the Prep students to complete their GED diplomas was at least six months or longer with several having stopped out and returned to the program multiple times before earning their GED diploma. Another drawback, at least for instructors, is the difficulty in covering topics as a group due to students being at different points in their test preparation (Haley, 2008). This was evident in the Prep program as well where the instructors said they had to do a great deal of individualized instruction because students were at different points in taking the GED test. While the enrollment policy made instruction more difficult, the majority of the Prep students preferred the individualized instruction, stating they liked working at their own pace, not having to worry about holding others back or vice versa, and getting to focus on one subject at a time. They were not bothered by the extended time it took them to earn their GED diploma.

On the other hand, the Bridge program took a managed enrollment approach, only allowing students to start every seven weeks. Hallison (2016) and Haley (2008) noted the most successful managed enrollment policies are those that allow students to enroll every eight weeks or less. Those that wait longer tend to lose students before they ever start the program as adult education students often want immediate gratification or have constantly changing goals (Haley, 2008). In order to address the issue of students not returning at the start of a new cohort, the adult education program had a holding class for new students that worked on basic math and life skills until they were able to enter the Bridge program. The instructors and administrator noted this
seemed to help diminish dropout rates. While managed enrollment presents an obstacle at the beginning of the program, the positives greatly outweigh the negatives in students’ end results. Hallison (2016) and Haley (2008) discussed the ability of instructors in managed enrollment settings to teach specified lesson plans, include group work, and give students the opportunity to test at a faster pace. These findings were replicated in this study which found Bridge students completed their GED diplomas in three months or less. Instructors and students alike positively discussed their ability to cover several topics at the same time, allowing students to take 2 or 3 parts of the GED test within a quick amount of time. Several Bridge students, in comparison to the Prep students, enjoyed the cohort setting, stating they liked the sense of family created, seeing their friends each week, and having classmates text or call to check on them if they missed class. The administrator also mentioned the positive benefits of the managed enrollment approach for their state requirements as it allowed them to hit the required number of contact hours faster and increased retention and completion rates overall.

**Orientation and transition eek.** Along with the difference in enrollment strategies, one of the primary impacts noted by students, instructors, and the administrator on student persistence and retention in adult education was the addition of an orientation and transition week, along with a transition specialist, for the Bridge program. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) reported orientation to have one of the most direct effects on student retention and persistence. Kefallinou (2009) also cited orientation as one of the factors to help increase student educational gains and goal attainment by over 20% in the Learner Persistence Project. Several programs have also added a transition specialist to help students with goals, attendance, support services, and the transition to college or career, finding an increase in completion and matriculation rates for GED students (CLASP, 2010; Kefallinou, 2009; Nix & Michalak, 2012). Due to the managed
enrollment nature of the Bridge program, instructors and the transition specialist were able to
offer an orientation during new students’ first week in class, while those who had been in the
program participated in a transition week during the same time. This week offered new students
the chance to learn about the adult education program, the GED test, and support services offered
by the school, while the current students worked on college admissions, financial aid, and
explored the program offerings and career opportunities presented by the college. The transition
specialist was also able to follow up with students and help them more on a one-on-one basis
once they were down to their last test section in order to complete their college application and
financial aid paperwork, increasing their chances of continuing on to college. The addition of
these two weeks and the transition specialist offered students a chance to acclimate to the
campus and class environment, provided them the opportunity to interact with their peers and
instructors, build their confidence, and create goals for themselves, all of which lend to
persistence and success according to Terenzini and Reason (2005).

Although 4 of the 5 students interviewed from the Bridge program spoke about these
weeks in a positive manner, one student did mention that the long orientation process put her off
from returning to school at first. She was nervous about the interaction involved and felt it was a
waste of her time that she could have used studying for the GED test. However, she admitted that
she did appreciate the orientation and transition week once she was finally enrolled in the
program because it let her build a rapport with her instructors and helped her with the admissions
process to enroll in college. Instructors commented on the week-long orientation process as well,
citing some negatives and positives to the week. While they felt it was informational and a good
start to introduce students to the idea of attending college after completing their GED diploma,
instructors felt the length of time may be too long. As Brian stated, “we’re looking into a new
orientation approach that would just be a day long or maybe just a couple of hours each day the first week” in order to appease students wanting to start studying right away, but also to keep those who are not serious about earning a GED diploma from counting towards their state numbers which happens when students hit the 12-hour mark of attendance. At the moment, orientation lasts the first two days of class, or eight hours, so if students attend orientation and then just one day of actual instruction and never return, they count towards the program’s state numbers and then hurt the program when they don’t hit the required 40 contact hours mark to retest on the TABE and make a level completion.

Prep students did not have the opportunity to participate in an orientation process nor did they have access to a transition specialist. When asked about the orientation process or an introduction period, students held differing views on such an addition. Three students felt they would have benefited from an orientation or transition week, especially to learn about the support services offered by the college. Two students wished they had learned about accommodation services earlier on and one student mentioned that knowing about laptop and interview clothing rentals would have been beneficial to him. The other two students did not feel an orientation or transition week were necessary. They preferred starting classwork right away and found they were able to navigate the transition to college on their own without many difficulties. Although some students did not feel an orientation or transition week was necessary, instructors and the administrator felt the benefits of them were important for students and plan to offer one for all students in coming years.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

Another significant difference identified by all participants was the approach taken to instruction and curriculum by each program. The Prep program utilized a traditional GED
curriculum while the Bridge program employed a newer model incorporating contextualized instruction. Previous research supports the use of contextualized curriculum for GED students to not only provide them with the material needed to pass the GED test, but to also incorporate life skills, study skills, and career-related opportunities, whereas traditional instruction focuses solely on GED test preparation. The fourth construct of Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) conceptual framework is individual student experiences which emphasizes students’ classroom experiences, curricular experiences, and co-curricular experiences as being the most influential impact on their persistence. This can be seen in how students perceived their time in adult education prepared them for college level coursework.

Garvey and Grobe (2011) suggested traditional programs, such as the Prep program in this study, only provide a brush up on the skills students need in order pass the GED test and fall short of providing students with a robust enough curriculum to ensure they can pass college placement tests and excel at college coursework. Instructor participants slightly agreed with this statement, noting that the Prep program solely focuses on GED preparation and does not include many skills that students can retain to assist them in college. However, unlike most traditional programs, the Prep program only used GED preparation materials for homework or extra practice for their students, whereas most programs use it for all of their instruction (Gardner, 2001; Garvey & Grobe, 2011). Although the Prep program stepped away from typical GED study materials to utilize Blackboard and materials of their own making, as several previous studies found, they still only taught students the material they needed to know to pass the test, without making any real life connections to help students retain information which led to lower scores on the GED test (Garvey & Grobe, 2011; Martin et al, 2015; Purcell-Gates et al., 1998).
Four of the Prep participants supported these previous findings, mentioning they barely passed one or more sections of the test and two had to retake one section before passing.

In response to the poor matriculation and retention rates of GED recipients and the need for a more skilled workforce, the creation of career bridge programs came about within the last 10-15 years. According to Strawn (2011), these programs provide students with occupational knowledge, a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for college level coursework, and assist students with navigating college applications and financial aid. The college’s Bridge program followed these requirements, starting with the addition of four career areas that served as the basis for their contextualized curriculum and offered students career exploration opportunities and ending with a transition specialist who assisted them with enrolling in college. Previous research on similar programs showed significant gains in GED completion times, pass rates, and matriculation rates for students who participated in Bridge programs compared to students from traditional programs (Jenkins et al., 2009; Zeidenberg, et al., 2010; Martin & Broadus, 2013; Sieben, 2011; Wachen et al., 2011). Findings from this study correspond with previous research with Bridge students earning a GED diploma faster than Prep students and transitioning to college at almost double the rate of Prep students. Due to these findings, administrator and instructor participants discussed plans to move the entire adult education program towards a Bridge model with contextualized curriculum. Bridge student participants supported the use of contextualized curriculum as well. All students made positive comments about their preparation for college coursework due to the study skills, critical thinking, and reading habits they learned in the Bridge program. Although, Bridge students felt more prepared for college level work, all students still faced some difficulties once in college which are discussed next.
**Barriers and Support Services**

The third finding has long been studied in research on high school dropouts and GED students, determining those in adult education programs often face more struggles and barriers to education than their high school graduate counterparts (Groto & Martin, 2009; Rosenthal, 1998; Thompson, 2012). According to Rosenthal (1998), the same reasons students dropped out from school the first time continue to be barriers to them returning to the classroom in adult education programs and persisting on through college graduation. These findings continue to be supported by this study with students, instructors, and the administrator mentioning the significant need to teach students how to handle crises and to offer support services. Students’ challenges covered a wide variety of topics from personal factors including physical and mental disabilities and family and work obligations to educational barriers including technology and learning styles. The diverse challenges students face span across all constructs of Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) conceptual framework, strengthening the need for them to be addressed by adult education programs and colleges wanting to see GED recipients persist and succeed to degree completion.

**Personal Barriers**

Previous research regarding the relation of internal and external factors on student persistence is limited. However, research that is available identified family relations and roles, socioeconomic status, household stress, first generation diploma earner, substance abuse, and mental disabilities as factors GED students must overcome when returning to school (Bozick & DeLuca, 2011; Nix & Michalak; Rosenthal, 1998). While substance abuse was not mentioned by the student participants in this study, several other factors identified by previous research were.

Mental disabilities were mentioned by three students including depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. Students found their disorders hindered their progress in
school and noted the need for assistance to continue through school. While other programs may not offer the support services needed, leading to higher dropout rates for their GED students, this college’s services were mentioned by student and instructor participants as helpful to students. Counselor and accommodations services were utilized by two of the above students and were noted for their help in keeping students in school and successfully completing their coursework. The student with ADHD noted how the study skills she learned in the Bridge program helped her to overcome her symptoms and allowed her to stay focused on her school work.

Other barriers mentioned by previous research were also prevalent in this study. Most student participants had family and work obligations that made returning to school difficult for them. Three students identified working full-time as their reason for continuing to take classes only part-time once they enrolled in college while other students moved to full-time status after their first semester. Those with family obligations, in addition to work obligations, discussed their higher stress levels while trying to attend school as well. Coincidentally, Desimone (1999), Hoover-Dempsey et al. (1987), and Rosenthal (1998) mentioned the positive correlation between family and friend support with school persistence. Three of the participants noted how the support of their spouse or other family members kept them going with two suggesting they would not still be in school without their husbands’ support and assistance.

Bozick and DeLuca (2011) found economic resources to be one of the main reasons why GED students do not attend college. This sentiment was expressed by the instructors and administrator in this study as well, who noted financial issues and childcare were two of the most prominent reasons they saw for their students not persisting through college. To address these issues, the college waives the application and testing fees for their GED students applying to the credit side of the college. They also have a teacher supported foundation that assists GED
students with the cost of attending college. Childcare services are also available on campus for students to utilize. However, while previous research and the instructors and administrator identified childcare and economic resources as prevalent issues for GED students, it must be noted that neither of these concerns were mentioned by any student participants interviewed, suggesting these might not be as prevalent as once considered and should not be generalized to all students.

**School-Related Barriers**

While previous research broadly addresses the personal barriers affecting persistence and success of GED students, not much is known about the school-related factors once GED recipients enter the college classroom. Conti (1985) and Iachini et al. (2013) suggested GED students prefer learner-centered and individualized approaches to instructions. Those in the Prep program shared this same perception, mentioning they appreciated and enjoyed the one-on-one time they got with instructors, the ability to work at their own pace, and the individualized learning plans they had. However, as one student noted, this individualized approach to instruction was not beneficial once in college where students are expected to learn as a class, at the same pace, and while studying multiple subjects at once. This suggest adult education programs need to introduce students to more group-related instructional strategies and have students take a more active role in their learning to be successful once in college.

Furthermore, student participants revealed several areas of concern related to the classroom including lack of technical skills, writing styles, and learning styles. While Pimental (2013) and Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014) found GED recipients were more likely to need remedial classes once they entered college, no prior research addressed the same concerns identified by student participants in this case study. Students found their lack of computer skills
and limited exposure to paper writing utilizing MLA or APA formatting were the biggest challenges they faced with their college courses. Two of the older students interviewed also found concepts and styles of teaching challenging, as they have evolved from their time in secondary school. The lack of research and tools to assist students in this area are concerning and lead one to wonder how these skills affect college persistence and success for GED recipients.

While research is limited regarding the relationship between skills learned in the classroom and student persistence, the effect a student’s peer environment has on persistence has been studied. Concerning the third construct in the conceptual framework, a student’s peer environment plays a subtle role in their persistence. Students’ perceptions of friendliness, norms, values, and social integration can influence their persistence (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

Previous research discusses the need for students to feel a part of the group and to increase their self-worth amongst their peers (Iachini et al., 2013). Other research noted the importance of students to build connections to their peers and instructors in order to increase retention rates (Link, 2006). This perception of belonging was echoed by students and instructors who noted the importance of feeling part of the campus, being familiar with services, and being part of a group for students to continue returning to class. Only one student stated he preferred to stay isolated from his classmates and was not there to make friends. His age, work role, and lack of common interests with other students could explain this anomaly. While the majority of students increased their confidence and self-worth by making friends and becoming comfortable with the campus setting, other factors related to their college persistence must still be reviewed.

**College Persistence and Outcomes**

The fourth and final finding from this study looked to provide an answer to the discouragingly high rate of dropout for GED recipients pursuing a college credential. Previous
research found the college graduation rate of GED recipients to be anywhere from 3%-12% while the dropout rate was over 70% for GED students in their first semester of college (Patterson, 2010; Patterson, et al., 2009; Patterson, et al., 2010; Tyler, 2003; Zhang, et al., 2011). Student participants revealed several components to their continued persistence through college towards their degree completion including the need for support services, technological skills, and study skills. Participant responses regarding their continuation towards degree completion also supported earlier research suggesting students with goals, drive, motivation, and dedication to their studies are more likely to persist and succeed to degree completion. Although all student participants had the goal and drive to obtain a college credential, they recognized a few factors that schools could assist with to increase their chances of success: better instruction on writing styles, a “how to” for studying, and increased instruction for using technology. According to Terenzini and Reason (2005), what organizations do has more impact on student persistence than what they are, suggesting how schools address and offer support to students trying to earn their degree or diploma is more impactful towards their success than the school’s physical attributes.

When looking at enrollment and persistence rates of GED students entering a postsecondary institution, previous studies are numerous with similar findings across the board. Patterson (2010) found only 31.5% of GED students matriculated to college and the longer students waited to enroll after receiving their GED diploma, the less likely they were to attend. This study found all participants enrolled the following semester of college after earning their GED diploma which can be attributed to part of their success. Patterson, et al. (2009) found the majority of GED students were more likely to enroll only part-time with most dropping out after their first semester. While enrolling part-time seemed to be a hindrance in previous research, student participants in this study also enrolled part-time their first semester but found the part-
time status to be positive. Students revealed taking classes part-time allowed them to identify the best ways to balance work, family, and school life, adjust to college coursework, identify best study practices, and spend more time studying for each class. This positive experience with taking classes part-time had the opposite effect for students in this case compared to previous studies, as it increased students’ confidence and pushed the majority of them to enroll full-time in subsequent semesters. Although, three students found continuing part-time was more manageable for them and made the decision to take longer to complete their programs to keep their stress levels down and increase their chances of success.

Further research shows that GED recipients are often single semester enrollees with only 12% of the 41% who enrolled in college completing a certificate, diploma, or degree (Patterson et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2011). While these numbers are concerning and suggest GED recipients struggle with the transition to college, no research addresses or attempts to identify the reasons why students struggle once in college. Through this study, student participants helped to shed light on this issue, identifying paper writing, technology, and study skills as the factors they struggle with most in their college courses. GED students are not exposed to long papers, writing styles, citations and formatting, all of which may be required in their college classes, leaving them unprepared. Also, with the growing number of online classes, along with class projects that must be completed on the computer, GED students who are not familiar with computers and Microsoft Office programs, for example, have a harder time completing assignments. Finally, GED students do not spend much time outside of class studying for the GED test on their own. Half of the students interviewed mentioned a lack of knowing how to study on their own was a difficulty they have with their college classes. More research needs to be conducted in this area and colleges need to make extra effort to address the problems students face to increase college
persistence and success for GED recipients. As Terenzini and Reason (2005) observed, there are numerous factors that affect student persistence. If schools can identify these factors and provide students with the skills or assistance needed to overcome them, persistence can turn into degree completion and college success for these students.

**Conclusion**

This study was conducted to identify if one type of adult education program better prepares students for college over another to pinpoint ways to increase persistence and college completion rates for GED recipients. The primary question this study sought to answer was: What role does the type of adult education program completed (career bridge program or traditional program) play in the success of GED recipients enrolled at the same community college? Two sub-questions also guided the study to help identify individual factors of each program related to student success and how students perceived their success once in college. These were: Are there differences in pre-college academic preparedness (GED instructional materials and teaching methods) of GED recipients from a career bridge program versus a traditional adult education program? How prepared for and successful are GED recipients once enrolled in a college program? Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) integrated model of influences on student learning and persistence helped to identify not only individual student factors influencing their persistence and success, but also allowed for identification of organizational policies and procedures that assisted or inhibited student success as well.

Previous research and findings from this study suggest GED students come back to school with a variety of factors and diverse backgrounds affecting their chances of persisting through to GED diploma completion and later, postsecondary degree completion. Programs that successfully provide students with the skills needed to overcome the barriers and challenges they
face are more likely to increase rates of GED diploma completion, transitioning to college, and college credential earnings. Primary findings from this study correlated to previous research while also providing a deeper look into the organizational factors affecting student persistence. These findings suggest a more rigorous curriculum similar to what students will see in college that makes real life connections for them and the offer of support services to help them overcome challenges in their lives are the key organizational factors schools should consider to increase retention, persistence, and degree completion of adult education students.

This study found the Bridge program offered more of the factors related to student persistence and success once enrolled in college. The Bridge program offered a more rigorous curriculum that also connected students to possible careers, providing them a straight pathway into college, while also providing orientation/transition weeks and a transition specialist to help connect students to the support services offered by the school. The Bridge program lessened the time it took for students to complete a GED diploma which previous research has shown to increase completion rates and matriculation to college. However, further research needs to be conducted into what colleges can do to raise retention rates and increase persistence of GED recipients once in college. Previous research notes that students often drop out after just one semester, but do not offer reasons why. This study identified potential issues perceived by students as challenges to persistence in college including study skills, learning multiple subjects at once, technical skills, and extended paper writing, but more research into this area needs to be conducted. Following, recommendations for improvements in adult education programs are offered, including specific examples of how to implement suggestions in practice. Closing, are considerations for future research on this topic.
Recommendations for Practice

Through this study, it has become apparent there are several changes adult education programs can make to their curriculum, policies, and practices to improve GED completion rates and persistence through college for their students. Findings from this study and previous research strengthen the need to move away from more traditional models of adult education and to find new ways of preparing students for the GED test that also support the transition to college if they are to be successful past earning a GED diploma. Following, are recommendations for best practices based upon the findings in this study, empirical research, and the researcher’s own experiences as a transition coordinator within a traditional adult education program.

Orientation and transition specialist. From this study and our own program’s orientation process, I suggest an orientation process that extends multiple days while also allowing students to start actual classwork as well. One day should be dedicated to TABE pre-testing, completing paperwork, meeting instructors, and reviewing classroom expectations. The student’s first day of class should be split between a tour of the campus and meeting those in charge of support services, along with some class instruction. The final day of class during their first week could be split between career exploration and more class time. This would provide students with a chance to adapt, experience, and decide if they want to continue with their GED preparation courses before hitting the 12-hour mark that makes them part of a program’s state numbers. This would also provide students with the chance to get to know the instructors and services provided by the school while also meeting student expectations of starting GED preparation right away.

To streamline the process, a managed enrollment approach would be best, even if programs increased the number of orientations to once a month. This could potentially turn off
some students who do not want to wait. Making calls to students before orientation and scheduling them for an orientation date could help with this, along with offering a holding class such as the one offered at this site to keep students interested while also preparing them with skills they need for success such as study skills, employability skills, and computer skills.

If possible, a transition specialist would be a positive addition to any program, even on a part-time basis. The transition specialist’s role would include college and career exploration and really come into play towards the end of a student’s time in adult education. Transition specialists on main campuses could hold a college transition day once a week or month where they meet with those students who only have one test left to take to walk them through college applications, FAFSA forms, and give them a tour of the campus to introduce them to student support center staff and advisors. Transition specialists can also provide one-on-one support to students that are struggling to come to class, need assistance choosing a major or college, or need extra support services. In my role as a transition specialist, not only was helping students transition to college important, but assisting them with getting a job was significant as well to meet WIOA standards. Transition specialists should be familiar with resume and cover letter writing and job hunting skills to assist students who are looking for work while attending school.

Curriculum. There are several different approaches that can be taken to improve curriculum for adult education programs to assist students with retaining information and being better prepared for college. For programs who may not have the funds to completely revamp their curriculum to a contextualized format and make career pathway connections, improving the rigor of classes and expectations of work level can help to improve students’ chances in college. Currently, most programs do not give homework assignments or expect students to study outside of class. Reading and writing assignments are limited as well since they are not required for the
GED test. By incorporating class standards that have students do longer reading and writing assignments that may extend outside of their class time, programs can help students adjust to and become accustomed with the level of work they will have to complete in college.

For programs with the means to add a contextualized curriculum, there are two different approaches that can be taken. One would involve instructor and personnel training in contextualized curriculum and career pathway opportunities. Programs could start with just 2-4 career pathways that cover a wide variety of topics to introduce students to or could be picked based on industry demand in the area. Another way to approach a contextualized curriculum would be to partner with industries in the area and have an industry partner that works with an instructor in the classroom to pair GED instruction with job-related skills. Either approach would require a significant amount of training, preparation, and complete support from administrators, instructors, and industry partners to be successful. Programs such as I-BEST and New York’s Bridge Pathway model are often spoken about at conferences and provide trainings to other programs across the country as well for those interested in making a complete overhaul to their programs.

**Support services.** The final recommendation for adult education programs to consider is expanding upon the support services offered to students. Research shows that adult education students often have more barriers to completing their education than regular high school graduates. They may often need accommodation services in the classroom, counseling services, socioeconomic help, and support in how to handle life crisis situations such as finding childcare or transportation to class. Adult education students are often reactive to situations instead of being proactive to keep crises from occurring. Support services such as the OnCourse class
offered by this program could be a significant addition to other adult education programs in teaching students how to handle difficult situations they will encounter in their lives.

Besides offering in-class training on how to manage critical situations and plan ahead, it’s imperative for adult education programs to make students aware of support services offered on campus. This may need to start with program administrators reaching out to college administrators to build the connection between adult education and the credit side of the college. Not all colleges treat their adult education students as part of their student population or as potential future students. Adult education students need to feel included and part of the campus environment to increase persistence and success. This starts with treating them as regular students with a student ID card and access to student services such as the library, tutoring center, career services, disability services, and counseling services. Once this inclusion of adult education students is established, it’s imperative that programs then take the steps to make students aware of these services through the orientation and transition weeks.

**Application to own program.** The findings from this study have guided changes to the adult education program at my own college. We are moving to a two-day orientation process that involves an initial assessment and TABE testing the first day with a program overview of rules, class schedules, and services the second day. We are also implementing a career exploration component, called Northstar Digital, that students will begin during orientation and complete within their first few weeks of class. With this career exploration component, we hope to offer students a chance to learn through contextualized curriculum utilizing McGraw Hill’s *Workforce Career Companion* workbooks that cover 16 different pathways and career clusters.

Along with these career workbooks, our program administrator has identified advanced manufacturing, logistics, and healthcare as the main industries in our service delivery area. Our
lead instructors have been tasked with meeting with industry partners in these areas to develop curriculum that utilizes the skills needed for these jobs with GED preparation. Lead instructors are to then meet and share curriculum across all site locations and instructors. While the lead instructors are working to develop a new contextualized curriculum, our program administrator is working with some of our college instructors to Integrated Education Training (IET) options. These IET options would allow GED students to earn certificates in certain college programs while working towards a GED diploma, increasing the probability that they will transition on to college and complete one of our program offerings.

While some steps have been taken, there are still many more to go. One positive change for our program would be the integration of our adult education students with the regular college population. Currently, our GED students do not have student ID’s or access to many of the services provided to our regular college students including use of the library and career services. This change will have to come from our management team and president. However, they have been reluctant to make these adjustments. Continued research on the importance of student integration may be needed to make this change happen.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on one program offered at a technical college in the Midwest part of the United States. Findings cannot be applied to other adult education programs as state and local standards, structures, policies, and procedures may not all be the same. To increase the reliability of this research, further research needs to be conducted comparing Bridge type programs in other states to traditional programs in the same areas.

Furthermore, this study focused on the impact the type of adult education program made on student persistence once in college. This study, along with previous studies, are limited by the
length of the study to only students who have completed one semester or the first year of college and have not yet completed a college credential. To fully understand GED recipient persistence and success at the postsecondary level, studies need to expand to include GED recipients who have earned a college diploma or degree. Contrarily, this study only included students who were successful at persisting through college so far. To better understand factors influencing college persistence for GED recipients, those who have dropped out of college should be interviewed and their experiences explored as well.

Finally, this study focused mainly on what adult education programs could do to improve college persistence for GED holders without acknowledging the role their college experiences play in their persistence as well. Continued research should control for or include variables related to college classes such as class size, instruction style, instructor preferences, learning support, and type of classes attempted. Such research would expand upon the steps schools could take to improve persistence and completion rates for GED recipients once in college. While adult education programs can help in the preparation students receive before entering college to improve their chances of persistence, it’s how colleges continue to support them throughout their postsecondary careers that may prove to have the bigger impact on their degree completion.
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Appendix A
Initial Student Recruitment Letter

Subject line: Doctoral dissertation needs participants

Dear (student),

My name is Jessica Nguyen and am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation and I am seeking participants to share their experiences in the GED program.

I am researching the GED Prep II and the GED Bridge programs and how well they prepare students for college once they receive their GED diploma. My goal is to help identify what about the programs helps students the most once in college and to see if one program leads to better student success at the postsecondary level than the other.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be interviewing you about your experiences in the GED program and college. The approximate time commitment will be one hour with a face-to-face interview taking place on your college campus at a time convenient for you.

Please respond to this email or contact me at nguyen.jes@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in learning more about this study or are interested in participating.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jessica Nguyen
Appendix B  
Follow-Up Student Recruitment Letter

Subject line: Participants still needed for doctoral dissertation

Dear (student),

A week ago you received an email about participating in a research study that I am doing for my doctoral dissertation.

This email is a reminder about that study. Please contact me if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions. I can be reached at nguyen.jes@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Jessica Nguyen
Appendix C
Instructor Recruitment Letter

Subject line: Dissertation Research

Hello,

My name is Jessica Nguyen and am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation, and I am looking to learn about the instructional strategies and materials used within your GED program.

I am researching the GED Prep II and the GED Bridge programs and how well they prepare students for college once they receive their GED diploma. My goal is to help identify what about the programs helps students the most once in college and to see if one program leads to better student success at the postsecondary level than the other.

For this study, I will be interviewing two instructors from each program type in a paired interview. The approximate time commitment will be one hour in a face-to-face interview taking place on the college campus at a time convenient for both instructors.

Please respond to this email or contact me at nguyen.jes@husky.neu.edu to set up a time for the interview and to learn more about this study.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jessica Nguyen
Subject line: Dissertation Research

Hello,

My name is Jessica Nguyen and am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am conducting a research study for my doctoral dissertation, and I am looking to learn about the instructional strategies and materials used within your GED program. I am researching the GED Prep II and the GED Bridge programs and how well they prepare students for college once they receive their GED diploma. My goal is to help identify what about the programs helps students the most once in college and to see if one program leads to better student success at the postsecondary level than the other.

For this study, I will be interviewing the program administrator over the adult education program. The approximate time commitment will be one hour in a face-to-face interview taking place on the college campus at a time convenient for you.

Please respond to this email or contact me at nguyen.jes@husky.neu.edu to set up a time for the interview and to learn more about this study.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jessica Nguyen
Appendix E
Student Interview Guide

1. Which adult education program did you participate in?

2. What was the last grade you completed before stopping/dropping out of school?

3. How long did you wait to come back and attend the GED program and what was your goal for coming back to school?

4. How long did you attend the GED program before passing the GED test?

5. What type of assignments did you have in the GED program that helped you prepare for your college classes?
   Possible prompt: These might include homework assignments, writing assignments, reading assignments, assignments related to a particular job, or tests.

6. What teaching style do you learn best by?
   Possible prompt: Do you like lectures, practice problems, demonstrations, working with materials, or working in groups?

7. Have you had to learn any new skills for your college classes that you didn’t learn in your GED classes?

8. What do you feel GED programs could do better to help students be better prepared for college?

9. Were there any other factors outside of instruction that were helpful to you in completing your GED diploma and starting college (for example, other support services, friends, family, someone to help with the college application process)?

10. What are you majoring in now in college and are you pursuing a certificate, diploma, or degree?

11. Are you attending part-time or full-time and how many credit hours did you complete this past semester?

12. Do you intend to continue taking classes the next semester and/or until you complete your program?

13. What are your biggest barriers to completing your college credential?
   Possible prompt: Do you feel there is something the school could do to help you overcome these barriers?
Appendix F
Instructor Interview Guide

1. Which program do you teach for and how long have you been teaching (in general and for this program)?

2. How often do you hold classes and how is that time broken up between subjects?

3. What types of instructional materials do you use?

4. What types of assignments do you use (for example, reading materials, homework, groupwork, individual work, classwork)?

5. Do you use only GED testing materials or do you incorporate other instructional materials as well?

6. Is the focus as a teacher, to help students pass the GED test or to help prepare them for college and/or employment?

7. What do you find to be the biggest barrier for students?

8. Do you feel the GED classes help to prepare students for college level coursework?
   Possible prompt: Is there something more you feel the GED program could do to prepare students for college?
   Possible prompt: What part of the GED program do you feel helps students the most once in college?
1. **How long have you been in this position?**

2. **How long have you had an adult education program and how long has it been split into multiple program types?**

3. **Can you tell me a little about each of the programs?**
   
   *Possible prompt: How are the programs structured?*
   
   *Possible prompt: What types of materials are used for instruction within each program?*
   
   *Possible prompt: What types of assignments are given in each program?*
   
   *Possible prompt: What are the requirements to get into each program?*

4. **What are the requirements to enroll in each program?**

5. **Are there any instructional differences between the GED Prep II classes and the Bridge classes?**
   
   *Possible prompt: Can you describe some of these differences?*

6. **Have you noticed any differences in the number of students from each program receiving a GED diploma and enrolling in the college?**

7. **Approximately how long does it take students to earn a GED once entering each program?**

8. **Do you have any recommendations on ways to improve adult education programs to better serve students?**