

COLLEGE READINESS OF GED GRADUATES AFTER COMPLETING AN ADULT
EDUCATION PROGRAM AT A TECHNICAL COLLEGE

by

HOWIE FARRELL GUNBY

(Under the Direction of Myra N. Womble)

ABSTRACT

Each year, millions of students are served in adult education programs across the United States. One of the main goals of these students is to acquire the General Education Development (GED) credential. Annually, an estimated 500,000 individuals nationwide receive a GED credential and qualify for further education, training, and employment opportunities. However, some students are not academically or socially prepared for the rigors of college. To successfully transition students into college without the need for remediation, adult education program must meet the challenge in educating and equipping these students with the necessary skills. Students who are college ready help reduce a college's financial burden for remediation instructors, help in reducing the number of college courses needed, and thereby increase the chance of graduating from college. A qualitative approach was used to examine graduate's perceptions about lived experiences that have contributed to their readiness (or lack thereof) to pursue postsecondary education, including their experiences in an adult education program at a technical college.

INDEX WORDS: Adult Education, GED, College Readiness, Postsecondary Transition

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I have to thank God for his grace, mercy, and loving-kindness that He has shown toward me. This study is dedicated to my family – Lashonda, Amanda, Denzel, and Maciah. I love you for being patient with me as I undertook this study. Thanks for encouraging me and asking me how much longer. Also, special thanks to my mom, Katie. You have always been there for me. To my siblings, Norris and Venessa, thank you for your input and push to complete this study. I love you all.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of whether or not the nation's public school system is doing what it is intended to do: enroll, engage, and educate youth to be productive members of society. Since almost 90% of the fastest-growing and highest-paying jobs require some postsecondary education, having a high school diploma and the skills to succeed in college and the workplace are essential. Yet, nationally, one-third of students—about 1.3 million each year—leave high school without a diploma, at a high cost to themselves and society at large (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). This situation creates a dilemma for our society at federal, state, and local levels in terms of how to educate these individuals and prepare them for the workforce.

Each year since 1999, the number of people who earn a General Education Development (GED) diploma continues to escalate. To satisfy that need of the increased numbers of GED graduates, postsecondary institutions, more than ever, must be prepared to enroll and graduate students from nontraditional groups who are often unprepared for college-level work (Lamkin, 2004). The greatest benefit of obtaining a GED is the potential it offers for continuing education, training, and gainful employment. Table 1 proves the more education a person receives the more earned and the likelihood of finding a job. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), the median weekly earnings for an individual with less than a high school diploma is \$451 compared to \$638 for someone with a high school diploma or GED. Moreover, increases in earnings continue as one obtains additional educational degrees. Degrees beyond high school equate to higher earnings. For example, each week a Bachelor's degree holder earns \$1,053

while a Master's degree holder earns \$1,263, a Professional degree holder earns \$1,665, and a Doctoral degree holder earns \$1,551 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

Table 1: Education pays in higher earnings and lower unemployment rates

Unemployment rate	Education attained	Median weekly earnings
2.5%	Doctoral degree	\$1,551
2.4	Professional degree	1,665
3.6	Master's degree	1,263
4.9	Bachelor's degree	1,053
6.8	Associate degree	768
8.7	Some college, no degree	719
9.4	High-school diploma	638
14.1	Less than a high school diploma	451
7.6	All Workers	797

Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

The workplace of tomorrow, information intense and technologically advanced, will offer an abundance of better jobs that could bring prosperity to thousands of Americans (Jenkins, 2003). A skilled and academically prepared workforce would increase income and thus would increase tax payments to federal, state, and local governments (Griffin, 2008). America's workforce is, and continues to be, a part of the constantly changing global workforce and its workforce training system must respond to the changes, or be left behind other nations. The new global economy is built on a foundation of information and communications technology. By 2005, advances in technology and ongoing globalization had indeed resulted in the elimination of many unskilled jobs, with knowledge-based employment growing at a faster rate and in larger numbers than any other segment of employment (Kelly, 2005). These circumstances illustrate a clear link between education and earning potential and an increase in education equates to lower unemployment rates and increased weekly income. Therefore, those in the nation's workforce

who hold a high school diploma or an equivalent will need some form of postsecondary education to be able to gain the types of employment that increase earnings potential (Sanders, 2007).

Postsecondary schools are seeing the increased presence of GED graduates. Each year an average of 500,000 individuals nationwide, receive a GED credential and qualify for further education, training, and employment opportunities (GED Testing Services, 2006). In 2003, 63% of GED recipients indicated that they obtained this credential in order to pursue further education (GED Testing Services, 2005). Unfortunately, as a result of unprepared students entering colleges across the country, the largest programs on most technical college campuses are developmental studies. The transition and persistence of GED recipients in postsecondary education is a key component in the effort to assist 93 million adults who have limited literacy skills (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, 2006). Hence, it is incumbent on the adult education programs across the country to ensure that these graduates have the necessary skills needed to perform at the postsecondary level, without the need for remediation.

History of the General Education Development Diploma

The first Test of General Educational Development (Tests of GED) was developed in 1942 to measure the major outcomes and concepts generally associated with four years of high school education. Begun by the United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI), the original tests were given only to military personnel so that returning World War II veterans could more easily attend a college or vocational school even if they had not completed high school before serving in the military. To date, there have been four generations of Tests of GED; the original GED Tests released in 1942, the 1978 series, the 1988 series, and the current series released in 2002. The USAFI examination staff, composed of civilian testing experts, worked with an advisory

committee established with the support and cooperation of the American Council on Education (ACE), the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the regional accrediting associations to develop and govern the test (American Council on Education, 2012).

The opportunity to document the attainment of high school-level skills proved to be a significant aid to many service members whose academic careers had been disrupted during the war. During the 1950s, it became obvious that civilians could also benefit from the program. Therefore, the American Council on Education undertook the task. From 1945-1963, the program was administered by the Veteran's Testing Service. In 1963, in recognition of the transition to a program chiefly for non-veteran adults, the name was changed to the General Educational Development Testing Service (GED Testing Services, 2008).

From its inception in 1942, the GED test battery has contained five different exams—writing, interpretation of literature, mathematics, social studies, and science. Since the Tests of GED assess academic skills and knowledge normally developed in a four-year program of high school education, it is of paramount importance to the GED Testing Service that the Tests of GED continue to evolve as secondary education evolves. To this effect, the 1988 Series Test included a writing essay as part of the test. Currently, the 2002 Series is still being administered and it is a recognized instrument that certifies that passing this exam demonstrates the knowledge and skills of a high school graduate. The 2002 Series GED Tests reflect current high school curriculum standards and include content relevant to the workplace and community. In addition, the 2002 Series reflects standards developed at the national and jurisdictional levels and standards recommended by panels of experts representing the core academic disciplines of English-language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (GED Testing Service, 2006).

Approximately 21 million adults took the GED tests between 1972 and 1999. In 2005, more than 715,000 adults worldwide took some portion of the GED Tests. However, despite its widespread usage, the GED Test is not easily passed. The perception that passing the GED Test is easier than acquiring a high school diploma is not true as the tests are very demanding. For example, to earn a credential, a candidate must complete a battery of five tests that last for 7½ hours and address the five major subject areas as well as information processing, problem solving, and critical thinking. The tests are benchmarked by a minimum passing score set nationally by the test administrator at the American Council on Education. However, individual states set their own passing scores at or above the minimum requirement. In January of 1997, this minimum passing score was raised to a new standard requiring all GED graduates to exceed the performance of at least 33 percent of traditional graduating high school seniors (GED Testing Service, 2006). Examinees' scores are compared to the performance of a national sample of graduating high school seniors through national norming and equating studies conducted by the GED Testing Service (Auchter, 1993). By applying this new standard, passing the GED Tests, perhaps with an average score of 500, would put a test taker's class rank in the upper half (top 50%) and convey to colleges that a test taker possesses skills and knowledge equivalent to applicants from traditional high schools (GED Testing Service, 2006).

Postsecondary Opportunities and Developmental Education

In 1999, Chaplin suggested that one of the appeals of pursuing a GED is the fact that over 95% of U.S. colleges and universities accepted GED recipients as students. Today, over 98% of colleges and universities accept the GED transcript for admission purposes (GED Testing Services, 2009). In 2005, 348,541 passed the GED Test nationally. Twenty-one percent of those who passed took the test to enroll at a four-year institution, 28.5% took the test to enter a two-

year institution, and 22.2 % took the test to enroll in a technical or trade program (GED Testing Services, 2009). For the majority of GED graduates, the road out of poverty and to economic security is linked to continuing education (Brown, 2000). For high school dropouts, acquiring a GED can open the door to postsecondary education as the GED certificate can enable a student to receive financial aid through Pell Grants and Guaranteed Student Loans. Therefore, those who earn the GED have access to the information needed to finance postsecondary education and information they may not have had without pursuing the GED (Boesel, Alsalem, & Smith, 1998) becomes available. Ultimately, those who earn the GED are able to seek many of the same types of financial support needed to pursue a postsecondary educational program as high school graduates.

Most scholars in the field believe that developmental education is a process where adults identify their beliefs, clarify their goals, and formulate an action plan (Schlossbert, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1968). Remediation is considered a component of developmental education, yet it is only a small part of the developmental process. Consequently, developmental education is considered the normal, expected, sequence of learning and assumes there is a gap between high school and college for which, a bridge needs to be built for students. Community college remedial or developmental education programs provide curriculum and services for entering postsecondary students who are not academically prepared to perform college-level work. Students participating in these programs include recent high school graduates as well as adults who have been out of school for some time. These programs (commonly called developmental education) seek to help students acquire the skills needed to persist and succeed in community college. More broadly, these skills are also important for expanding career opportunities for students and improving the economic vitality of communities. The opportunity

for underprepared students, many of whom are socially or economically disadvantaged, to receive an Associate Degree or vocational or technical certification from a community college represents the promise that has historically been a part of American life (Lavin & Hyllegard, 1996). Without this promise and without the opportunities represented through remediation, the long-standing social contract between the United States and its least powerful citizens is violated.

Unfortunately, some outcomes of remediation are not adequately examined or measured, although they may well be the most important ones. For example, the National Study of Developmental Education found that dropout rates in remedial courses were higher in community colleges than in universities. This report also found that dropout rates in remedial courses were highest in mathematics, and for all institutions, dropout rates in remedial courses averaged about 25%. Finally, according to this report, those students who actually completed their first remedial course successfully (with a grade of C or better) at either colleges or universities were more likely to fulfill their remedial requirements within one year.

While the findings of the aforementioned study may be generally true of postsecondary education, the extent to which they were representative of community colleges remains unclear. Many students had to retake remedial courses at least once and occasionally several times, not because they failed the course outright, but because they dropped out or did not finish all course requirements within the prescribed grading period. If students who are underprepared for success in community college courses can be properly prepared for these courses, then remediation should be considered successful (Boylan, Bonham, Claxton, & Bliss, 1997).

In the fall of 2000, the most common approach used by community colleges to select students for remedial coursework was to give placement tests to all entering students. Griffin (2008) states that although many colleges and universities had strict entrance requirements, some

postsecondary institutions allowed individuals to enter with substandard academic preparedness and provided the opportunity for remediation. These colleges, often referred to as open enrollment colleges, tested all applicants (high school diploma, GED, alternate diploma, or no credential) as part of their admission requirements (Roa, 2004). The results of admission tests, given to new applicants in such areas as reading, writing, and mathematics, helped insured proper course placement.

Also in the fall of 2000, 76 percent of Title IV degree-granting two and four-year institutions that enrolled freshmen offered at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course. A higher proportion of institutions offered remedial courses in mathematics (71%) and writing (68%) than were offered in reading (56%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Unfortunately, some institutions have criteria and stipulations regarding taking other courses (i.e. core courses) along with developmental or remedial courses that could be detrimental to students. For example, if an institution limited the number of credits that a student could earn per semester, doing so could result in a part-time enrollment status that could directly reduce the student's financial aid and grant awards, possibly leaving the student unable to attend school. However, some institutions award institutional credit that counts toward financial aid, campus housing, and full-time student status, but doesn't count toward degree completion.

Whether the community colleges enroll 17-year-olds who have left high school early and whether they serve as a bridge between schooling and work for older students, developmental education fits within their mission of connecting people with opportunities. Therefore, community colleges are likely to be involved in remedial studies in one form or another (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

In 2005, of approximately 40 million adults in the United States without a high school diploma, more than 680,000 took some portion of the GED and approximately 420,000 passed. In Georgia, of approximately 1.3 million adults that did not have a high school diploma, almost 33,000 took some portion of the test and an estimated 19,400 passed the portion taken (GED Testing Services, 2006). With the popularity of the GED Test increasing, and more people choosing the GED route, enrollment in postsecondary institutions is also increasing, making administrators more aware of the presence of these students.

Analyzing data from a direct survey of undergraduate students, the American Council on Education (1996) reported that about 13 percent of undergraduates took one or more remedial reading, writing, or math courses during the 1993 academic year. Although GED graduates earn what is considered to be the equivalency of a high school diploma, they still may not be academically prepared for postsecondary education and may need remedial education, as do some graduates of traditional high schools. Rubin (1991) reported on attempts by the College Reading and Learning Association to clarify the definition of remediation; the report stated that remedial suggests that skills have been taught, but not learned, and the student must be retaught. The remediation process; however, causes several concerns at the collegiate level, the first being a need for more instructors which requires additional funds by the college. Another concern is the actual remediation, the need to reteach basic skills that should have developed prior to enrolling in college. One additional concern is the fact that remedial courses add to students' requirements to complete a degree program, thus prolonging the time to graduate. This prolonging of program completion decreases students' levels of persistence needed to obtain a degree.

Even though GED recipients are a small portion of postsecondary undergraduates, it is equally important for them to succeed. This qualitative study sought to gather information that was beneficial in understanding the participant's lived experience and perspective of the knowledge and critical skills that they feel are necessary for GED graduates to enter postsecondary education programs without the need for remediation. The collegiate graduation numbers are alarmingly lower for those who need developmental courses than for those who are academically ready to enter college. If adult education programs are aware of the critical skills and components necessary for GED graduates to be college program ready, measures can be taken to improve the transition to college and the graduation rates of GED graduates. For the purposes of this study, GED graduates are those persons who have successfully completed all sections of the GED.

Purpose of the Study

The premise of this study is that more factors are involved in student college readiness than can and have been measured by traditional assessments. Traditional assessments such as the SAT Reasoning Test, the ACT, and the GED provide some measure of student readiness; however, social, financial, and emotional factors may also contribute to college readiness, and ultimately, college success or failure (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). For this study, college readiness is defined as *possession of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to complete a college course of study successfully, and without remediation*. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand and report GED graduates' perceptions about their college readiness, after completing an adult education program at a technical college. The investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college describe the factors that led to their level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education?
2. Do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college believe the technical college contributed to their readiness to pursue postsecondary education?

Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning is the process by which we call into question our taken for granted frames of reference (habits of mind or mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning often involves deep, powerful emotions or beliefs and is evidenced in action (Brendel, 2009). Transformative learning reflects a particular vision for adult education and a conceptual framework for how adults learn (Dirkx, 1998). As described by Mezirow (1997), whose theoretical tenets guided this study, transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. Clark 1993 also defined transformational learning as learning that induces more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences which shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner's subsequent experiences. O'Sullivan (2003) summed it up stating that rather than being confined to what we see from our own perspectives, the field of academia need to look beyond the traditional realm to better understands how adults cope with the processes of inner and outward conflict, dialogue, change, and reintegration in the many variations not yet understood.

When we seek transformative learning as the aim of what we do, we attend to processes of change already at work with persons and communities. If we are invited into these lives and enter into these processes, we may have some influence on what and how one learns (Dirks, 1998). Through a transformational learning lens, this study seeks to understand what GED recipients (who are graduates of the adult education program and entering postsecondary education) believe about their level of readiness to postsecondary education and what they believe were the technical college's contributions to their readiness for pursuit of postsecondary education. It is this transformation from secondary to postsecondary and the level of readiness whether negative or positive that is crucial to the GED graduates college placement. The impact of the lived experiences, perceptions, and stories that surfaced from the qualitative data was the essence and driving force of this study.

Significance of the Study

Stadler (1994) postured that the number of people who earn the equivalent of a high school diploma by utilizing the tests of the GED is increasing each year and continues to escalate. This influx of new students has caused administrators, admissions personnel, and faculty to raise questions about the readiness of GED graduates to succeed in a technical college. Therefore, before we can deal effectively with issues about success in college, we first need to examine the college readiness of those who earn a GED and determine if the GED adequately prepares them for postsecondary education. Knowledge and understanding about what graduates of this southeastern technical college's adult education program perceive to be their level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education as a result of the preparation they received provided valuable information needed by administrators to address concerns regarding the large number of students who need college developmental courses. Likewise, knowledge and understanding

about what graduates of this southeastern technical college's adult education program perceive to be the factors that have contributed to their readiness provided valuable information needed to ensure that GED students develop the knowledge and skills necessary for college readiness. If graduates of adult education programs are college ready, the number of faculty teaching developmental courses at the college level can be reduced. These developmental teaching positions are causing colleges millions of dollars in payroll costs. In today's society, time is money, and adult education programs should do what they can to ensure that postsecondary institutions' time with graduates of adult education programs at a technical college is not used for remediation.

Summary

With the increasing number of individuals electing to earn the GED diploma and go on to postsecondary education, it is important to determine if the education received in the adult education program adequately prepares them to enroll in higher education. In order to be successful in the 21st century workforce, GED graduates must continue to postsecondary education, without the need of remediation classes that could lengthen their course requirements to graduate. Adult education instructors must adequately prepare students to successfully complete all parts of the GED and equip them with academic and ancillary skills necessary to be college ready. Adult education instructors at this technical college can help GED graduates become college ready by being aware of college standards, but also by understanding how graduates perceive their preparedness and the contributions the adult education program at this technical college made to their college readiness, both of which this study expects to establish.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to understand and report GED graduates' perceptions about their college readiness, after completing an adult education program at a technical college. Research has been previously conducted on this topic where the experiences of senior management, administrators, adult education instructors, and volunteers were examined, but examination of the experiences of students, in an attempt to understand their frame of reference, is rare. Specifically, this study addressed the following two research questions: (1) How do GED graduates of the adult education program provided by a technical college describe the factors that led to their level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education? (2) Do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college believe the technical college contributed to their readiness to pursue postsecondary education?

This review of the literature is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief history of postsecondary education in the U.S. at the two-year college level (junior, community, technical colleges), including the Technical College System of Georgia. This section also focuses on adult education programs in Georgia and the role they play in remedial education. A review of the adult education program at a technical college in the southeast concludes this section. The second section examines developmental and remedial education including the skills and aptitudes required for college admission. The third section reviews the history and standards for the GED Test and a profile of GED recipients. The fourth section explores college readiness, standardized measures of college readiness, and transition to postsecondary education. Finally,

the fifth section focuses on three of the adult learning theories that focus on learning that leads to deep and pervasive shifts in one's perspective, understanding of oneself, one's relationship, and one's goal.

Brief History of Two-Year Colleges in the United States

In 1900, William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, suggested that “many students who might not have the courage to enter upon a course of four years’ study would be willing to do the two years of work before entering business or the professional school” (as cited by Brick, 1965, p. 18). The purposes of these institutions were to provide terminal programs in agriculture, technical studies, manual training, and the domestic arts. In 1936, Hollinshead wrote that “the junior college should be a community college meeting community needs” (p.111), providing adult education and educational, recreational, and vocational activities and placing its cultural facilities at the disposal of the community. Two generic names have been applied to two-year colleges, specifically junior and community. However, from the beginning until the 1940’s, these colleges were known most commonly as junior colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). At the second annual meeting of the American Association of Junior Colleges, in 1922, a junior college was defined as “an institution offering two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade” (Bogue, 1950, p. xvii). During the 1950’s and 1960’s, the term junior college was applied more often to the lower-division branches of private universities and to two-year colleges supported by churches or organized independently, while the term ‘community college’ came gradually to be used to identify comprehensive, publicly supported institutions. By the 1970’s, the term community college was usually applied to both types. Today, the names of these institutions vary according to the community. Names used for these institutions today

include city college, county college, branch campus, technical institutes, vocational schools, and technical and adult education centers (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2006), community education's enrollment in 1997 was 10.4 million (44% of all U.S. undergraduates) with 46% being first-time freshmen. The average age of these students was 29 years. Approximately 500,000 students earned associate of arts degrees and nearly 200,000 earned a two-year certificate.

Technical College System of Georgia

Georgia has been involved in technical education since the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which was the first significant piece of federal legislation directed toward vocational education. This piece of legislation was co-sponsored by Georgia senator and future governor Hoke Smith. The need for training in the methods of modern industry was evident after the devastation of the Civil War. With the decline of the cotton economy and the onset of the Great Depression, the urgency for Georgians to act was of great need. In 1943, Dr. M.D. Mobley, then State Director of Vocational Education, succeeded in getting approval from the State Board of Education to implement his plan for a system of Area Trade Schools, and by 1944, the first school opened in Clarkesville—North Georgia Trade and Vocational School. Four years later, South Georgia Trade and Vocational School opened in Americus. In 1958, W.M. Hicks was instrumental in getting the State Board of Education to approve a set of policies for establishing what would be called Area Vocational-Technical Schools (Foundations and Defining Principles of Georgia's Technical College System, 2004).

The late 1960s saw thousands of Georgians enrolling in the 19 schools that opened during that decade. During this same time, legislation created the Quick Start program, a unique

workforce development training program that continues to provide customized training free-of-charge to qualified new, expanding, and existing businesses. Quick Start is one of Georgia's most important economic development incentives for attracting new investment to the state and promoting job creation. Quick Start has worked with entrepreneurial start-ups as well as international, Fortune 500 corporations. For over 40 years, the program has provided customized training for industries ranging from biotech to warehousing and distribution (TCSG, 2009).

Due to the continued growth, another major landmark was accomplished in 1984 when Governor Joe Frank Harris created the State Board of Postsecondary Vocational Education, which ultimately led to the creation of the Department of Technical and Adult Education in 1988. Also in the same year, Georgia's adult education programs were transferred to this newly created organization to work alongside the technical schools and Quick Start. This historic culmination of services now supported by one agency was dedicated to the full scope of workforce development services—education, technical education, and economic development. These new developments linked technical education to the needs of Georgia's businesses and industries, the people, and its communities (TCSG, 2009).

By the year 2000, more than one billion dollars had been invested in modernizing the system. Also in 2000, legislation allowed the technical institutes to change their names to technical colleges and provided a funding formula that would accommodate the phenomenal growth in enrollment. In July 2008, another major piece of legislation changed the name of the agency from the Department of Technical and Adult Education to the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). Under the new name and leadership, TCSG is guided by three defining principles—customer focus, partnerships with business and industry, and a commitment to

quality. There are 34 technical colleges and 37 adult education service delivery area programs in the TCSG system (TCSG, 2009).

Adult Education Programs in Georgia

In fiscal year 2008, nearly 100,000 students with over 5 million contact hours enrolled in adult education programs and 18,000 of those Georgians proudly obtained their GED, opening doors to increased earning potential, higher education, and better lives. Through its 37 service delivery areas, the Office of Adult Education (OAE) promotes and provides adult education programs throughout the state of Georgia. These programs are available to adults who need basic, general, or specialized skills instruction. OAE facilitates collaboration among state and local entities to improve adult education efforts through its adult education programs. It is important to note that the GED, Workplace Literacy, English Literacy, and Health Literacy are programs under the umbrella of OAE. The mission of the OAE is to enable every adult learner in Georgia to acquire the necessary basic skills—reading, writing, computation, speaking, and listening—to compete successfully in today's workplace, strengthen family foundations, and exercise full citizenship. OAE administers the General Educational Development (GED) program and awards the GED high school diploma to successful GED examinees. It also facilitates cooperation among state and local entities for the purpose of increasing and improving adult education efforts in Georgia. Therefore, OAE has two primary roles, it provides direct services through the service delivery areas and Georgia's technical colleges, and it coordinates services with other organizations. OAE's vision is a "Fully Literate Georgia" whose workers are exceptionally well prepared to compete in the global marketplace. OAE envisions this "Fully Literate Georgia" emerging as a world leader in economic development, and in the provision of educational programs and services that are seamless in delivery, responsive to the individual

needs of students, and designed to overcome barriers to educational access and improve the quality of life of Georgia's citizens (Office of Adult Education, 2009).

Each of the 37 service delivery areas receive either federal, state, and/or local funds to provide necessary administrators, instructors, supplies, materials, and other support items for program implementation. Education services are provided for out-of-school persons who are beyond the age of compulsory school attendance, and function at less than a secondary education completion level, or are unable to speak, read, or write the English language. Eligible clients are those who have attained 16 years of age, are not enrolled or required to be enrolled in a secondary school under state law, and lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills to enable them to function effectively in society. Individuals who do not have a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, have not achieved an equivalent level of education, or are unable to speak, read or write the English language are also eligible (Office of Adult Education, 2009).

Adult Education Program at a Technical College in the Southeast

The adult education program of interest to this study is located in the southeastern United States. It services the educational needs of business, industry, and the public in a five county area that includes three rural counties and two urban counties in east central Georgia. The organization head of the Adult Education Program at the technical college is the president of the college; however, the program director is responsible for the day-to-day operations. The program director is also responsible for supervision of the faculty, staff, and students within the service delivery area. In fiscal year 2008, the program was staffed with 1 full-time director, 1 full-time assistant director, 38 part-time instructors, 9 full-time instructors, and 7 paraprofessionals.

In FY 2008, there were 2,296 students who generated 175,587 contact hours of instructional services at the technical college. There were 8 American Indians or Alaskan Natives, 94 Asians, 1,511 Blacks or African-Americans, 74 Hispanics or Latinos, 12 Native Hawaiians or Other Pacific Islanders, and 597 Whites.

Developmental and Remedial Education

Most scholars in the field of education believe that developmental education is a process where adults identify their beliefs, clarify their goals, and formulate an action plan (Schlossbert, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1968). Remediation is considered a component of developmental education and it is only a small part of the developmental process. Consequently, developmental education is considered the normal expected sequence of learning; this assumes that there is a gap between high school and college that needs to be bridged for students. Community college remedial or developmental education programs provide curriculum and services for entering postsecondary students who are not academically prepared to perform college-level work.

Unfortunately, a variety of outcomes of remediation, not adequately examined or measured by scholars, may well be among the most important ones. For example, the National Study of Developmental Education (Boylan, Bonham, Claxton, & Bliss, 1992) found that dropout rates in remedial courses were higher in community colleges than in universities and were highest in mathematics. These authors also reported that dropout rates in remedial courses for all institutions averaged about 25%, and those that actually completed their first remedial course successfully (with a grade of C or better) at either colleges or universities were more likely to fulfill their remedial requirements within one year.

While the findings of the aforementioned study may be generally true of postsecondary education, it was difficult to determine the extent to which they were representative of community colleges. Many students had to retake remedial courses at least once and occasionally several times, not because they failed the course outright but because they either dropped out or did not finish all course requirements within the prescribed grading period (Boylan, Bonham, Claxton, & Bliss, 1997). Regardless of the outcome, these programs (commonly called "developmental education" by colleges) seek to help students acquire the skills needed to persist and succeed in college. More broadly, these skills are also important for expanding career opportunities for students and improving the economic vitality of communities.

Skills and Aptitudes Required for College Admission

Although each educational institution had the flexibility to establish the cutoff scores for placement in college-level courses, there were published guidelines (ACT, 2007) identifying the minimum score for each module to indicate college-level academic preparedness. According to the technical college's Admission Counselor (B. Roberts, personal communication, March 3, 2010), the cutoff scores for college readiness for an associate degree were: Reading 74, English 60, Pre-Algebra 26 and Elementary Algebra 37 for 2010. The cutoff scores for college readiness of a diploma certificate were: Reading 70, English 23, and Math 26. If a student scored below these cutoffs, the college placed that student in remediation/developmental courses.

Postsecondary institutions may each have different stipulations regarding taking other courses along with developmental courses. If an institution stipulates that students cannot enroll in other courses along with developmental courses, this criterion would limit the number of credits that a student could earn and limit their enrollment status as part-time, which could directly reduce their financial aid and grant awards. However, some institutions award

institutional credit for remedial courses, which counts toward financial aid, campus housing, and full-time student status, but doesn't count toward degree completion. Whether the community colleges pick up the seventeen year olds who have left high school early and whether they serve as a bridge between schooling and work for their older students, developmental education fits within their mission of connecting people with opportunities. They will be involved in remedial studies in one form or another (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 280).

GED History, Standards, and Recipient Profile

The first Test of General Educational Development (GED Tests) was developed in 1942 to measure the major outcomes and concepts generally associated with four years of high school education. Begun by the United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI), the original tests were given only to military personnel so that returning World War II veterans could more easily attend a college or vocational school even if they had not completed high school before serving in the military. To date, there have been four generations of GED Tests; the original GED Tests released in 1942, the 1978 series, the 1988 series, and the current series released in 2002. The USAFI examination staff, composed of civilian testing experts, worked with an advisory committee established with the support and cooperation of the American Council on Education (ACE), the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the regional accrediting associations to develop and govern the test (GED Testing Services, 2008).

The opportunity to document the attainment of high school-level skills proved to be a significant aid to many service members whose academic careers had been disrupted during the war. During the 1950's, it became obvious that civilians could also benefit from the program. Because of this need, the ACE undertook the task. From 1945-1963, the program was administered by the Veteran's Testing Service. In 1963, in recognition of the transition to a

program chiefly for non-veteran adults, the name was changed to the General Educational Development Testing Service (GED Testing Services, 2008).

From its inception in 1942, the GED test battery has contained five different exams – writing, interpretation of literature, mathematics, social studies, and science. Since the GED Tests assess academic skills and knowledge normally developed in a four-year program of high school education, it is of paramount importance to the GED Testing Service that the GED Tests continue to evolve as secondary education evolves. To this effect, the 1988 Series Test included a writing essay as part of the test (GED Testing Services, 2008).

Currently, the 2002 Series is being administered and it is a recognized instrument that certifies that passing this exam demonstrates the knowledge and skills of a high school graduate. The 2002 Series GED Tests reflect current high school curriculum standards while including content relevant to the workplace and community. Also, the 2002 Series reflects the standards developed at the national and jurisdictional levels and recommended by panels of experts representing the core academic disciplines of English-language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (GED Testing Service, 2009).

There is already preparation for the 2014 Series which addresses the cognitive skills, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of questions. The specifications for the GED Tests are assessed at regular intervals to certify that content reflects current curricular and academic standards for high school graduates across the United States and Canada. As expectations and standards change for high school students, GED Testing Service aligns the tests with these same expectations and standards (GED Testing Service, 2009).

GED Standards

The credential awarded to adults as a result of passing GED Tests is commonly referred to as a high school equivalency diploma. To allow GED candidates the opportunity to demonstrate achievement comparable to that of high school graduates, the tests have historically been based on two foundations. The first is test content that conforms as closely as possible to the core academic curricula of high schools in the United States and the second, score scales that are based on periodic normings of the GED Tests on a stratified random, nationally representative sample of graduating high school seniors (Auchter, 1999). This norming process allows the passing standards for the GED Tests to be referenced to the actual performance of those who graduate through the traditional route. The passing standard for the GED Tests is set higher than that for graduation from high school. Based on the 1996 norming and with the 1997 initiation of a higher minimum passing score requirement, over one-third of graduating high school seniors would not pass the GED Tests (Woodward, 1999).

Profile of GED Recipients

In 2005, of the 715,365 candidates who tested, 619,846 (87%) of them completed the five-content area test battery. Of the 619,846 candidates who completed the five-content area test battery, 72% (443,607) passed. High school teenagers between the ages of 16-18 accounted for 34 percent of those passing the GED Tests. More males (58%) than females (42%) took the GED Tests in 2005. Of all GED recipients with known race/ethnicity, 62% were white, 18% were African American, and 16% were Hispanic. Almost 90% of the GED graduates completed at least one year of high school. Approximately 49% had completed 9th or 10th grade; approximately 42% completed at least the 11th grade. Candidates for testing varied in the amount of time between leaving the traditional K-12 system and taking the GED Tests. While

14% of the candidates tested after being out of school for one year or less, 23% tested after being out of school for more than 10 years (2005 Statistical Report).

There are numerous reasons why GED candidates take the GED exam. Some want to further their education, gain or retain employment, or enroll in the military. Others have cited social and personal reasons for taking the GED exam. More than 60% of GED passers with known reasons for taking the GED Tests indicated that they took the tests for educational reasons, and 56% indicated they took the tests for personal reasons. In terms of specific educational reasons, 28% of the passers indicated interest in attending a two-year institution, while 21% indicated that they wanted to pursue a four-year college. Among all GED graduates, 48% indicated employment reasons for taking the tests, and 39 percent indicated they would like to get a better job through earning the GED diploma (2005 Statistical Report).

College Readiness and Transition to Postsecondary Education

College readiness is one of seven national education priorities (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). However, according to McCabe (2000), in a national study of community college education, 41% of entering community college students and 29% of all entering college students are underprepared in at least one of the basic skills of reading, writing, and math. While the rise in developmental programs and courses at community colleges might indicate that the problem of students being underprepared is growing, being underprepared for college-level work is not a new phenomenon, rather it is a historical problem (Maxwell, as cited in Platt, 1986). Most college readiness reforms target K–12 education; however, it is up to higher education to provide clear signals about what students need to know and do to be ready for college-level coursework.

College Readiness

College readiness can be defined operationally as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution (Conley, 2007). The student who is college ready is able to understand what is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge that is given, and can take away the key intellectual lesson that the course was designed to offer. Since college is different from a high school or GED program of study, the expectations and engagement of the student is most critical to the success of that individual. This engagement is evident because the pace of collegiate courses is more rapid, different aspects of materials are taught, and different goals are set. The college instructor expect students to make inferences, interpret results, analyze conflicting explanations of phenomena, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious answer, reach conclusions, offer explanations, conduct research, engage in the give-and-take of ideas, and generally think deeply about what they are being taught (National Research Council, 2002). Research findings describe college courses that require students to read eight to ten books in the same time that a high school class requires only one or two (Standards for Success, 2003).

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2006), a vast majority of first-year college students is actively engaged in small groups and is expected to work with others inside and outside class on complex problems and projects. They are then expected to make presentations and to explain what they have learned. In these courses, students are expected to be independent, self-reliant learners who recognize when they are having problems and know when and how to seek help from professors, students, or other sources (Conley, 2006). In short, the difference in expectations between high school/GED graduates and college are manifold and

significant. Therefore, it is incumbent of administration, instructors, and students to understand the need, resources, mandates and importance of transitioning students from GED to postsecondary education.

Standardized Measures of College Readiness

The ACT Assessment® provides an objective measure of students' academic achievement and readiness for college and includes four curriculum-based tests of educational development: English, mathematics, reading, and science. The ACT tests are designed to measure academic skills that are taught in typical college-preparatory curricula in high school and are necessary in the first year of college. High scores on these tests show that a student is proficient in these subject areas and is ready for college-level work. Thus, ACT scores may be used to help determine if a student is academically prepared for the first year of college. The advantage of using ACT Assessment scores is that they are standardized measures that sustain meaning across schools and years (ACT, 2007).

The SAT Reasoning Test is the nation's most widely used admissions test among colleges and universities. It tests students' knowledge of subjects that are necessary for college success: reading, writing, and mathematics. The SAT assesses the critical thinking skills students need for academic success in college—skills that students learned in high school. The SAT is typically taken by high school juniors and seniors. It tells students how well they use the skills and knowledge they have attained in and outside of the classroom—including how they think, solve problems, and communicate. The SAT is an important resource for colleges. It's also one of the best predictors of how well students do in college. Each section of the SAT is scored on a scale of 200-800, with two writing sub scores for multiple-choice questions and the essay. It is

administered seven times a year in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S. Territories, and six times a year overseas (Collegeboard, 2009).

As a computer-adaptive test, the COMPASS program adjusts the item difficulty level to the skills of the individual student, eliminating items that are too easy or too difficult and that contribute little to the measurement. Such flexibility reduces the number of items and testing time, while maintaining the accuracy of placement results. COMPASS results are available within seconds upon completion of testing, with a hard copy for the student and multiple reporting formats for the test administrator. COMPASS affords an unprecedented amount of flexibility and customization. You can select the subject areas in which you wish to test your students. The COMPASS software comes preloaded with standard test packages commonly used by postsecondary institutions across the country. You can also establish your own test packages and specify routing rules for the adaptive tests. This ensures you're testing students' skill levels in subject areas that are appropriate to the curriculum at your institution. COMPASS offers test modules in the subject areas most frequently used by postsecondary institutions to evaluate the skill levels of their incoming students. The COMPASS system includes placement tests that admissions personnel can use to place students in courses appropriate to their skill levels, diagnostics tests that faculty can use to identify specific subject areas where students may need help, and extensive demographics that advisors can use for a thorough understanding of students' support needs (ACT, 2006).

Transition to Postsecondary Education

Research on transition to college for adult graduates of GED programs is an emerging field. Until recently, this research information has been embedded in more general discussions of youth transition, adult education, and non-traditional students. Liebowitz and Taylor (2004)

describes a transition model as building a coordinate network between adult education, postsecondary education, and workforce development through collaboration, alignment, and shared performance goals. In an effort to strengthen the transition of students to postsecondary education, it is imperative to help them develop study skills such as note-taking, time management, and stress reduction. Spohn and Kallenbach (2004) stressed the need for learning communities and cohort models in adult education as a transition model for nontraditional students. The development of transition activities moves ahead in stages. The staff of GED programs staff try new strategies, test them with groups of learners, and then refine them based on learners' reactions and the availability of new information (Alamprese, 2004). As these approaches are refined further, and data are collected about their effectiveness, GED programs have better resources and tools to use in providing effective transition services for adult learners. However, the information gained from this study about how graduates perceive their college readiness and the contributions the technical college made to their college readiness was useful to refine existing approaches for helping GED graduates become college ready.

Adult Learning Theories

Adult education programs prepare individuals for earning a General Education Development (GED) diploma. Consequently, understanding how adult learners learn has become significantly important to the success of these individuals. Once we have gained access to what, when, why, and how they learn, we can provide greater access for transitioning these individuals into higher education. To ensure these thousands of students who earn the GED are successful in postsecondary education, adult education programs should consult research-based principles and implement findings from research in their instructional delivery. Two primary theories relevant to this population are transformational learning and critical theory.

Transformational Learning

Transformational learning theory is about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. The major theorist accredited with transformational learning is Jack Mezirow who articulated the term in 1978. Although others have expanded on components within the theory, Mezirow is accredited for the full evolution of transformational learning. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educationalist whose philosophy of education denotes adult learning as a transformative process; although, his focus is more on the social outcomes. Both philosophers deeply believe in the lived experiences of their participants for a way informal educators can approach practice. It is because of this parallel in Mezirow (1991, 1995) philosophical stance that he has attributed and acknowledged in his books the influence of Freire thinking on his own.

Basically, Mezirow's theory of transformational learning is about how adults interpret their life experiences and how they make meaning of it. He in fact defines learning as a meaning-making activity: "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide further action" (1996, p. 162). In other words, their experience in the adult education program preparing them for the GED should guide their learning for the next level into higher education. Transformative learning allows for an individual through engaging with their life experience to make meaning that there is an opportunity for a change in perspective.

Adult educators can create a protected learning environment which has the necessary conditions of social democracy for transformative learning. Daloz (1986) encourages the strategies of challenging, supporting, and visioning that mentors can use to facilitate the learner's personal journey of transformation. Hart (1990) suggests techniques for consciousness raising in

groups. Cranton (1996) presents drawing from different types of strategies, including critical questioning and experiential techniques such as role plays and simulations, journal writings, and life histories. The above strategies require the GED graduate to think critically apart from the traditional ways of learning, especially lecturing. Kegan (1994, p. 287) put it best when he wrote that higher and adult education's "mission" is to "assist adults in creating the order of consciousness the modern world demands." As a result, it is a mandate that adult educators must foster the transformation of their students to meet the needs of the demands of today.

Critical Theory

Critical Theory may be distinguished from a "traditional" theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). In a broader sense, a critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). Critical theory recognizes perspectives of all stakeholders in a particular position. This includes points of view of the under-represented in order to "do justice to a diversity of socially defined perspectives while providing grounding for the evaluation of controversial problems" (Endres, 1996 p. 24). Critical thinking goes hand-in-hand with a reflective process to question traditional understandings and scrutinize existing values, practices, ideological frameworks, and processes (Froomkin, 2003; Habermas, 1993; Kellner, 1989).

The first meaning of the term *critical theory* was that defined by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of social science in his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*: Critical theory is social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to

traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it (Wikipedia, 2007). Two major concepts are: (a) that critical social theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (i.e. how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), and (b) that critical theory should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences. According to an article by deMarrais (1991), he demonstrates how an adult education student's failure to learn to read can be understood as a systemic social problem rather than on one of individual failure. Far too often, GED students are labeled as individual failures.

Looking at their surroundings and environment, one can find some of the answers to how they learn. When we look from a critical theory point of view, it is obvious that existing economic, social structures and power dynamics play a vital role in the lives of GED students. This critical data was used to position adult education providers to provide the necessary access and support for those GED graduates to effectively transition.

Attribution Retraining (AR) Theory

Current research finds that for academically unprepared or underprepared students, affective traits – such as degree of motivation or level of anxiety, are more reliable predictors of student performance than looking exclusively at cognitive traits, such as academic ability (Hill, 2004). AR theory comes from attributional theory, a theory of motivation (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). According to attributional theory, people look for causes to explain outcomes events in their environment, especially if those outcomes and events are unexpected or important or negative. Also, AR theory is designed to enhance motivation and achievement striving by changing how students think about their academic successes and failures so that their beliefs work for – rather than against – their academic success (Kallenbach & Zafft, 2004). In academic

settings, this means that students look for reasons for their successes and failures (internal or external), and their reasoning shape the way they view their academic ability.

While it is difficult to find AR research studies that focus specifically on GED graduates, most studies do focus on incoming college students who require developmental education and this often includes adults with non-traditional diplomas. Kallenback & Zafft (2004) point out studies which showed that AR works best: when “at risk” students are below, but close to the college academic standard; when coupled with high quality teaching, including teaching of study skills and note-taking; as part of opportunities to experience success; with coursework that does not have a “myth of innate ability” – for example, the assumption that some people are just better at math; and when successful learning is thought of as mastery over time rather than hinging on one specific test or activity. In practice, it is important to have students discuss and reflect on their perceptions in order to effectively transition from GED to postsecondary without the need for developmental studies.

Summary

The related literature provides a background and rationale for research into the GED graduates perception of college readiness after completing the adult education program. It illuminates the philosophical and theoretical foundations that are rooted in the works of Mezirow who saw learning as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised understanding of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide further action. The history of the GED and the technical colleges in Georgia provides the foundation for the selection of the research participants. College readiness is defined and supported by research on how one can

know if they exhibit the skills and behaviors necessary to be labeled as such. Finally, the chapter discusses the theories that are relevant to understanding the perceptions and experiences of adults transitioning from GED to postsecondary education.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Two-year colleges are continuing to see a growing number of students who need developmental or remedial classes, which suggests that they are not academically prepared for collegiate work. The need for remediation continues to be a burden on student retention because of the extra courses needed for graduation. Financially, the need for extra courses is a burden on the student because it translates into hundreds or thousands more dollars than originally planned. Educationally, the institution spends a large portion of its payroll on providing developmental instruction rather than the core courses needed for fulfillment of the certificate or degree. Before adult education students complete their GED coursework, it is imperative that they master the skills necessary to be college ready--meaning developmental study courses would not be needed for them to be successful as they pursue higher education levels. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand and report GED graduates' perceptions about their college readiness, after completing an adult education program at a technical college. The investigation was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college describe the factors that led to their level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education? (2) Do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college believe the technical college contributed to their readiness to pursue postsecondary education?

Design of the Study

The definition of qualitative denotes of or relating to quality. Quality is an inherent or phenomenal property or essential characteristic of some object, thing, or experience (Schwandt, 2001). Eisner's (1991) explication of qualitative inquiry begins from the point of view that inquiry is a matter of the perception of qualities of some object or event and an appraisal of their value. According to Merriam (2002), the overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences. Merriam and Simpson (2002) state that the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals in interaction with their social worlds. It is also a systematic, subjective approach used to describe and give meaning to life experiences. Qualitative approaches are based on a holistic world view and the belief that there is no single reality, that reality is different from each individual and changes over time, and that meaning can only be understood within a given context (Burns & Grove, 2001). Therefore, a qualitative-research approach was the most advantageous method of choice in pursuing this study, which sought to understand GED graduates' perceptions of their college readiness. It was this method that got to the very heart of the students' understanding of their perceptions about a phenomenon—their college readiness.

Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world that emphasizes the quality of what is being studied rather than the quantity of the response (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Its philosophical position is broadly interpretive in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted; based on methods of data generation that are both flexible and sensitive to social context; and built on methods of analysis and explanation that involve understandings of

complexity, detail, and context (Moon, 2002). As Patton (1985) explains, qualitative research “is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there” (p. 1). Patton goes on to explain that this understanding is itself, an end. He suggests that the intent of qualitative research is not to predict the future, but to understand the nature of the setting. Patton also says through qualitative research, we come to understand what it means for participants to be in a certain setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, and what the world looks like in the setting among other things. The analysis strives for depth of understanding.

Phenomenology was the qualitative approach I used to examine graduate’s perceptions about lived experiences that have contributed to their readiness (or lack thereof) to pursue postsecondary education, including their experiences in an education program at a technical college. Phenomenology is a complex, multifaceted philosophy that defies simple characterization that carefully describes ordinary conscious experience of everyday life as one experiences them. These experiences include perception (hearing, seeing, etc...), believing, remembering, deciding, feeling, judging, evaluating, and all experiences of bodily action. In qualitative research, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (Merriam & Associates, 2000, p. 5). Since I sought to understand the ‘readiness’ phenomenon, I was able to respond and adapt in collecting and analyzing the data. As the researcher and instrument, I was able to view and decipher nonverbal and verbal communication, process the information rapidly, obtain clarity by checking for accuracy of the interpretation, and have the opportunity to explore and probe unusual or unanticipated responses. Through qualitative research, themes, categories, and theories could emerge from the data because of its rich description. The uses of words and/or pictures are used to tell the story about the

phenomenon versus numbers and statistics. In addition, quotes from documents, participant interviews and observations, field notes, and or combinations of these data are included to support the findings of a qualitative study. Overall, qualitative studies aim to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering humanistic 'why?' and 'how?' questions (Marshall, 1996).

Sample Selection

Generalization in the sense of statistics is not a purpose of qualitative research, so probabilistic sampling is not needed in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). The basic assumption of purposeful sampling is that because researchers want to discover or understand a phenomenon, they choose “a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). The size of the sample is determined by the optimum number necessary to enable valid inferences to be made about the population (Marshall, 1996).

The first step of purposeful sampling is to determine criteria of selection of the people or sites to be studied (Merriam, 1998). The criteria of selection are closely related to the purpose of the study and researchers need to have important reasons for choosing selection criteria (Merriam, 1998). According to Patton (2002), there are 16 purposeful sampling strategies. These strategies are extreme or deviant case sampling, intensity sampling, maximum variation sampling, homogeneous sampling, typical case sampling, critical case sampling, snowball or chain sampling, criterion sampling, theory-based sampling, confirming and disconfirming cases, stratified purposeful sampling, opportunistic or emergent sampling, purposeful random sampling, sampling politically important cases, convenience sampling, and combination or mixed purpose sampling. The sampling approach most suitable, and that was used for this study, is the intensive sampling strategy.

Patton describes intensity sampling as information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely. Examples of intensity sampling include good students and poor students or above average and below average. One of the strengths of this sampling technique is the allowance to seek excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not highly unusual cases as those used in extreme or deviant case sampling. One of the weaknesses of the extreme cases strategy is that the extreme successes or unusual failures may be seen as too much of an outlier and; therefore, it is not considered for use in this study.

The students were selected from the Georgia Adult Learner Information System (GALIS). GALIS is a web-enabled management information system (MIS) developed to meet the individual needs of Georgia's adult education program, while meeting the guidelines of the National Reporting System (NRS). GALIS is a system to collect the data needed to meet state and local program management needs and the requirements of NRS. By utilizing a web-based system, the Office of Adult Education has access to real time data. The advantages of GALIS are: computerized individual student database, disaggregated data to instructional site and classroom level, individual student identified by goal, edit checks for test scores and other data integrity, data matches with external data systems, and other edit checks to monitor data quality. One of the external data matches include adult education students who have obtained their GED and who are currently or previously been enrolled in any college in Georgia. This source was sufficient to gather the needed data as hundreds of students are data matched on a monthly basis.

Using intensive sampling strategy, the sample for this study consisted of GED graduates who matriculated through an adult education program for three months or greater. Of those GED graduates, I selected four who were not program ready upon entry into their college program, and engaged them in the study after they had completed their developmental college courses.

Four GED graduates provided the optimum number necessary to enable valid inferences to be made about the population. The sample of four comprised of male and female students who were between the ages of 19 and 45. Since the focus was on those who participated in the adult education classes, this selected population excluded the outliers which were those who passed the GED without needing adult education classes. Each student was selected from the technical college identified for this study.

Data Collection

Merriam (1998) maintained that there are three kinds of data collection methods that qualitative researchers rely heavily on: observation, interviews, and documents. Each data collection method has its strengths and weaknesses, and researchers choose collection methods according to their research questions and practical barriers. The method of data collection for this study was face-to-face interviews. The schedules of the interviews were prepared in advance to ensure participants' availability. A room with appropriate accommodations was used to promote freedom of expression and comfort for participation. The purpose of interviewing as a data collection method was to allow the researcher to enter into the other person's perspective (Patton, 2002). This method led to a deeper search to find out what was in and on someone else's mind and allows the researcher to gather their story. My goal was to ensure that each participant interviewed provided me with a detailed rendering of the life they live as it relates to the 'readiness' event that I sought to understand through their senses and not mine or anyone else's.

Patton (2002) offers three variations that can be used in interview instrumentation: *informal conversational interviews, the interview guide approach, standardized open-ended interviews, and closed fixed-response interviews*. The *informal conversational interview* approach allowed questions to emerge from the immediate context and to be asked in the natural

course of things or as topics of interest emerge. Questions were not predetermined, which allowed for the interview to be matched to individuals and to circumstances. Data gathered from informal conversational interviews was different for each person interviewed. The *interview guide approach* is structured; therefore, the interviewer decides the topics and issues in advance to include the wording and sequence in the course of the interview. This type of interview made the data collection more systematic for each participant. This guide provided a framework within which the interviewer would develop questions, sequence those questions, and make decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth. In *standardized, open-ended interviews*, the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All participants were asked the same questions in the same order. This increased the comparability of responses given by each participant. It also reduced interviewer biases and effects because of the consistency used. All of the questions were worded in a completely open-ended format.

Of these three variations, I used the interview guide approach with a semi-structured interview. However, when using a *semi-structured interview*, the researcher has an *interview guide*, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply. Questions may not follow exactly in the way outlined on the guide. Questions that were not included in the guide may be asked as they draw upon things said by interviewees. However, all of the questions were asked and a similar wording was used from interviewee to interviewee (Patton, 2002). This approach gave me flexibility to ask pre-selected questions from an interview guide without limiting my ability to probe deeper based on responses given. The interview guide consisted of a series of questions that was asked of all participants to get a sense of how those particular questions were answered by each participant. This interview strategy allowed me to be consistent, but at the

same time explore in depth responses to the questions that warranted a different direction within the scope of the interview.

Since my research focus involves students, most of the questions included on the interview guide dealt with student learning in an educational environment (see Appendix A). Because the population from which the participants was drawn has had some educational or behavioral setbacks, I expected those experiences to emerge during the interviews and to address further, the purpose of the study, specifically to understand and report GED graduates' perceptions about their college readiness, after completing the adult education program. Holistically, I wanted to know why, how, and what happens during the transition of GED graduates into postsecondary education. Each interview session took between one to two hours to complete. All interviews were tape recorded in a location that was convenient for the participant. Tape recording allows researchers to obtain all of the spoken information and to listen to an interview as many times as desired. Therefore, tape recording is very useful for analyzing qualitative data (Esterberg, 2002). Follow-up interviews was used to ensure that what was documented was exactly what the participants wanted to convey, and to determine if there was additional information that needs to be clarified, based upon the responses.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is not simply a matter of classifying, categorizing, coding, or collating data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Data analysis is the process of making meaning out of the data and it is a complex process involving “moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). Thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting (Patton, 2002). I completed transcription of the

data because doing so allowed me to become immersed in the data and to feel very involved in the analysis of it.

As I sought to analyze the data regarding GED graduates' perception of their readiness to pursue postsecondary education, I needed a method that produced the richest, thickest results possible for that population. Therefore, I used a phenomenological data analysis approach, which in qualitative research, is used to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people (Patton, 2002). The first step in phenomenological data analysis is epoche. Epoche is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things (Patton, 2002). In epoche, the everyday understanding, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited, visually, natively, in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Patton further states that epoche allows the researcher to look inside, to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material, to eliminate, or at least gain clarity about, preconceptions. This beginning stage allows for the setting aside of personal biases in order to see the experiences of the participants in their truest form.

The second step in phenomenological data analysis is phenomenological reduction. According to Husserl (1913), this process "brackets out" the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions. In this step, the phenomenon is held up for inspection by the researcher, taken apart, and dissected from the world where it occurred. During the bracketing stage, the elements and necessary structures are uncovered, defined, and analyzed. Denzin (1989) describes the five steps a researcher would employ in bracketing. First, the researcher would locate within the personal experience, or self-

story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question. Next, the researcher would interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader. The third step involves the researcher obtaining the subject's interpretations of the phrases, if possible. In the fourth step, the researcher would inspect the meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied. Finally, in the fifth step, the researcher would offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in the fourth step.

The third step in phenomenological data analysis is imaginative variation. After bracketing, the data was treated with equal value. The data were organized into clusters and afterwards the researcher eliminated repetitive or overlapping data. Thus, the researcher then identified the invariant themes within the data in order to perform an "imaginative variation" on each theme. These processes produced an enhanced or expanded version of the invariant themes. According to Patton (2002), using these enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes, the researcher moves to the textural portrayal of each theme—a description of an experience that doesn't contain that experience. Phenomenological analysis then involves a structural description that contains the 'bones' of the experience for the whole group of people studied, "a way of understanding how the co-researchers as a group experience what they experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142). At this point, the researcher can look beneath experience for a deeper meaning for the individuals who, together, make up the group.

The final step in phenomenological data analysis is the synthesis of texture and structure—to synthesize the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The culmination of this step gave the researcher the heart of the phenomenon being undertaken—the

findings of the study. This meaning and experience is necessary to understand the richness of the analytic process.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability were crucial in reassuring readers and interested parties that the information presented is indeed credible and sound. Internal validity explores the question of how research findings are congruent with the reality that researchers try to understand (Merriam, 1998). To ensure that researchers are getting as close to participants' interpretation of reality as possible, Merriam and Simpson (2000) describe five strategies for obtaining that goal. The first strategy is triangulation, which is the use of multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings (Mathison, 1988). Member checks is the second strategy that involves taking data collected from study participants and the researcher's tentative interpretations of these data back to the people from whom they were derived, asking if the data rings true. The third strategy is peer or colleague examination where the researcher asks peers or colleagues to examine the data and to comment on the plausibility of the emerging findings. Statements of the researcher's experiences, assumptions, and biases are the fourth strategy. The final strategy is submersion or engagement in the research situation, which allows for collecting data over a long period of time to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. It was the participant's comments, ideas, and lived experiences that I needed to effectively display in my study. I wanted to ensure that I had accurately captured their thoughts and perceptions about the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, as mentioned previously, I used four of the five strategies to ensure reliability and validity— triangulation, member checks, peer or colleague examination, and researcher's experience, assumptions, and biases. External validity, or the extent to which findings can be generalized to other situations, has been the

source of much debate in qualitative research literature (Firestone, 1993). There are strategies that can be used to strengthen the generalizability aspect of rigor in qualitative research such as thick descriptions, multi-site designs, modal comparison, and sampling within component parts of a phenomenon (Merriam, 1988). I used the modal comparison strategy that involves describing how typical the program, event, or sample is compared with the majority of others in the same group. For example, I provided a description of a typical GED graduate who has approached education through non-traditional means to illustrate how representative he/she is compared to the typical GED student. The sample description provided was one that can be compared to the majority of other GED students in the same group. Therefore, the small sample studied in this research can be considered to have commonality among all students of a similar background.

Reliability is concerned with the extent to which a researcher's findings will be found again. However, there is no standard or norm in qualitative research for obtaining repeated measures to establish reliability as in quantitative research (Merriam, 1988). Instead, Merriam suggests qualitative researchers seek to establish consistency, to determine if the results of the study are consistent with the data collected. Four strategies used by qualitative researchers to help establish consistency are triangulation, member checks, peer or colleague examination, and researcher's experience, assumptions, and biases. For this study, I used these four strategies in an ethical manner and incorporated the necessary human components of the adult education program that includes not only students, but administrators and teachers to establish consistency. Also, I had a fundamental appreciation for not only this process of gaining the desired information, but a greater appreciation for doing the fieldwork that yielded greater results from GED graduates continuing their education into postsecondary educational facilities.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

As an adult education director for more than five years, I had the opportunity to help shape and solidify the educational, social, and other foundational skills of students in the adult education program. In addition, I had been an instructor in the adult education program for five years. New legislative changes are requiring that our students in the adult education program earn an equivalent to a high school diploma and also acquire the skills necessary for college readiness. Today, college transition of GED graduates is a priority of federal, state, and local legislative and educational agencies. My primary bias was that I knew there was more we can do as adult educators to ensure GED students' acquisition of knowledge and skills—college readiness. I also knew that we have to redevelop our adult education curriculum, provide necessary instructional staff development, enhance the delivery of the instruction, and maybe realign the GED Test with entrance exams as strategies to ensure that students are prepared for transition to college. These circumstances have potential to prevent my objective consideration of the data and the issue at hand—the readiness phenomenon.

In addition, I served on curriculum, GED advisory, and leadership committees that are currently addressing this situation; therefore, this study was one of the most fundamental reasons for continuing in my current professional employment. We are seeking to explore the possibilities of our graduates moving from earning the GED to eventually earning the doctoral degree. However, we must first ensure college preparedness of our GED graduates. Because I have a stake in this study, I was sensitive to the responses and feelings of my participants. It was anticipated that the findings from this study be used to all our adult education educators and provide the information necessary to begin in re-evaluating how we proceed with our instructional and transitional delivery. My adult education training, experience,

accomplishments, and status in the adult education community were evident of my credibility and illustrated my desire to undergo the rigorous methods to obtain the results of this study. As a researcher, I strove to neither overestimate nor underestimate my effects but to take seriously my responsibility to describe and study what was observed and documented.

Summary

This chapter presented the design, sample selection, data collection, and analysis to be implemented in this study. This study was grounded in the belief that the best way to extract both reliable and valid testimony from the study group is through a descriptive qualitative study investigation, and guided by the theoretical tenets of Jack Mezirow. Merriam (2002) states that a good qualitative study is one that is carried out systematically and ethically and the findings are trustworthy. She also points out that the question of trustworthiness has to do with issues of internal validity, reliability, and external validity or generalizability. I believe that the rigor and product of thick, rich descriptions of what had been observed and documented provided beneficial findings for the adult education program at all levels.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

A qualitative research design was used to guide this research. An interview process allowed participants to talk openly regarding their experiences in the adult education and technical college classrooms. The purpose of this study was to understand and report GED graduates' perceptions about their college readiness after completing an adult education program at a technical college. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college describe the factors that led to their level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education?
2. Do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college believe the technical college contributed to their readiness to pursue postsecondary education?

Phenomenology was the qualitative research approach I used to examine graduates' perceptions about lived experiences that have contributed to their readiness (or lack thereof) to pursue postsecondary education, including their experiences in an education program at a technical college. Through purposeful sampling, four GED graduates of an adult education program at a technical college were interviewed. Themes and categories emerged from the interview responses because of the rich, vivid descriptions given by participants. The use of words told the story about the phenomenon in contrast to numbers and statistics that would have resulted through a quantitative research approach.

Profiles of Participants

During the interviews, participants responded to 17 semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A) that were structured around the two main research questions. Each participant was assigned a pseudo name to maintain anonymity. This profile of the participants is based on information provided in response to general demographic questions, questions about their educational lives that led to them dropping out of high school, and their responses to the semi-structured interview questions.

Lilly

When asked to give reasons for dropping out of high school and to put those reasons in order of importance with the most important reason first, the 19-year-old, self-described shy female, stated that she dropped out of school due to an unexpected pregnancy. She was an average student who could not handle the pressure of walking around the school pregnant. She dropped out in the first semester of her 12th-grade year needing only six more credits to graduate. Due to family issues, she moved to Florida with her fiancé. In Florida, she was told that she would not be in the 12th-grade and that it would take her longer to graduate. This news came as a shock and disappointment regarding her educational goals. This was not what she had in mind when moving to Florida for a better life for herself and her family. Months later, she moved back to Georgia to live with her fiancé's grandparents. After giving birth to a daughter, she decided to enroll in adult education classes to earn her GED.

She discussed at length the hard times she had trying to get to class each day. She didn't want to intrude on her fiancé's grandparents for rides to class. Her fiancé often worked late and did not get home in time to take her to class. However, she managed to get to class a majority of

the time even if she was late. Due to her extenuating situations, she was more determined to stay up longer at night to study in hopes of completing her goal ahead of her planned schedule.

Throughout the interview, she expressed her displeasure for taking standardized tests. She stated "...the adult education program is similar to high school in that there are a lot of tests...pretests, chapter tests, and post-tests. She emphatically stated, "I hate taking tests!" Her hatred for taking tests caused doubts in her ability and aspirations of attaining her diploma due to the seven and a half hour GED test. She further expressed hatred for testing saying, "I get so nervous that I lose my concentration. I want to do my best and I question myself a lot during the test."

When I asked about the quality of instruction she received in the adult education program, I noticed that she began to smile a lot more when talking about her teacher. She discussed how she felt comfortable asking questions and participating in whole group instruction. Throughout the interview, she talked extensively about the knowledge that her instructor possessed and brought to the classroom.

And when you need help, you just let the instructor know. She would let you know if you needed additional help and when she could help you. She would help you at that moment. She was a very good instructor.

She explained it differently and she went at it at different angles of it and if I needed the extra help then she would stay after school to help me. She gave me extra work if I needed to work on something.

Lily seemed to truly believe that the heart of the adult education program is a caring and knowledgeable instructor. Her eyes would brighten and glow whenever she mentioned the things her instructor did for her in the classroom.

As with all incoming students, Lily took the COMPASS exam two weeks after obtaining her GED. The COMPASS exam includes placement tests that admissions personnel can use to place students in courses appropriate to their skill levels, diagnostics tests that faculty can use to identify specific subject areas where students may need help, and extensive demographics that advisors can use for a thorough understanding of students' support needs (ACT, 2006). She passed the reading, and writing portions of the COMPASS; however, she needed remedial education classes in Math.

Math was her weakest subject and she was not surprised by the pretest results. Although she passed her math remediation class, she failed her English class in the same semester. She was devastated and thought this would be another setback. She attributed her failure to lack of time for her studies and time devoted to raising her young child. This turned out to be only a minor setback because she was able to pass her English class the following semester and is currently progressing toward her Associates Degree in Pharmacy Technology.

Debra

Debra, a 22-year-old female, was served in the Special Education services at her local high school. When asked if she was in special education in high school (a probing question, but also a question on the state intake enrollment form), she talked ardently about being embarrassed by being labeled as a special education student (SPED). Even though the classroom was an inclusion class, she noted that students still knew who the SPED students were in the class. She explained sarcastically, "I was embarrassed. Who in their right mind would want to be in special education?" Debra dropped out of school in the 11th-grade to get a job. Her mother was unable mentally, physically, or financially to take care of her and her baby sister. As the primary bread winner for the family, she had to work long hours to provide for the entire family. After

working, she had to come home and make sure that her sister's physical and educational needs were met. She made sure that homework was done and that she made it to her sister's doctor appointments.

When her sister was 5-years-old, Debra enrolled in the adult education class. However, she was unable to maintain her educational goals due to her family needing her to continue to help around the house. She dropped out of adult education after only 3 weeks. After a couple of months, she decided to enroll in adult education in the afternoon. By enrolling in the afternoon, she was able to get her sister off to school and then be back in time to get her off the bus. This lasted only about 5 weeks because of transportation issues and cuts in her hours at her employment. This pattern of starting and stopping adult education classes lasted for about 5 years.

Finally as her sister was old enough to take care of her social and physical needs, she enrolled for the last time. She struggled with several sections of the GED. She took the math part 3 times, the social studies part 2 times, the science part 3 times and took the reading part 2 times. She started in the morning classes, but did not stay too long due to the immaturity of the students in those classes. She enrolled in the night program which had more mature and dedicated working students in the class. She maintained her employment while in the adult education class.

The ongoing struggles Debra faced posed a problem for the adult education teacher. According to Debra's teacher, "The constant dropping in and out of class made it difficult to provide consistent instruction for her. We constantly had to reteach what was already taught due to her not being able to retain the information for several weeks." When asked about what changes could be made to the adult education experience, Debra stated:

“It wasn’t anything the adult education could have done because I had a lot of personal problems. If they could have provided childcare or transportation to ease some of the problems, it would have helped me to focus more on my GED. The hours were great because I had the option of morning, afternoon, or evening. Because I had them all, I had the chance to see which one was better for me. I wish the GED could have let me take more practice tests to see what college classes would have been like.”

In 2009, she earned her GED and enrolled in cosmetology at the local technical college. Debra had to take a class in remedial English and Math. In her comments about being prepared and her college readiness, she stated, “One-on-one instruction was the best for me. I felt I didn’t have to keep up with anyone else. I worked at my own pace. I would like to have had more information about college. I would have liked to see what kind of math that was going to be taught in college that way I could have been working on that until my scores from my GED came back. Or I could have stayed after receiving my GED to work on it.”

Lanna

Lanna is a 25-year-old female who dropped out of school in the 12th-grade. When asked why she dropped out of school, she stated that she had several emotional problems that led to her dropping out. One of her biggest challenges was her home life. Her father died when she was only five years old. She admits that she didn’t have a strong male factor in her life to help direct and support her educational goals. When her mother remarried, she did not get along with her step-father. There were days of arguing and fighting. Her mother was the only one employed in the household and there were times that bills did not get paid and utilities would get cut off. Lanna acknowledged that anger developed from not having her basic needs met each day.

Lanna's anger and emotional turmoil filtered into her behavior at school. Although she was not a student who got into trouble, she began to hate students who had a good life and those feelings were manifested in a variety of ways. She stopped doing her homework and stopped studying for tests and quizzes. She eventually lost interest in school and dropped out. Because of the issues with her step-father, they could not remain at home all day together. They fought and argued all the time. Eventually, Lanna moved in with her grandparents to avoid this unbearable situation.

While with her grandparents, Lanna hid from the world. She stayed inside the house the majority of the day only to come outside in the evening. She did not want the embarrassment or harassment of people talking about her dropping out of school. After a few months, boredom became a huge factor in her deciding to get her GED. She bought a GED book from a local bookstore and began studying on her own. She could do most of the work, but there were certain math problems that neither she nor her grandparents could help her solve. This led to her enrolling in the adult education program to earn her GED.

The adult education classes were easy for her. She stated, "Well at first I thought it was going to be difficult, but I didn't expect to come out that fast." Lanna continued in the classes for about six months. She further stated, "I studied very hard before I got there, so, when I got there it was kind of like I knew everything...so, I knew I probably would not be there that long." Lanna earned her GED and enrolled in the technical college in the fall of the same year.

Lanna had good scores on the COMPASS exam with the exception of math. She was assigned to math remediation class. She was upset, but the counselor told her that this would be a good course to ensure that she had the foundation necessary for college math. Lanna passed

her remedial math class with an A and continued the next semester. However, she dropped out in that semester due to transportation issues.

Douglas

Douglas is a 22-year-old man who dropped out of school in the 8th-grade. He had a rough life growing up. Douglas was born and raised in the north. He had a Northern accent which was obvious when he spoke. He had been affiliated with gangs since he was eleven years old. Life was hard as he told it. He was constantly in and out of trouble with the law since he was fourteen years old. He was raised by a single mother and had not seen his father in over ten years. His mother worked two jobs to provide for his family which left him at home to help take care of his siblings. He felt he had to sell drugs to help his family make ends meet. Because of his known criminal activity, his mother forced him move to the South to live with her sister.

When Douglas got to his new home, he tried to continue his thug life behavior. Even though he had a new, supportive family, he began to get in trouble in his new school. He was given an ultimatum to do better in school and stop hanging out late at night or they would have to put him out of their home. When asked why he dropped out of high school and to put his reasons in order of importance with the most important reason first, he stated, "I started hanging with the wrong crowd and I wasn't focused and I really didn't like school. Also, I was starting to fall behind in my classes." He did not listen and eventually his aunt kicked him out of the house. He went to live with his older cousin in a better neighborhood and eventually enrolled into adult education classes.

Through the first few weeks of the class, Douglas isolated himself from the other students in the class. He enjoyed the class and saw some commonalities that he shared with other students which allowed him to begin to participate in class. The more he participated in class;

the more he opened up to people in the class. When asked how would classmates describe him, he said, "...before I got serious or when I first started out, I didn't know anybody. So, I was quiet and did my work, but I got to know people better and I started swaying in my work again. I got distracted." After he got back on track, he stated, "...people would describe me as a fun person to get to know...I'm not a loud person. I get along with everybody."

After over 1½ years of attending adult education classes, Douglas earned his GED. He immediately signed up to take the entrance exam to the technical college in his city. He was enrolled in remedial math and English classes due to his performance on the COMPASS exam. When asked about his preparedness for college and what would have helped the most while in adult education class, he stated, "probably going over some stuff that would get us ready for college classes other than...cause most of the stuff in GED class is like high school work and it would have been better if we had went over some college stuff. So we could be familiar with it when we started our college classes."

Douglas passed both of his remedial classes with an A average. He was looking forward to attending the next semester; however, he had to move to another town and was going to transfer to another college there. He seemed positive and excited about the move and was eager to start the new college the next semester.

Summary of Interview Responses

In interpretive research, Merriam (2001) explained that understanding the interviewing process as well as the multiple realities and truths that were generated would lead to theories about the phenomenon itself. Merriam further explained, "These findings can be in the form of organized descriptive accounts, themes, or categories that cut across the data, or in the forms of models and theories that explain the data" (p. 178). I used a phenomenological data analysis

approach, which in qualitative research, is used to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people (Patton, 2002).

Next, I employed phenomenological reduction. According to Husserl (1913), this process “brackets out” the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions. In this step, the phenomenon is held up for inspection by the researcher, taken apart, and dissected from the world where it occurred. After bracketing, the data is treated with equal value. It is then organized into clusters and afterwards the researcher eliminates repetitive or overlapping data. This process produces an enhanced or expanded version of the invariant themes. According to Patton (2002), using these enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes, the researcher moves to the textural portrayal of each theme—a description of an experience that doesn’t contain that experience. At this point, the researcher can look beneath the surface of the experience for deeper meaning from the individuals who, together, make up the group.

The final step in phenomenological data analysis is the synthesis of texture and structure—to synthesize the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Patton (2002) added, what emerge is a depiction of the experience and a portrayal of the individuals who participated in the study. The culmination of this step gives the researcher the heart of the phenomenon being undertaken—the findings of the study. This meaning and experience is necessary to understand the richness of the analytic process.

The researcher identified categories that the data were placed under based on how the data reflected the purpose of the study and the data’s relevance to the research. The categories were: decision to withdraw from high school, learning environment that was more difficult (high

school versus adult education), experiences in the adult education classroom, learning styles, instruction in the classroom, and what could adult education have done differently to make them college ready. The main themes that clearly emerged as a result of the participant's interviews were personal issues, motivation, appreciation for teachers, and learning opportunities beyond GED. These findings are presented in Table 1. The following sections provide a summary of each category and common themes gleaned from the data.

Table 1 Category and Themes

Category	Lilly	Debra	Lanna	Douglas
Decision to withdraw from High School	Personal issues-got pregnant and didn't want the social pressures and stigmas.	Personal issues-take care of ill younger sister and mom.	Personal issues-Family issues with step-father in the home.	Personal issues-family, hanging with wrong crowd, and not focused.
Learning environment more difficult- HS vs Adult Education	HS-didn't want to deal with the drama or the stereotyping of people.	HS-just wasn't motivated to learn at the time and didn't like going to school.	HS-didn't like to be around disrespectful or negative people.	HS-couldn't get with it, bad experiences, and too far behind.
Experiences in the Adult Education classroom	Comfortable and quiet.	Teacher made it good.	Enjoyed quiet atmosphere and had things in common with students.	The teacher and students were great. Comfortable with other students.
Learning Style	Tactical and Visual	Visual and auditory	Visual	Tactical
Adult Education classroom instruction	Mostly one-on-one instruction. Worked at own pace in workbooks.	Mostly one-on-one instruction. Worked at own pace in workbooks.	Mostly one-on-one instruction. Worked at own pace in workbooks.	Mostly one-on-one instruction. Worked at own pace in workbooks.
After adult education class, what could they have done differently to make college ready?	Offer college prep classes while enrolled in adult education. Inventory tests to match skills with college major.	Work on college material while waiting for GED results.	Homework-to be more accountable like in college and high school.	More challenging material that is given in college. Go beyond high school material.

Decision to Withdraw

The National Center for Education Statistics' *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001* (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004) reports characteristics on dropouts such as gender, race/ethnicity, family income, age, and geographic region; and other studies focus more on the student and family factors contributing to dropping out of school. These studies find that absenteeism, school performance, disciplinary problems, mobility, educational level of parents, and parental support are contributing factors (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000). For all analyses in these studies, the same reasons for not completing high school were always ranked in the top five: "Was absent too many times," "Did not like school," "Was bored," "Wasn't happy in school," and "Poor study habits." (George-Ezzelle, Zhang, & Douglas, 2006).

All participants in the current study acknowledged that personal reasons were why they decided to withdraw from high school. However, probing deeper into the personal reasons, factors that were ranked in the top five of the George-Ezzelle, Zhang, and Douglas study were found in the current study. Lilly's reason for dropping out was due to an unexpected pregnancy which contributed to her missing too many days in school. Douglas was always in trouble with the law, absent from school, and was retained twice; once in elementary and once in middle school. Debra dropped out to take care of her family and hated the stigma and ridicule of being labeled as a special education student which led to her not being happy with school. She did not receive family support of her education due to their lack of educational attainment. Both of her parents were high school dropouts. Lanna dropped out due to family issues dealing with her step-father. These issues led to her missing too many days from school which is the number one

reason for students withdrawing from high school according to George-Ezzelle, Zhang, and Douglas (2006).

Learning Environment More Difficult–High School or Adult Education

Schools are under tremendous pressure for students to pass multiple-choice tests required by No Child Left Behind [NCLB], (2001) which requires teachers spend hours on practice questions, helping students memorize facts, and test-taking strategies rather than expounding on the lessons at greater lengths. All of the participants agree that high school was more challenging and rigorous than adult education. Douglas stated, “I just could not get with it. I had a bad experience and I was so far behind that I could not catch up.” Teachers are under so much pressure that they do not have sufficient time to help the struggling learner because of the abundance of standards that must be covered within the school year (Thomas, 2011). Debra did not enjoy going to school with the stigma of being labeled a special education student. Although she needed extra time and additional supports to be successful, she lost the motivation to attend and did not want to learn at that time.

The other two participants, Lilly and Lanna, also agreed that high school was more difficult for them. They had additional challenges dealing with their peers. Lanna hated disrespectful people. She did not want to be around or near those who were negative all of the time. It became a battle for her to come to school for fear that she would get into a fight or major altercation with another student. Lilly liked the small class sizes and low enrollment in adult education. She stated, “I guess I did not like to deal with the drama (high school). I like the GED class because nobody really messes with you. You did your own thing. You did what you had to do.” All of the participants agreed that working at their own pace in adult education and

not being held accountable for keeping up with others in high school made it more of an environment conducive to learning for them.

Experiences in the Adult Education Classroom

All of the participants felt more comfortable in the adult education classroom rather than the high school classroom. The adult education classroom provided them an alternative education without having to attend six and a half hours a day. All of the participants enrolled in the day classes at the technical college. Debra, however, was enrolled in day, afternoon, and evening classes throughout her dropping out at different stages. They all agreed the hours were conducive to their work and family schedules. They agreed that not being treated like children and the mandate that they must behave as adults increased their desire to learn.

All of them agreed that having something in common with the other students in the classroom made them feel comfortable asking for and receiving instruction. Lanna stated, "I was able to meet people that I had something in common with because they left school, just like I did." Of the four, Lanna was the only one who had an issue with an instructor. She felt that she knew the majority of the material and that the teacher could have provided more instruction to the other students. The other three raved about the quality of instruction they received from their teacher. They believed the teacher made the difference in their persistence to obtain their GED. To help students pass the tests and succeed later in life, teachers not only provide subject matter instruction, but also focus on improving the communication, information-processing, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills necessary for further education and successful careers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Teachers in adult basic education should have an understanding of how to help these students achieve their goals, but they also need to have the

knowledge to recognize challenges their students may face and provide them with access to a broader system of additional services to address these challenges.

Learning Styles

The participants were asked about their learning style and how they learn best. Douglas boldly stated that he was a hands-on person. He said, “I am a hands-on person and you can show me how to do it all day, but if you don’t let me try it myself–I won’t understand it.” He further stated that if he is not doing something, he can get easily distracted. Lilly stated that she was both a tactile and visual learner, but mostly tactile. She stated, “I have to be able to do it and be able to see it to understand.” She went on to say, “If I see somebody do it, like math for example; if I can see how they work it out then I can do it.”

Debra and Lanna, both admitted that they were visual learners. However, Debra stated that she was a visual and auditory learner, but mostly visual. Lanna stated, “I think when I am listening to something–you hear it at that moment, but then the next moment you can forget it. But, when you interact or see it, it can stay with you.” Lanna also talked about the importance of teachers writing on the board and providing examples of how to work math problems. Although the teacher works with students individually most of the time, all of these participants agreed that they understood better when the teacher wrote on the board and explained the work. These participants may have been visual learners because visual learners can quickly understand and retain information that they see. They learn best when the course material includes a flow chart, diagram, picture, PowerPoint presentation, demonstration, concept map, graph or video (Tannahill, 2009).

Adult Education-Classroom Instruction

“One-on-one instruction is one of the favorite instructional delivery models in most of the adult education classes at the technical college in the southeast,” said Stefanie Bowie (TC director). Due to the different functioning levels and ages of the students who dropped out of high school, the prior education level of students in an adult education class can range from the first grade to the twelfth grade. Bowie stated, “This makes it difficult for teachers to work with students in whole groups; therefore, we utilize a lot of one-on-one instruction.”

All four participants agreed that the majority of instruction they received was one-on-one. Regarding her classroom instruction, Debra stated, “You got to work at your own pace, then you could take the work home, and bring it back the next day. Then if you missed some things, the teacher would go over them with you.” Lilly had the same experience as Debra. Lilly stated, “I kind of remained to myself. When you need help, you just let the instructor know.” Each participant felt motivated to continue because they did not have to keep up with the other students in the classroom. They expressed that the pressures of testing and labeling students in high school made them uncomfortable, especially when they could not keep up or make the grade other students were making on tests or quizzes.

The main types of instructional material were worksheets that were taken from GED workbooks. The students would take a pretest to determine where to start in the workbooks. Students would continue to work on a specific skill until they completed a section of the workbook that focused on that skill. Once they completed the section, they would be given a posttest to determine mastery. If they mastered that unit or skill, the student would move to the next prescribed skill or lesson until they had successfully completed the entire unit necessary for GED completion (Bowie, personal communication, November 13, 2011).

Adult Education-College Readiness

The overall essential research question was designed to learn how the technical college adult education program contributed to the participants' readiness to pursue postsecondary education. Since each of these participants entered remediation in college, they were uniquely qualified to provide views about the factors that led to their readiness as well as their level of perceived readiness achieved through the adult education program. This type of information would help determine the types of changes the adult education program should make to improve students' readiness to enter college without being subject to remedial programs. Each of these participants agreed that the college classroom is more challenging than the adult education classroom. Douglas, Debra, and Lilly wished that the adult education program could have offered work skills assessment tests to determine what would be a good occupation and a good career path for them.

Based on these kinds of comments from the participants in this study, access to the services of a career counselor would have helped them select appropriate career paths or college majors. The National Center for Family Literature (2011) describes a program in Texas that provides a variety of services for GED graduates who enroll in postsecondary education, including weekly class meetings with a career counselor. Since it takes an estimated six weeks for GED students to receive their GED results, they wished that they could have been working on college math or writing. They felt this would have given them a boost on the entrance exam as well as skills needed to be successful in the college classroom.

Even though Lanna enjoyed the one-on-one instruction, she felt that she needed more homework; just like in high school. She knew there would be homework in college and this would have helped her begin to establish good work ethics and study skills. Lanna explained,

“Some people go to class and that’s the only time they learn, so I think it would have been very encouraging if she gave us homework, handouts, and booklets to take home.” Lanna felt that adult education should be as accountable as high school and college.

Common Themes

After analyzing the data from the interview, a deeper understanding of those who entered adult education and advanced into postsecondary education materialized. These themes validate the commonality of the population of this study. The common themes that emerged as a result of the participant’s interviews were personal reasons for withdrawing from high school, motivation to enter the adult education classes; teachers make the difference, and curriculum rigor beyond the GED.

Personal Issues

Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman (2004) reported characteristics of dropouts that are factors contributing to dropping out of school. In their study, it was evident that there is more than one reason a student would drop out of school. But, what is clear is that personal reasons were at the top of the list of reasons for dropping out. Whether it was pregnancy, depression, lacking social skills, boredom, not happy in school, did not like school, or did not like the teachers, each of the 43 reasons listed had some component of personal issues tied to it.

All four of the participants in the current study agreed that personal issues played a huge role in their decision to withdraw from high school. Lanna had personal conflicts with other students in the school. Lilly got pregnant and was forced to drop out because of the stereotype. Debra’s family was dysfunctional and needed her financial support to make ends meet. She also had to take care of her sister who had several physical illnesses. Douglas was constantly in

trouble with the law and had bad experiences in the classroom. He was not able to focus on school and did not have the drive to earn his diploma.

Motivation

Although the participants dropped out due to personal reasons, these same reasons propelled them to enter adult education to pursue an alternative education. It does not take long for those who drop out to realize that they need a good education to even get a job; even one of the lowest paying jobs. Their personal issues did not stop the moment they entered adult education; however, the classes gave them an opportunity to get their education *and* work to support their families. They saw some commonalities with the other classmates that made them feel comfortable in that environment. This made them start to appreciate getting an education and consequently, they became more motivated to continue to pursue their GED.

Another attributing motivation factor was that they were able to pace themselves with the curriculum. They were able to work one-on-one and see successes that they did not see in the high school classroom. For most of them, high school brought many challenges. They were always being compared to the entire class or their grade level. For once, they were able to go as slow or fast as they needed. These little successes turned into motivations that sparked their willingness to learn.

While there are a number of factors that affect performance in school, one of the most influential is motivation (Francis et al., 2004). Motivation, also referred to as academic engagement, refers to “cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicators of student investment in and attachment to education” (Tucker, Zayco, & Herman, 2002, p. 477). It is obvious that students who are not motivated to succeed do not work hard. In fact, several researchers have

suggested that only motivation directly affects academic achievement; all other factors affect achievement only through their effect on motivation (Tucker et al., 2002).

Teachers Make the Difference

The participants talked extensively about the quality of instruction provided by the teachers. It is apparent from the interviews that teachers could be the biggest difference between a student reaching or not reaching his or her educational goal. The participants were asked what they liked least and most about the adult education classes. Overwhelmingly, they expressed their support of their teachers who made the difference in their success. In their comparison of high school and the adult education program, they stated that the adult education teachers showed them more compassion and patience. They felt that not only did the other students in the classroom understand their plight, but the teachers knew exactly how they felt and were willing to accommodate to their situation.

It goes without saying that a professional knows his or her field well. Adult education teachers know how to work with those who have dropped out of school. The participants expressed that the adult education teachers were concerned about their success. When asked about the difference in instruction between high school and the adult education program, Lilly stated, "She explained it differently and she went at it at different angles of it. If I needed the extra help then she would stay after to help me." Debra stated, "I had two teachers one-on-one that really got down to it." These students were attracted to learning because the teachers motivated them to learn, work towards a goal and made them feel that they sincerely wanted them to succeed educationally. Adults are motivated to enroll by the desire to reach a specific goal. Therefore, it is important to help them determine realistic goals both long and short-term (McClendon & Polis, 2007).

Curriculum Rigor Beyond GED

While in the adult education classes, these students acknowledged their motivation to earn their GED and pursue postsecondary education. However, they also stressed that more work which would help them to be ready for college would have been ideal; especially during the time they were waiting on their GED results. They also wished they had learned other skills while in the adult education classes; such as, testing taking strategies, better studying habits, and time management. Access to career development strategies such as career inventories would have been beneficial as well. Since they had homework in college, they wanted to have homework in the adult education classes so that they could have established that as a necessary routine.

They acknowledged that the time waiting on GED results was critical and not having to attend adult education class may have caused them not to score well on the college entrance exam or COMPASS. They expressed that it should be mandatory to continue going to adult education class until the result of the COMPASS are given. Taking a break damages the continuity of learning and allows bad studying habits to form.

They also felt that a college prep class that would teach not only college math or English, but other skills needed by beginning college students (e.g., Introduction to Computers) would have been helpful. Many states have adopted transition programs for GED graduates to enroll in prior to entering college. The Florida GED PLUS College Preparation Program is designed to provide GED students with the necessary skills for successful transition into college-level courses of study. The program focuses not only on assisting students in passing the GED Test, but also on developing college-ready skills in the areas of writing, reading, algebra, research and word processing, goal setting, and time management (Florida Department of Education, 2006).

Persistence is typically defined as the length of time adults attend a class or tutoring sessions and; therefore, “dropping out” of a class is evidence of a lack of persistence. Yet, as Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) point out, some students “may withdraw when their goals for participation have been reached, which may not coincide with a program’s definition of completion,” and some may “leave one program and sooner or later enroll in another that better fits their needs” (p. 3). In addition, “Many adults who stop attending programs return when their circumstances change, often repeating this ‘stopping out’ cycle several times.” Comings et al. (ibid.) defined persistence as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out of their programs, and returning to programs as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (p. 3).

Having a goal and making progress toward its achievement can be powerful motivators to persist in learning. A key finding of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) persistence study (Comings et al., 1999) was that adults who mentioned a specific goal were more likely to persist than those who had no goal. Persistence can falter with lack of progress, and sometimes goals must be revised and learners redirected toward new goals (Goforth & Jonik, 2002b).

Technical colleges around the country have hired transition coordinators to help GED graduates transition into college. These transition coordinators help bridge all of the participants concerns before entering college. It is important that the transition coordinator bond with recent GED graduates to keep them motivated and persistent in pursuit of their goals. Throughout the interviews, it was apparent that these students felt like that had someone who understood and cared for them. If they were to be successful, they had to see and believe that the faculty and staff at the technical college cared about them instead of just hearing, or being told. Transition

coordinators, at the college level or those employed within the adult education program, play a tremendous role in ensuring that adult education students enter college without needing developmental classes.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the study, a detailed account of the recorded responses of the participants, and some of the researcher's experiences as an adult education director. This study attempted to relate the students' perceptions about their college readiness. The goal was to hear from them through their own words and their own experiences. The journey was to present their lived experiences from high school to adult education classes to postsecondary education. Their thought and feelings combined were pertinent and defined clearly in the common themes. The participants responses were both enlightening and worthy of future research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter begins with a summary of the purpose, a restatement of the research questions, and a summary of the methods. The chapter continues with conclusions drawn from the findings of this study, implications of these findings for practice, and recommendations for further research that would add to the body of knowledge regarding college readiness of GED graduates.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand and report GED graduates' perceptions about their college readiness, after completing an adult education program at a technical college. The investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college describe the factors that led to their level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education?
2. Do GED graduates of an adult education program provided by a technical college believe the technical college contributed to their readiness to pursue postsecondary education?

Method

The impetus for this study was that, through experience, I observed that more factors are involved in student college readiness than can and have been measured by traditional assessments. Traditional assessments such as the SAT Reasoning Test, the ACT, and the GED provide some measure of student readiness; however, social, financial, and emotional factors may also contribute to college readiness, and ultimately, college success or failure (Rosenbaum,

Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). For this study, college readiness was defined as *possession of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to complete a college course of study successfully, and without remediation.*

Through purposeful sampling, four GED graduates of an adult education program at a technical college were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in various locations and each interview lasted approximately one hour. Follow-up phone calls were made to clarify the information that was gathered, and thereby, to confirm the researcher's findings.

Conclusions

Purposeful sampling was suitable for this study in order to focus on participants who earned a GED from an adult education program in the southeast and who are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program. The basic assumption of purposeful sampling is that because researchers want to discover or understand a phenomenon, they choose "a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Therefore, this study provides rich, thick descriptions of the experiences of the participants. Several quotes from the interviews were provided for the reader to examine if the stated responses correlated to a similar situation that they face during their transition from GED to postsecondary education.

The findings of this study led to several important conclusions regarding GED graduates' perceptions and beliefs about their college readiness. Based on the findings of this study, these conclusions are: (a) personal barriers that led these GED students to drop out of high school were also the motivation that led them to enroll in GED classes; (b) teachers made the difference in the perceived achievement of these GED students and their view of the education process; and (c) curriculum rigor beyond GED coursework was perceived to be a "must" for these GED students, especially in terms of preparation for college.

Conclusion One–Personal Barriers

The first conclusion drawn from this study was the circumstances that caused the students to drop out of high school also played a major role in motivating them to earn a GED. The National Center for Education Statistics' *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2001* (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004) reports characteristics on dropouts such as gender, race/ethnicity, family income, age, and geographic region. However, other studies focus more on the student and family factors contributing to dropping out of school. These studies have found that absenteeism, school performance, disciplinary problems, mobility, educational level of parents, and parental support are contributing factors (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000) leading students to drop out of school. The adult education literature indicates that perceptions of the value of education and schooling begin to be shaped in the early years of life (Quigley, 1997; Reder, 2007). For those who were early school leavers or dropouts, those nascent perceptions can last a lifetime, and can range from a sense of shame and guilt for not completing school, to anger, to feelings of being neglected by teachers or administrators, to a sense of powerful resilience and determination to complete school despite all odds (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010).

The participants in this study had various personal reasons for dropping out, but the reasons for starting the GED program were all the same--they wanted a better life financially which meant that they would need more education beyond the GED. Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy (2010) reported a similar study of 75 participants, many of whom took part-time or short-term jobs; usually for low pay after leaving school. In order to secure a better job or further their education, they realized they needed to change some things in their life which began with the need a college degree. According to Wolfgramm (1994), at-risk students needed an

educational environment that encouraged academic success, promoted self-worth, and prepared for postsecondary education if they desired to continue the education process. Getting a better job is a major reason that adults take the GED test (GED Testing Services, 2009). While annual increases would be expected to be modest (2%), the widening gap between uncredentialed dropouts and GED test credential recipients across time, offers potential for increases in hourly compensation for employees with GED test credentials (Song, 2011). Participants in this study continually perceived that more education and consequently more money would help them in their current situation. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2005 defined perception as, 'to attain awareness or understanding of,' and the level of awareness of success for participants in the current study helped them to perceive that they could actually earn a college degree. Whether it was due to the unplanned pregnancy, the struggle to help the family financially, or the necessity to stay out of trouble with the law, the interviewees expressed an extreme need to do something to better their lives.

Before the motivation to better themselves, the participants felt defeated educationally, physically, emotionally, and socially. The transformation of a new way of thinking and a greater sense of motivation changed their perception about themselves. The motivation to achieve beyond their current status was one of the factors that led to their readiness to pursue postsecondary education. Transforming into this new experience allowed the participants to shift from despair into accepting new challenges that arise from pursuing to doing better in life.

Conclusion Two—Importance of Teachers

The second factor drawn from this study that led to the perceived readiness of the participants is the high level of support participants felt they received from their GED instructors. As an adult education director, when assigning teachers, I would seek out those

individuals who wanted to teach adult education students and who were genuinely concerned about the students. After seven years of being the adult education director, I made sure that the teachers were given professional development in the areas of motivating, encouraging, and building relationships with students. As director, I realized that the teachers had an enormous impact on the success of the student. This finding leads the researcher to conclude that the research question, which sought to determine the factors that led to the students' perceived level of readiness to pursue postsecondary education, was answered—the teachers.

The facilitation of significant learning often rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner (Rogers, 1969). Each of the participants in the current study felt that their teacher's mode of instructional delivery was conducive to the way they learned best. They all described how the one-on-one and group collaboration delivery model worked to their advantage to pass the GED. Once they passed the GED, they felt confident and that they were ready to pursue a postsecondary education. They felt the teachers had prepared them to pass the GED and this same preparation would be sufficient for entry into postsecondary education. The educational program must help adult students build self-efficacy as it pertains to reaching their goals. Self-efficacy is focused on a specific task and represents the feeling of being able to accomplish that task (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). Even though the participants were not completely academically ready for college, they had the necessary motivation and persistence to continue to pursue their expected goal of a college degree.

A highly self-directed learner is one who exhibits initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and

has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self-confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organize his or her time, set an appropriate pace of learning, one who is able to develop a plan for completing work; and one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal oriented (Guglielmino, 1978, p. 73.)

The participants' perceptions were fundamental to the purpose for this study. The students perceived that because the teacher was able to assist them in accomplishing one milestone in their lives, then surely the education received would be adequate to pass the entrance exam for technical college. As Lilly detailed in her interview about her teacher, "She explained it differently and she went at it at different angles of it and if I needed the extra help then she would stay after school to help me." The participants' teachers were able to build positive relationships with the students which resulted in development of a sense of trust and openness. A sense of trust and openness allowed the students to feel comfortable in asking questions and taking a more independent role in their learning. This newly formed independence likely contributed to their perception that they could succeed in college.

Conclusion Three—Curriculum Rigor Beyond GED Coursework

Each of the participants agreed that the rigor of college-level work should be built into the GED curriculum. When Douglas was asked about his preparedness for college and what would have helped the most while in adult education class, he stated, "probably going over some stuff that would get us ready for college classes other than...cause most of the stuff in GED class is like high school work and it would have been better if we had went over some college stuff. So we could be familiar with it when we started our college classes." To ensure the validity and rigor of the GED Tests, GED Testing Services (2012) provides the following facts: (a) the tests

are field-tested and normed on graduating seniors before becoming final test forms, (b) only 60% of graduating high school seniors would pass the GED Tests on their first attempt, (c) 71% of all GED test takers had reached grade ten or higher in their high school education and (d) to pass the GED Tests, a test-taker must earn a minimum total standard combined score of 2250 on all 5 tests and a minimum standard score of 410 on each content area test. Therefore, even though the GED Tests are rigorous beyond the basic skills, an increase in rigor is needed to ensure students' college readiness.

Building on the goals of the GED 21st Century Initiative, two partners (American Council on Education and Pearson) will combine their collective expertise and resources to develop a new GED Test aligned with Common Core State Standards that assures colleges, universities and prospective employers that adults who have passed the GED Tests are prepared to compete and succeed in a global economy. The three primary components of the GED 21st Century Initiative include: a new, more rigorous GED Test aligned with Common Core State Standards designed to ensure career- and college-readiness; a national test preparation program featuring an expanding array of innovative and personalized learning resources; and a transition network that connects GED test-takers to career and postsecondary educational opportunities (American Council on Education, 2012). The vision of the GED Testing Service is: In an ideal society, everyone would graduate from high school. Until that becomes a reality, we, GED Testing Service®, will offer the opportunity to earn a high school equivalency credential so that individuals can have a second chance to advance their educational, personal, and professional aspirations (American Council on Education, 2012, para. 2). If this vision is to come true, curriculum standards have to continue to be aligned with K-12 and postsecondary education.

Even though students come to the adult education program for various reasons, it is important to ensure that they leave with the basic skills needed to be successful in life. The reasons students enter adult education programs vary from entering postsecondary education as a strategy for career advancement, to getting a job, or self-satisfaction. Adult education personnel must be keenly aware of those who desire to pursue a postsecondary education. This awareness allows them to adapt the curriculum so that it is more rigorous and challenging. Based on the findings of this study, doing so will enhance the preparation of GED students for collegiate work. Adult education instructors will continue to differentiate the learning and setting that takes place on a typical day in their classrooms (Bowie, 2012). Increasing the rigor in the adult education classroom and the intensity of instruction provides the GED graduate a better chance of being college ready.

Implications for Practice

The research needed to distinguish high school graduates from GED graduates is becoming increasingly necessary for postsecondary institutions. While it is obvious that high school graduates and GED completers have some similarities, the differences in these graduates are most important if they are going to be successful in college. This qualitative study sought to understand the perceptions of GED graduates about their college readiness. Adult education instructors, postsecondary institutions, and GED graduates not included in this study can gain insight into what a more meaningful education experience should include as students prepare for transition to postsecondary education.

One way this study can be put into practice is by changing the curriculum and instruction of the adult education classroom. In Georgia, it takes approximately four to six weeks to obtain the results of a GED test. In this waiting period, the students need to be actively working on

materials that they will face as beginning college students. Students should not be allowed to wait on results and not be engaged in any type of instruction. The students must remain engaged in a disciplined routine to enhance the learning process and move them closer to college readiness. A scheduled instructional format must be implemented to avoid a lapse in instruction. College tours, workshops, financial aid seminars, and COMPASS preparation should be scheduled to get the student acclimated to the college setting. Most technical institutions have begun to hire transitional coordinators to help with the transition to college. However, transitional coordinators are just the beginning in helping facilitate the transition of GED graduates into postsecondary education. The GED transition coordinators hired must be sensitive to, and knowledgeable about, the characteristics and learning styles of GED graduates if GED graduates are to be successful in college.

Another implication based on the findings of this study is the need for professional development of adult education instructors. Professional learning is one of the best mechanisms for instructors to stay abreast of current trends and research. To compliment professional development, instructors can use the findings of this study to help them tailor their curriculum to best meet the needs of GED students similar to those in this study who detailed their lived experiences before and after transition to postsecondary education. Assistance with low self-esteem after they have withdrawn from high school is one of many obstacles that adult education instructors need to master if their students are going to be successful. An instructor's ability to maintain students' desire, perseverance, and engagement will be critical in his or her development and use of effective lesson plans. Learning style inventories will also play a critical role in helping adult education instructors understand how to best present the basic education and college preparation materials to the student. It is incumbent upon adult educators to be lifelong

learners so that they can stay abreast of teaching strategies and tools needed to effectively teach and prepare GED graduates for successful transition to postsecondary education.

A third area that this study can have implication is for the GED graduate who wants to transition into postsecondary education. Too many times, students feel as if they are the only ones who have experienced a life-changing situation. By examining and reporting the lived experiences of the participants in this study, who remained motivated to accomplish their goals no matter what obstacles they faced, other GED students may be inspired to overcome their own obstacles. The participants in this study overcame drugs, pregnancy, ridicule, abandonment, depression, guilt, shame, defeat, and other emotional situations to move toward their education and work goals. Therefore, this study may also serve as a resource for other GED students seeking a higher education, but facing similar obstacles.

Suggestions for Future Research

Because little if any research regarding GED graduates transitioning into postsecondary education is available, opportunities are plentiful for additional research. Instructional delivery for high school graduates and GED graduates must be explored to fully understand the different needs of both groups, and especially to provide all the types of learning experiences needed by GED graduates planning to pursue college education. In other words, a GED graduate's life experiences may present many challenges and obstacles that are far different than some high school graduates. The knowledge about and solutions to these challenges and obstacles are important and critical to the success of the GED graduate.

Based upon the findings of this study, the following recommendations for future research are made:

1. This study's participants were seeking a degree from a technical college. It would be advantageous to determine if the findings are similar for GED graduates who want to pursue a four-year degree. Such information would help determine if a different set of instructional delivery models would be needed for those who plan to pursue a four-year degree. Therefore, it is recommended that a future study be conducted to examine the lived experiences of GED graduates enrolled in four-year college programs.
2. A future qualitative study of adult education instructors would provide beneficial information from the teacher's perspective, and the findings would likely add to the value of the current study. Instructors could provide an additional lens into what GED preparation looks like on a daily basis with a myriad of students from different races, origins, and backgrounds. The experiences of GED instructors would provide valuable insights into the climate and culture of the classroom that would make it conducive to the GED learner, but especially the GED learner who plans to pursue college, at any level.
3. Transition coordinators are a fairly recent addition to the technical college staff. Future research to explore their work, particularly their job duties, would provide insight into their contributions to the transition of GED graduates to college.
4. Quantitative studies can also offer opportunities for future research as well. One possible quantitative study would involve collection and analysis of data from GED graduates using survey research. Such a study could possibly provide additional information about how GED students believe GED instructors can assist in ensuring college readiness.
5. It is evident that a more suitable process for transitioning from earning the GED to the college classroom is needed. Many research articles discuss what is meant by

transitioning from a high school setting to college; however, research studies on the transitioning process from an adult education/GED program are minimal. Therefore, it is recommended that a future qualitative study examine the ‘GED to college transition’ process followed by other adult education/GED programs to determine: how it differs from the ‘high school to college’ transition, the processes that have proven effective, the matriculation through college coursework, the succession to college graduation, and obtainment of meaningful employment.

Summary

Chapter five presented conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research derived from this study of college readiness of GED graduates completing an adult education program at a technical college. A qualitative study approach with purposeful sampling was employed to gain rich, descriptive information through four interviews. The participants interviewed were enrolled in an adult education program for at least six months and earned their GED at a technical college. The findings from the analysis of the data collected through the student interviews led to the following conclusions: (a) personal barriers that led the students to drop-out of high school were also the motivation that led them to enroll in GED classes; (b) students believed that their teacher’s made a positive difference in the learning that took place; and (c) a more rigorous curriculum that goes beyond GED coursework is needed and can be provided during the time students are awaiting GED scores. The findings drawn from this study answered the two guiding research questions.

Finally, a primary outcome of this research is the need to close the gap between the perceptions about college readiness of GED graduates and the reality of college readiness. Even though the students lacked some of the skills needed for college, and as a result were required to

take a remedial studies class, the motivation and desire to obtain a college degree outweighed the short-lived stepping stone of a remedial class. Each year, an average of 500,000 individuals nationwide receive a GED credential and qualify for further education, training, and employment opportunities (GED Testing Service, 2006). In 2003, 63% of GED recipients indicated that they obtained this credential in order to pursue further education (NCSALL, 2003). Future research of GED graduates pursuing higher education will provide a link to understanding how to provide instruction and service to better assist the millions of GED students who plan to pursue further education.

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APPENDIX A
Interview Guide

1. What were your reasons for dropping out of high school? Put them in order of importance, with the most important reason first.
2. Describe the learning environment that was more difficult for you – adult education or high school?
3. Tell me what you liked most about high school? What did you like least about high school?
4. Tell me what you liked most about adult education? What did you like least about adult education?
5. Were you in Special Services in high school?
6. How many high school credits did you have before you dropped out of school?
7. Tell me in as much detail as you can about your experiences in the adult education classroom. Describe the high points? Describe the low points?
8. How would you describe the adult education classroom community? How do you think others in your class would describe you?
9. Explain what kind of a learner are you? Or How would you describe yourself as a learner?
10. Explain what kind of teaching excites you about learning? Can you provide an example of such a lesson? What kind discourages you? Can you provide an example of such a lesson?
11. Describe the kind of obstacles makes it hard for you to learn? What kind of supports or resources help you learn better? Can you provide an example?
12. In class instruction, do you use one specific text book or supplemental materials or a combination of both? How are being used?
13. Tell me about the quality of instruction in the adult education classroom?
14. Describe what you feel would have helped you the most while in the adult education program?
15. Did you feel that you were prepared for college after the adult education classes? Why or Why not?
16. Tell me what stands out as having been especially helpful in getting prepared? What would you have liked more of?
17. If you could change something about the adult education experience, what would it be?

APPENDIX B
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled “COLLEGE READINESS OF GED GRADUATES AFTER COMPLETING THE ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM AT A TECHNICAL COLLEGE ” conducted by Howie F. Gunby from the Department of Workforce Education, Leadership, and Social Foundations at the University of Georgia (706-401-6021) under the direction of Dr. Myra N. Womble, Department of Lifelong, Education, Policy, and Administration at the University of Georgia (706 542-1682). I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can refuse to participate or stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. The reason for this study is to understand and report GED graduates’ perceptions about their college readiness after completing the adult education program at a technical college in the southeast. I understand that I will not benefit directly from this research. I understand that the duration of my participation will not last over a month.

If I volunteer to take part in this study I will be asked to do the following things:

- 1) Meet with the investigator for an interview that will last approximately one hour.
- 2) Answer questions about the adult education class and developmental course in which I participated.
- 3) Allow the investigator to tape-record the interview.
- 4) Be willing to talk with the investigator at some time after the interview to clarify my information.
- 5) If asked, read a transcript of my interview to ensure that my answers have been transcribed correctly.

I understand that:

1. No discomforts or stresses are expected from participation in this research project.
2. No risks are expected.
3. This study is confidential and I will not be identified in the final product of the research.
4. My answers will not be associated with me in any identifiable way.
5. My college will not be identified in the final product of the research.
6. I will receive no compensation for participating in the interview.
7. The audiotape will be locked in a file cabinet with a pseudoname with only researcher having access.
8. I have the right to review the audiotape. The audiotape will be destroyed within one month after the second meeting of clarifying the contents of the audiotape. No one, except the interviewer and me, will have access to the tape.
9. All records of the master list will be destroyed within a month after the researcher has enough participants and enough evidence to complete the study.

10. No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission, except if it is necessary to protect my welfare (for example, if I were injured and need physician care) or if required by law.
11. The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at: 706-401-6021.

My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Telephone: 706-401-6021

Email: hgunby03@uga.edu

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.