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Sonja V. McCaskill-Mitchell

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THE LEVEL OF PERSISTENCE IN HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUTS ENROLLED IN
THE GED PROGRAM AT A RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

By

Sonja McCaskill-Mitchell

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Community College Leadership
in the Department of Leadership and Foundations

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2009

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The purpose of the study was to identify factors that affect students' persistence in completion of the GED. Exploration of characteristics of participants that do/do not persist and obtain their GED assists the high school dropout, potential GED recipient, GED program staff, and society as a whole. More information was needed in order to effectively address issues that adversely affect students enrolled in GED programs at a rural community college. Therefore, examination of the GED program's student database contributed in finding factors that both help and impede student success. Factors identified were investigated in an effort to assist in the retention of future participants in the GED program.

The subjects of this study consisted of 976 students enrolled in GED programs at a rural community college. The data utilized were archived and provided by the GED staff via charts and spreadsheets of student files and records (i.e. demographic sheet,

entry tests-locator test or TABE test, pre-GED testing, exit tests-GED, etc.). There was no direct contact with subjects.

A discriminant function analysis was utilized in this study. This was done by weighting the variables and combining them into discriminant functions that separate the groups maximally. The discriminating variables were considered as predictor variables and the group membership variables were considered as dummy criterion variables. Also, a quantitative, non-experimental design was employed to show the direction and magnitude of the relationships between independent variables. The essential features of the design were the abilities to find associations, relate variables, and make predictions. The variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels significantly discriminated into the following groups at a 59.5% rate of accuracy: (1) GED completion, (2) GED continuation, and (3) GED dropouts. Age, race, gender, entry level, and rural had a significant impact on persistence/GED completion. Older, male, and higher entry level (4, 5, and 6) participants were more apt to persist and complete the GED program. While white and black participants completed at higher rates than Asian and Hispanic participants. The majority of rural participants also completed the GED program.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the loving memories of my grandparents, Mr. Hugh and Mrs. Victoria Lee and Mr. Emmett and Mrs. Rosie McCaskill. All of them were college graduates of the other land grant college in Mississippi (ASU). Each of my grandparents was an educator and all emphasized the importance of an education and how hard it was fought for us to have access to it. I love and miss you all so very much. Thank you for loving and nurturing me to become the person I am today. To my Uncle Phil, thank you for your quiet strength and support. I know you are all smiling down on me.

My parents, Mr. Charles and Mrs. Vernadette McCaskill, graduated from ASU as well and continued to instill in my brothers and me that education is of the utmost importance. I never could have made it without you. Words can not adequately express my gratitude to both of you. Thank you for the love, prayers, the funds, and the support.

My baby girl, Christandre' McCaskill, I love you more than life itself. You have been my inspiration to achieve as much as possible. I wanted to show you that despite obstacles in life, that there are no limitations if you are strong, determined, and trust God. I have been in graduate school almost your entire life (master's, psychometry licensure, specialist's and doctorate degrees) and I look forward to having more time with you.

Momma loves you

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank God for seeing me through this journey. There are many others who were a part of the GPS that guided me to this final destination. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Ed Davis, Dr. Julia Porter, Dr. Lavinia Sparkman, and Dr. Marty Wiseman for their support. A special thank you goes to Dr. Porter for talking me into embarking on this journey and for being a wonderful mentor.

I would like to also thank Dr. J.T. Johnson for being patient, offering great explanations, and being willing to assist me throughout this process. Thanks to Dr. Jeffery Gray for lending his advice, assistance with proofreading, encouragement, etc. as needed throughout my graduate school years. A special thank you to my co-worker, Ms. Jo Powell, for helping me with the input of the data (Excel was a major bump in the road for me). Thank you Dr. William Lewis, President of PRCC, for always being willing to offer me assistance with whatever I asked of him.

I would like to thank Mr. Barry Upton and Ms. Patricia Magee of the PRCC GED Program for providing me with the data utilized in this study. This was not small feat, Patricia was especially patient and kind.

Thank you to my administrators at work for allowing me the flexibility to take time off when needed throughout this journey. Thank you to Dr. Sheba Jennings-Jordan and Dr. Dewayne Middleton for supporting and assisting me whenever I needed it. Thank

you to my classmates, Lagen Bradley, Cedric Bradley, and Kim Noland-Reed, that have shared the road with me and encouraged me along the way.

Thank you to my family and friends for keeping me grounded and helping me stay on task. Your love and support are greatly appreciated. A very special thank you to the Gordons (Baleria, Marvin, Cherish and Calenshea), I could not have made it without your support and prayers over the years. To my aunt and uncle, Connie and Pirl Johnson for providing me with a place to stay and meals when traveling to MSU for classes, no words can adequately express my gratitude to you. Thank you to my aunt, Hughiestyne Lee, for your love, support, and words of encouragement. My brothers, Chris and Andrew, thank you for offering me your love support throughout my educational venture.

Thank you to my husband, Michael for taking up my slack around the house and supporting me on the tail end of this journey.

Yes, Soror Jessie, I am finally through with my dissertation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The study addressed the level of persistence in high school dropouts enrolled in the GED program at a rural community college during the school term 2007-2008. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2007), there were 540,382 public school students who dropped out of grades 9–12 in the school year 2004–2005 in the United States. In the Northeast and Midwest, based on student enrollment of 50,000 or more students, the largest districts, were associated with higher dropout rates, while in the South and West, the smallest districts (1,000 or fewer students) had the highest dropout rates. More males (289,675) than females (209,818) dropped out of grades 9–12 in public schools during the school term studied. For the 512,702 drop-outs in 9th–12th grade for whom race/ethnicity was reported in school term 2004–2005, American Indians/Alaska Natives accounted for the smallest share of 9th–12th grade dropouts, but the national dropout rate for these students was higher than for all other racial/ethnic groups (6.7% versus 2.5% for Asians/Pacific Islanders, 5.8% for Hispanics, 6.0% for African Americans, and 2.8% for Caucasians).

The 2000 NCES report on high school dropout rates indicated that youth living in families with incomes in the lowest 20% of all family incomes were six times as likely as their cohorts from families in the top 20% of the income distribution to drop out of high school (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2000). There is a tendency to think of dropping

out of school as a phenomenon of low socioeconomic communities, however, recent studies have indicated that this may not always be the case (Alspaugh, 1998).

Furthermore, there are racial differences in the drop out rate. Minority groups are more likely to drop out of high school (NCES 2007). *Dropout Rates* from Child Trends Databank (2005) reports that Hispanic youth ages 16 to 24 accounted for 41% of all dropouts in 2005, despite only making up 17% of the total youth population. In 2005, 6% of Whites ages 16 to 24, compared to 3% of Asians, 11% of African Americans, and 23% of Hispanics were not enrolled in or completed high school. The higher rate of Hispanics may be the result of the high proportion of immigrants in this age group who never attended school in the United States. Also in 2005, 11% of males and 8% of females in this age group were high school dropouts. Although males make up 51% of the population, they comprise 58% of the dropouts in this age group. The dropout rates of African Americans and Hispanics declined substantially between 1992 and 2004, narrowing the gap between the two groups. The drop out rate for African American youth reached a historic low of 11% in 2001. This drop is partly related to the dramatic increases in incarceration rates among African American dropouts since 1980, which removes them from the civilian non-institutionalized population from which the estimates are drawn (*Dropout Rates*, 2005). The estimates for 2005 were determined using the new Office of Management and Budget race definitions and include only those who are identified with a single race (Hispanics may be of any race). Young people that drop out of high school are not likely to have the minimum skills and/or credentials needed to function in today's increasingly complex society and technological workplace. Studies

have shown that young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty (substantially low income) and receive government (public) assistance. High school dropouts are much more likely to become involved in crime (*Dropout Rates*, 2005).

The study, *Issue Brief: Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts Eight Years Later*, by the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2004) reported that 63% of students who dropped out had earned a diploma or GED within eight years of the year they should have originally graduated.

Statement of the Problem

According to Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison (2006), the high school drop out rate in America has become an epidemic. Each year, almost one third of all public high school students fail to graduate from high school with their classes. Included in students who drop out are one half of all Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans enrolled. Many of these students leave school with less than two years to complete their high school education. Swanson (2005) found differences in graduation rates between gender and race. In Mississippi, he found that approximately 60.7% of all students graduated from high school, comprised of 50% of American Indian, 65.1% Asian, 32.4% Hispanic, 55.9% Black and 65.4% White. Overall 54.1% male and 67.8% female students graduated. With respect to race and gender, only White and Black students were reported as follows 46.6% were Black females, 64.2% Black males, 70.2% White females, and 60.5% White males.

According to Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (2000), four out of ten Hispanic males reported that they were school dropouts who had not obtained a GED, compared to approximately one in ten black males and one in ten white males. Seven percent (7%) of Hispanic males and four percent (4%) of both black and white males reported that they obtained high school graduate status by obtaining a GED. Murnane et al. (2000) found that the hourly pay wage of males who reported obtaining a GED was seven percent (7%) higher than that of male dropouts without a GED and ten percent (10%) lower than that of males that reported earning a conventional high school diploma.

The increasing popularity of GED programs is a symptom of the failure of traditional high schools to meet the needs of students who find high school alienating or incompatible with their emerging adult responsibilities. Economic pressures can push low-income students into taking jobs that interfere with school. Early parenthood can also tremendously interfere with school. Many students consider the GED a very attractive alternative to a high school experience that is alienating and/or irrelevant to their future. Many dropouts say that getting a GED is faster than earning a diploma. The strength of personal motivational qualities and employment to predict dropouts' likelihood of later attaining a high school degree suggests that many dropouts have the needed drive to complete high school but choose to do so via GED certification (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004).

Dropping out of school can be a very dangerous decision, as dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, be in jail, be unhealthy, be divorced, and be single parents with children that repeat the cycle. Our nation suffers tremendously from this high school drop out epidemic via (1) loss of

productive workers, (2) higher costs associated with increased incarceration, (3) and increased health care and social services. Kaminski (1993) stated that there are many reasons why young people drop out of high school. Of course, there are some reasons that are more prevalent than others, but in many ways each student is different. For the most part, the education system does not address that reality, preferring to teach those students who fit a mold, and attempt to keep others from dropping out sometimes motivated by funding the school receives from the government. Although academic failure is not the only reason youth quit school, dropouts more often than not, have low literacy levels. It has been estimated that nearly 50% of adult basic education (ABE) students have a learning disability (Perin, 2003). Many students with disabilities have failed or have been retained for at least one year in school. The retention problem is one of the most serious challenges facing policymakers and educators today, because retention is so much more prevalent in schools that enroll disadvantaged students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). Retention predicts dropout at every age and in a variety of school settings (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2002). It is also a predictor of permanent rather than temporary dropouts. By dropping out, students that have failed a grade or been retained can avoid labels such as “dumb,” “behind,” or “failures” and must spending additional time in school before graduation. They can shed a punishing role, by entering the world of work or other means, acquire some of the status afforded to adults.

Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have led to students with disabilities in many states being offered alternatives to a high school diploma based on the severity of their respective disability. The graduation alternatives discussed by

Hartwig and Sitlington (2008) are used as options in Mississippi schools as well. The options currently available are GEDs (offered to those students who opt to take coursework that covers basic curriculum in the areas of math, science, reading and writing and pass an exam offered by community colleges and/or high schools), occupational diplomas (a diploma students receive for completing the requirements for specialization in specific occupations or skill areas), and certificates of attendance, achievement, or completion (a certificate offered to students who met the requirements of their special education program, but not those of the general education program). Because some of the options are very new, researchers have just begun to explore employer attitudes toward hiring recipients of the different types of high school exit documents. Hartwig and Sitlington (2008) found that employers were the least willing to hire individuals with certificates of attendance, achievement, or completion (would offer menial jobs) and most willing to hire those with occupational diplomas (offer jobs tied to skill or diploma area) and GEDs (most would offer unskilled labor jobs). All employers involved had few employees with a physical or mental disability.

Murnane, Willett, and Tyler (2000), found that there are three benefits in the labor market (employment) to dropouts who subsequently complete the GED program. The first benefit is that studying for the GED exam may increase a dropout's skills. The second benefit to obtaining a GED is that it signals to employers that the dropout possesses desirable traits, such as mastery of basic skills or a high level of motivation (Spence, 1973). The third benefit of earning a GED is that it may have an indirect positive effect on subsequent earnings by improving access to postsecondary education and work experience, both of which result in increases in marketable skills. Dropouts

with weak academic skills are the least desirable applicants for most jobs and earn only about two thirds as much at age 27 as dropouts that left school with stronger academic skills.

Other reasons for the vast number of drop outs are financial need, the types of work available, and the future value of high school jobs are very different for youth who are well-off compared to disadvantaged or poor. Students in their teens from poor families are less than half as likely to be employed as those from well-off families (Brown, 2001). For college-bound students who are considered well-off, work in high school is mainly discretionary. They purchase clothes, cars, and other luxuries with their earnings and their high school jobs are not likely to be connected to the full-time jobs they will eventually hold. However, for those students growing up in poverty (substantially low income), work in high school is much less discretionary, as many contribute earnings for family support (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000; Johnson & Lino, 2000) and their high school jobs may be related to the full-time jobs they will hold as adults. Even though most teenagers start and stop paid work repeatedly, for those who plan to go on to postsecondary education, the student role remains primary, because they tend to stay in school continuously, irrespective of their work status. For others, the student role fades, work assumes increasing importance, and dropping out of high school becomes a serious possibility. Cao, Stromsdorfer, and Weeks (1996) contend that working prior to dropping out could influence the decision to seek a high school certification such as the GED, since students might take a job with the intention of juggling school and work but then find that a regular high school program is too difficult to maintain along with a job. They may then drop out of school and enroll in a GED

program. Similarly, students' experiences in the labor market could make them more aware of the advantages of a high school diploma and lead them to return to high school. Furthermore, more than half of those who drop out later resume their educations (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998) some by earning high school diplomas, but the majority by earning a GED. According to Entwisle et al. (2004), the GED option allows youth to obtain high school certification while working full-time and it offers flexibility with respect to when they enroll in a GED program and the length of time they take to finish. Little systematic research addresses the specific question of whether the GED encourages dropping out, although allowing teenagers to get GEDs without parental permission increases the likelihood that they will do so (Chaplin, 1999). The GED option also seems to attract students who aspire to a high school degree, but for whom the opportunity costs of returning to school are high. Just as the choice to drop out links to prior life history, so does the choice to return to school or seek a GED.

Numerous studies show that temporary dropouts differ from permanent dropouts even before dropping out of school. GED recipients tend to finish more years of high school than permanent dropouts (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Cao et al., 1996; Maloney, 1992; Murnane, Willet, & Boudett, 1995, 1997), are more likely to have expected to complete high school (Chuang, 1997; Finn & Rock, 1997), have higher cognitive scores (Hotz, Xu, Tienda, & Ahituv, 1999; Murnane et al., 1995), and come from higher SES backgrounds (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Hotz et al., 1999; Kolstad & Kaufman, 1989; Murnane et al., 1995, 1997).

One in seven young adults classified in the U.S. Census as a high school graduate holds a GED certificate (Murnane et al., 2000). Pursuing a GED allows participants to

work and/or care for a child and concurrently achieve an alternate high school certification (Entwisle et al., 2004). However, much of the growth in the number of young adults obtaining a GED has stemmed from government policies. According to Murnane et al., the Adult Education Act of 1966 provided significant funds to states for GED preparation programs; the welfare Reform Act of 1988 specified that women who received AFDC payments that did not have high school diplomas, must either find employment, return to high school, or enroll in adult education programs, most of which are geared toward preparing participants for the GED examination. The 1986 amendments to the Higher Education Act specified that applicants for Pell Grants to pay for postsecondary education or training must demonstrate “ability to benefit” from financial aid. Obtaining a GED is the easiest way to satisfy this condition for a high school dropout.

The cause of high school dropouts is complex and confusing. For those students that go back and obtain a GED, there has to be some characteristic(s) that they possess, like persistence that helps them prevail. Finding out more about persistence could be helpful with assisting students in completion of the GED program.

Just as there are problems with high school students dropping out, the problems are almost as prevalent for participants in GED programs dropping out. Therefore, exploration of the factors that influence completion of the GED program is vital as well. Previous studies have looked at a number of different things to motivate students to remain in GED programs. Cash incentives have been offered to GED students that were welfare (public assistance) recipients to encourage them to complete the program. Welfare recipients were defined as adults who received welfare (public assistance) and

selected ABE classes as a pre-employment activity, and were required to attend classes for 20 hours per week. In Tennessee in 1996, welfare reform legislation passed that was unique among the 50 states, in that eligible welfare (public assistance) recipients could enroll in an ABE program to improve their skills or earn a GED credential enabling them to increase their earning potential and access postsecondary education and employment opportunities (Zeigler, Ebert, & Cope, 2004). Tennessee's welfare reform administered by the Department of Human Services, Families First, implemented the "Completion Bonus" in March 2000, a cash incentive program for crossing a variety of thresholds on the way to independence from welfare (public assistance). This bonus program was designed and implemented to promote the completion of educational and employment outcomes that will lead to self competence and career advancement (Metcalf, 2000). Benefits were time-limited under the welfare reform, therefore time is a major concern to programs that provide educational services. There was no significant difference between the rate of advancement and/or completion of the GED program for preincentive and postincentive participants. Thus, the study found that the cash incentive did not affect the rate at which participants advanced through the program. Nevertheless, more welfare (public assistance) recipients made progress in the postincentive period (Ziegler et al., 2004). Although there was no reduction in the amount of time to make progress for both groups, there was a significant increase in the number of postincentive welfare recipients who made progress. Rural participants reported that the cash incentive motivated them to persist, while urban participants indicated that it was not important. Urban participants stated that internal motivation of receiving a credential needed for employment was more important than external rewards. Therefore, extrinsic rewards can have some positive

effects on motivation (Cameron & Pierce, 1994). The cash incentive provided additional motivation for the Families First (welfare recipients) participants to persist, despite obstacles they encountered. Education is one way many welfare recipients can access job training and postsecondary education that could result in higher wages. Since most of the welfare recipients are poor women with children, many single parents who balance multiple roles of parent, worker, and student, a cash incentive may make persistence in an adult education or GED program more attainable from their perspective. According to Ziegler et al., the qualitative data supported the quantitative findings that the impact of the incentive is on persistence rather than the length of time needed to make progress.

The presence of support is a psychological factor linked to persistence in GED programs. According to DuBois (1989), family support, as well as, supportive instructors plays a large part in participants' persistence and retention in GED programs. Instructors can be instrumental in helping students realize they are progressing, which can be a psychological factor as well. GED dropouts can be encouraged to return to the program by staff contacting them to see what they need in order to continue in the program. According to Golden, Kist, Trehan and Padak (2005) participants need a kind word from teachers. Teachers should be vigilant with regard to what is going on beneath the surface.

King (2002) found in his research that high school dropouts' primary barriers to participation in GED programs were family constraints. This was especially true of younger, rural GED participants. Some of the issues relayed from the subjects were: lack of encouragement from family and friends, participation would reduce time spent with their family, difficulty arranging childcare, and other family problems that affected participation. Study recommendations to address some of the issues were as follows:

Adult education providers should develop policies and procedures that are sensitive to the needs of GED participants and their families because most can pursue the GED only with family support; Recruitment of GED participants should include materials for family members to read about the importance of adult education and the benefits of obtaining a GED; and Adult education providers should develop child care facilities for the large number of GED participants and potential participants who require that service, establishment of nontraditional hours for child care would be beneficial as well.

Purpose of the Study

All forms of news media currently report that our country is facing tremendously perilous economic times. Anything that can be done to assist people in improving their way of life deserves exploration. There is a shortage of jobs, government funding and a housing crisis (personal experience). The people in the lower income levels are especially vulnerable to the current struggles to just survive. This study focused on identifying factors that affect whether or not students persist in completion of the GED. GED completion would not only help the high school dropout, potential GED recipient, and GED program staff, but also society as a whole.

As previously stated, there are a multitude of reasons why students drop out of school. There are numerous educational environments which may well cause drop out rates to increase, and many different ways in which to address and change the current rate of dropouts from high school. More information is needed in order to effectively address issues that affect these students. Exploration of a GED program's student database assists

in finding factors that both help and impede student success. Factors identified were examined in an effort to assist in the retention of future participants in the GED program.

According to Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999), persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until the adult student reaches his or her educational goal (amount of effort). For the purpose of this research, persistence was measured by completion of adult education classes and obtaining the GED. Although time in class may not be important for each individual student, it is more likely a measure of persistence for comparison between populations of GED students, which makes it useful for research that supports or hinders persistence (Comings et al., 1999).

Research Questions

Answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What factors/demographics predict participant completion of the GED program (i.e. age, race, gender, physical/learning/or mental disability, learning disability, employment, low income, displaced homemaker, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels)?
2. What factors will the participants who did not complete the GED program but continued have in common?
3. What factors will the participants who dropped out of the GED program have in common?

Hypothesis

The answer to the following hypothesis was sought:

The variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels will significantly discriminate the groups of (a) GED completion, (b) GED continuation, and (c) GED dropouts.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and explore characteristics of participants that do/do not persist and obtain their GED.

1. A major limitation of this study was the inability to conduct adequate follow-up with students that drop out of the GED program. Such a follow-up could suggest implications for future study and assist GED instructors with helping future GED participants.
2. Another limitation was the inability to generalize the results to GED programs at community colleges nationwide due to data collection from a single rural community college during the 2007-2008 term.
3. One more limitation of this study was the lack of control due to ex post facto (use of pre-existing data). Therefore, it was a sample of convenience in which no random assignment or manipulation of variables was possible.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined as follows:

Community college - a regionally accredited institution of higher education that offers the associate degree as its terminal degree (Vaughan, 2000).

Persistence - the ability to maintain action regardless of one's feelings, to press on even when one feels like quitting; it is the fifth and final pillar of self-discipline (Pavlina,

2005). For the purpose of this study, persistence was measured as completion of the GED program.

High school dropout t- a person who has not graduated from, and is not currently enrolled in a full-time, state-approved secondary education program (Wittebols,1986).

Adult education - instruction designed for people beyond the age of compulsory school attendance and have either completed or interrupted their formal education (Cohen and Brawer, 2002).

General Educational Development (GED) test - a battery of five subtests, which covers science, reading, mathematics, social studies, and writing, patterned to certify the mastery of high school level skills and knowledge (Miller, 2006).

General Educational Development (GED) certificate - a high school equivalency certificate originally developed for returning veterans of World War II whose high school education was interrupted by military service (Texas Association of School Boards, 2008).

Adult - an individual who is 16 years of age or who is beyond the age of compulsory school attendance under state law (MS State Board of Community and Junior Colleges Policy and Procedures Manual, 2005).

Rural - population less than 2,500 as indicated on the Mississippi Adult Education Personal Data Sheet utilized by PRCC. It is also defined by the U. S. Census Bureau Geography Division (1994) as open countryside and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents; an incorporated place or census designated place (CDP) with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants that is located outside of an urbanized area (UA).

Learning Disability (LD) - low level of achievement (Fletcher, 2003) in a specific area or areas and/or literacy skills (Alamprese, 2003). Areas referred to are reading, math, writing, listening and speaking.

Physical/Learning/or Mental Disability - any person who has a physical, learning, or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of such a person's major life activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment (Medical College of Georgia Academic, Research, and Student Affairs Policy Library, 2001).

Single parent (SP) - household with children under the age of 18 headed by one parent who is widowed or divorced and not remarried, or by a parent who never married (Davidson, 2002).

Displaced homemaker (DH) - a person who suddenly must return to the workforce to solely support their family, as well as his/her self (Dabney, 1996).

Age - the length of time that one has existed. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2005).

Race - a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009).

Gender - The condition of being female or male; sex. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2005).

Employed - to participate in an active manner at a job or vocation to earn an income (contribute labor in exchange for wages).

Unemployed - out of work, especially involuntarily; jobless. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2005).

Not in labor force (NILF) - unemployed, not currently working and not actively seeking employment (PRCC Demographics Intake Sheet).

Public assistance (PA) - government aid to needy, aged, or disabled persons and to dependent children (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2009).

Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) - a norm-referenced test designed to measure achievement in reading, mathematics, language, and spelling. The TABE is divided into a locator test and five levels (E-easy, M-medium, D-difficult, A-advanced, and Pre-GED) including pre-literacy (L); scores are reported according to grade-level equivalency (CBT/McGraw-Hill, 2009).

TABE Skill Levels - SL1 (L) grade equivalent 0-1.9; SL2 (E) grade equivalent 2.0-3.9; SL3 (M) grade equivalent 4.0-5.9; SL4 (D) grade equivalent 6.0-8.9; SL5 (A) grade equivalent 9.0-10.9; SL 6 (A or Pre-GED) 11.0-2.9 (PRCC folder).

Discussion of the Problem

Each year, almost one third of all public high school students fail to graduate from high school with their classes. Dropping out of school can have a negative impact on quality of life, as dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in jail, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children that repeat the cycle. Our nation suffers from this high school drop out epidemic via loss of productive workers, higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services.

Our country is in an economic crisis. There is a shortage of jobs, a shortage of government funding and a housing crisis. People in lower income levels are especially

vulnerable to the current financial struggles to just survive. This study collected and examined data that can be utilized to assist some of the population within this category with finding ways to finish their education and better provide for themselves and/or their families. This can not only help the high school dropout, potential GED recipient, and GED program staff, but also society as a whole.

More information is needed in order to effectively address issues that adversely affect students enrolled in GED programs at rural community colleges. Exploring a GED program's student data base assists in finding factors that both help and impede student success. Factors identified were examined in an effort to assist in the retention of future participants in the GED program.

The presence of support is one psychological factor linked to persistence in GED programs. According to DuBois (1989), family support, as well as, supportive instructors played a large part in students' persistence and retention in GED programs. Instructors can be instrumental in helping students realize they are progressing, which can be a psychological factor as well.

The findings of this study were utilized to address the issues identified by the data as problems or factors that negatively affect the three groups (GED completion, GED continuation, and GED dropout). Identifying factors that contribute to GED participants dropping out, remaining in the program, and persisting to completion may be used to help GED participants and future participants persist and complete the program.

There was not an active independent variable in this study. Several independent variables were combined to see how well they predict the dependent variable. The independent variables were demographics such as: age, race, gender, low income,

learning disability, physical/learning/or mental disability, displaced homemaker, public assistance, rural, single parent, employment status, single parent, rural, public assistance, and entry/exit levels). The dependent variable is completion of the GED program (participant obtains GED). The relationship between variables was very important.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The review of the literature presented in this chapter concentrated on the growing epidemic of the high school dropout rate in the nation, the substantial increase in the number of adults seeking a GED certificate, and the role persistence plays in GED recipients' success. Upon completion of this study, strategies were offered for implementation to resolve the issues identified as barriers to persistence of GED participants enrolled in ABE programs.

High School Dropouts

According to Bridgeland et al. (2006), the high school drop out rate in America has become an epidemic. Each year, almost one third of all public high school students fail to graduate from high school with their classes. Thornburgh (2006) stated that the high school dropout rate is much higher than reported by many school districts. He studied the dropout rate in the U.S. and focused particularly on a rural high school in Indiana that for years wildly self-reported an inaccurate graduation rate of 98%. The school district obtained that number by using a commonly accepted statistical feint, by counting any dropout who consents to take the GED test later on as a graduating student. This GED trick is only one of many deployed by local and state governments around the

country to disguise the real dropout rates. The Federal Government has also been deceptive in producing rosy graduation rate estimates usually between 85-90% by relying on only a couple of questions buried within the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. Many critics say the census count severely underreports dropout numbers, in part because it doesn't include transients or prisoners, populations with a high proportion of dropouts. An advocacy group for low income and minority students, the Education Trust, issued a derisive report in 2005 about how the Federal Government stood by while states submitted patently misleading graduation figures, three states didn't submit any, and for many others, the figures were clearly inflated (Thornburgh, 2006).

According to Byrne (2003), traditional public funded schools have failed a large portion of students. Public schools may well serve the motivated, but they are generally not able to reach the thousands of students from dysfunctional families. They also do not possess the level of interest and caring as alternative schools created in recent years.

Devine (1996) cited parental low educational attainment, number of members in household, and lack of motivation as reasons why students from a low socioeconomic status or income level drop out of school. Coley (1995) identified the top four school related problems for dropping out as disliking school, receiving poor grades, not being able to keep up with school work, and not getting along with teachers. It is usually standard that school dropout rates are a reflection of the schools and the communities they serve (Alspaugh, 1998).

A number of unusual schools have been introduced, one successful school has been the Life Skills schools created by Ohio developer White Hat Management Co., in

Akron, Ohio (Byrne, 2003). Entrepreneur David L. Brennan found that his employees were not sufficiently educated in English and math, to operate newer machinery. He began school sessions of his own, then K-8 voucher schools, and in time the Life Skills program. It combined school offerings with virtual computer schools that are expanding in growth. Employees gain their high school diploma via heavy computer work and counseling in the morning, and work at jobs that White Hat assists them in securing in the afternoon. Two thousand seven hundred (2,700) students/employees have graduated from Life Skills in four years, and many have gone on to study at community colleges and four-year institutions of higher learning.

According to Cordtz (1989), approximately two-thirds of the convicts in the United States dropped out of school. Moreover, a link seems to exist between dropping out of high school and criminal involvement. Thus, society has developed numerous campaigns emphasizing the importance of young people staying in school and getting their high school diplomas.

Many dropout related statistics can be found in Drop-out Rates in the United States: 2004-2005, published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007). A look at status dropout rates (the proportion of the relevant age group that has not completed school and is not enrolled) indicates that the rates for Hispanics are perhaps misleadingly high because they combine the dropout rates for immigrants with the rates for those who were born in the U.S. Hispanic immigrants have much higher status dropout rates than the first-generation of Hispanics born here (43% to 17%). Interestingly the dropout rate for second-generation Hispanics moves back up to 24%. Other research has suggested that this increase might reflect a disillusionment factor (Bracey, 1994). The

immigrants arrive, speak Spanish, and are nostalgic about the old country. Members of the first generation born here tend not to speak Spanish, have no connection to the old country, and hope to realize the American Dream. However, the dream remains just that, and, by the time the first generation has children, some disillusionment has set in.

Gender

According to Kaminski (1993), the reasons for dropping out given by males largely fit those developed by urban research. The most common reason (about third) was work. This may account for so many suggestions for co-op programs or on-the-job training. The combination of “too many rules” and “problems with teachers” matches national findings that rank disciplinary problems as one of the top causes for males dropping out. Sixty percent (60%) of females gave pregnancy as their reason for dropping out of school. Eighty-six percent (86%) of these women said they would have remained in school if they had had access to daycare. The high rate of pregnancy from this rural area study may derive from the mind set of a philosophically conservative area: adoption rarely considered, abortion an unlikely option, family planning clinics strategically misplaced, human sexuality courses not in continuum from elementary through high school, education for all a lesser value, and daycare not available for students with babies.

Dropouts by Rural Location and Race

More than 14% of the over 46 million students enrolled in approximately 96,000 public schools in the United States attend rural schools (Rural Assistance Center, 2005).

Census Bureau statistics indicate that a number of the states with the highest percentages of high school dropouts are located in the South. “Ironically, southern states have often been among the leaders in education reform” (Christie, 2008, p. 325). Swanson (2005) studied high school graduation rates during the 2001-2002 school term in the South (data from Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina) and found that lower graduation rates tend to be found in school districts with high levels of racial segregation. Among minority groups, racial segregation is highest for Blacks and Hispanics. Segregation affects the lives of all students detrimentally. However, compared to White youth, Black youth in the South are about four times as likely to live and attend school in communities that suffer from high levels of both racial and economic segregation. As a result, today’s Black youth continue to bear the heavy burdens of racial isolation and concentrated poverty. Swanson (2005) also found differences in graduation rates between gender as well as race. In Mississippi, he found that approximately 60.7% of all students graduated from high school, comprised of 50% of American Indian, 65.1% Asian, 32.4% Hispanic, 55.9% Black and 65.4% White. Overall 54.1% male and 67.8 % female students graduated. With respect to race and gender, only White and Black students were reported as follows 46.6% were Black females, 64.2% Black males, 70.2% White females, and 60.5% White males.

According to Miller (2007), Mississippi school dropouts could expect to earn 27% less over the course of a lifetime than their counterparts with a high school diploma and 54% less than those with some college. People with a bachelor’s degree more than double the earnings of the typical dropout. That is only if dropouts are employed. Only 57% of Mississippi high school dropouts were in the work force in 2005. There was also a clear

correlation between dropping out of school and social costs. Approximately 70% of Mississippi's 22,000 prison inmates never finished high school. Mississippi's economy would experience a combination of savings and revenue of more than \$93 million in reduced crime spending and increased earnings per year if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5% (Alliance for Excellence Education, 2008).

The dropout rate of middle school students is not as widely discussed as the high school dropout rate. However, many retention programs are being developed at the middle school level to address the increasing high school dropout rate. Sable and Gaviola (2007) reported the 2004-2005 school term dropout rates for 7th-12th grades for each state. Of Mississippi's over 40,000 seventh graders, 255 students dropped out of school. Of its over 40,000 eighth grade students, 311 students dropped out. Neighboring Alabama did not report dropout rates for seventh and eighth grade students. Louisiana's dropout rate for the almost 60,000 seventh graders was reported as 913, and an astounding 2,069 for the approximately 60,000 eighth grader students. Tennessee reported 474 dropouts of their approximately 75,000 seventh graders and 481 dropouts of their approximately 75,000 eighth graders.

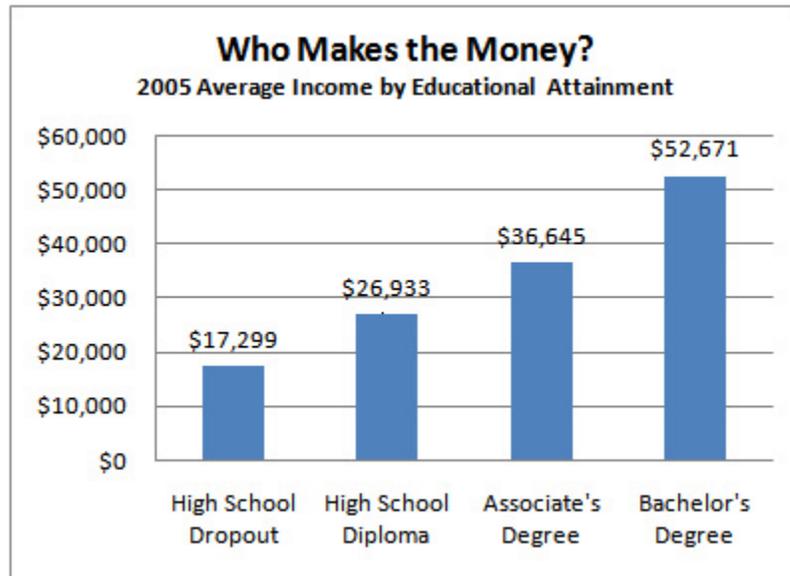
Project "GRADS" (Grass Roots Alternative Diploma Study) in Huntingdon, PA was a yearlong multi media method used in one rural county in an effort to prepare residents for the GED (Topper, 1989). It was a correspondence course made available to a wide population when educational programs were broadcast countywide over cable TV, as well as, weekly GED lessons were printed in a local newspaper. The GRADS program successfully reached numerous rural residents, including many that were jobless and/or wanted their high school equivalency diploma (GED).

One of the most documented aspects of rural ABE programs is the lack of support services such as childcare and transportation (Coro, 2006).

Effects of Dropouts on Employment and Income

Murnane and Levy (1996) identified 9th grade reading, writing, and math skills as essential for economic success in the workplace. Approximately one in four Mississippians of working-age are without the education and skills to be gainfully employed (Gilbert, 2008). Gilbert found only 15% of MS jobs utilize unskilled workers, 65% of jobs require skilled workers with education and training beyond high school, and 20% of jobs utilize professional workers (bachelor's degree or above). Entry-level jobs (employment) demand more skills now than in the past, rendering high school dropouts even more disadvantaged than before. A major issue is whether they can earn enough money to support a household. Barton (2006) discovered that the earning power of 25-34 year old dropouts who manage to work full-time averaged an annual salary of males decreased from \$35,087 in 1971 to \$22,903 in 2002, a decline of 35%. The comparable annual earnings for female dropouts were \$19,888 in 1971, declining to \$17,114 in 2002. Despite working full-time, the average earnings of this age group of dropouts is barely above the poverty (substantially low income) line for a family with children. Most dropouts do not reach the poverty level of earnings. According to Entwisle et al. (2004), the GED option allows youth to obtain high school certification while working full-time and it offers the flexibility with respect to when they enroll in a GED program and the length of time they take to finish.

In 2006 the US Bureau of the Census reported an earnings comparison of people with and without degrees for the year 2005. High school dropouts' earnings were minuscule compared to other educated groups. The results are listed in the chart below.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006

Figure 1. Who Makes the Money?

General Educational Development (GED)

The GED tests were initially developed by the Army, in cooperation with the American Council of Education (ACE), during World War II to assist returning veterans pursuing a college education. Post-war the GED gradually became more popular among civilians, and states began to grant the high school credential for those who were able to pass the tests. By the 1960's, civilians outnumbered the military (Boesel & Alsalam, 1998). By national standards, no one under 16 years of age is allowed to take the GED

test. GED participants 16-17 years old can enroll in ABE/GED programs if they face a hardship. Each state and/or county determines what constitutes a hardship (Kiefer, 2006).

Use of the GED as a Second Chance for Teen Dropouts

Due to increased high school graduation standards, high school adjustment difficulties, pregnancy, poverty (substantially low income), court referral, misperceptions of the GED, preference for an adult environment, and program marketing, many youth are opting to enroll in a GED program. ABE programs, that offer literacy instruction at various levels through preparation for the GED (McShane, 2005), are attracting increasing numbers of recent high school dropouts (Hayes, 2000; Rachal & Bingham, 2004; Welch & De Tommaso, 2004). Growth trends relative to the rising numbers of high school aged students, 16-17 year olds, enrolling in ABE programs indicate an increasing adolescentizing of the GED. These trends have serious implications for the kind of atmosphere in which the GED classes take place, as well as the kind of instruction that is utilized (Rachal & Bingham, 2004). With over 40% of American GED recipients being teenagers, Rachal & Bingham believe that traditional GED classrooms and the adults served would benefit substantially if as a matter of state policy, students were required to wait until their high school class has graduated before they can enter an adult GED program or take the test. Academic and behavioral problems seen in this more youthful population (Alexander et al., 2001; Smith, 2002) may create challenges for ABE programs. Adult education programs are designed as the title reflects, for older, more mature, self-directed students (Garrison, 1997; Hayes, 2000). Miller (2006) contends that the GED certificate does not provide the same pathways to earnings or post secondary

education as a high school diploma. He stated that the GED is designed for adults who did not earn a high school diploma because they dropped out of school or failed to meet a state's graduation requirements. However, the average age of a GED candidate in the U.S. in 2004 was 25 years old, though 30% of the candidates were 16-18 years of age. Although Miller (2006) stated that the GED certificate was not "equivalent" to the high school diploma, the American Council on Education (ACE) reported that the minimum passing score on the GED test would be attained by only 60% of graduating high school seniors.

Perin, Flugman, & Spiegel (2006) found that youth dropouts (16-20 years old) enrolled in four urban ABE programs in a northeastern state, experienced low retention and GED attainment rates. "Attempts to serve this vulnerable population included segregating classes by age, providing individualized assistance in class, offering computer-based practice, and hiring teachers who had experience with students with special education or correctional backgrounds" (p. 171).

Most community colleges treat the GED credential as equal to the regular high school diploma in assessing eligibility for entry. At the same time, limited options exist for youth dropouts, and while many ultimately may not earn the GED, some are able to increase their literacy and math skills. In the worst case, these students are off the streets during a vulnerable period in their lives and may receive some social services as well as increase their academic skills (Perin et al., 2006). Several reasons for youth attrition in ABE resembled many of those for high school dropout, including immaturity, pregnancy, lack of child care, family problems, lack of motivation, peer pressure, and arrest. Some students left the program after failing the GED exam, others to take jobs (employment) or

attend another program closer to home. Others students stopped attending because they felt as if they had strong skills and were only waiting for a GED test date (Perin et al.).

Adult vs. Teen Learners-Age Difference on GED?

A major difference in adult and child learners is that adults choose to participate in educational programs while children participate because of legal mandates (Cross, 1981). Most school-age children probably do not think seriously about dropping out. However, adults must make an active decision to participate in each class and often have to overcome significant barriers in order to attend classes. Quigley (1997) contends that the first three to six weeks of program participation are the key to persistence. Participants studying for the test in a GED class usually have a limited amount of time to prepare for it. Adult students below the pre-GED level often have very low reading skills and a high incidence of learning disabilities (Reder, 1995). This group of students frequently needs years of study to reach a significant goal such as passing the GED test. In order for adults to continue in the programs for as long as it takes, participating in self-directed study when they must drop out and having the discipline to return to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow takes persistence. Therefore, persistence is an essential part of students' ability to complete the program.

Participants that enroll in a GED program come to classes with a “myriad of differences: academic levels, background experiences, attitudes about education, family responsibilities, work schedules, etc. However, they all have the common goal of passing the GED test (Wright, 1998 p. 3).”

Studies looking at the impact of age on the continuation and completion of GED programs has been inconclusive and often contradictory (Dickinson, 1996). Dickinson reported that many researchers found older students persisting, while others cited younger students as having higher levels of persistence and still other researchers stated that age had no influence on persistence. Comings et al. (2000) found that students over 30 are more likely to have teenage or grown children. Therefore, they may persist longer because they benefit from maturity that comes with age and they no longer have the responsibilities of caring for younger children.

GED in MS Community Colleges and Test Entry Levels

According to a report by Gilbert (2008), more than 400,000 Mississippi adults over the age of 25 have not obtained a high school diploma. However, Mississippi ranked number two in the nation for achieving the largest increase of adults taking the GED exam to gain a high school completion certificate in 2007. Almost 10% of the state's population is educated at Mississippi's community and junior colleges. Only 60% of Mississippi's ninth grade students finish high school. Less than one percent (1%) of the adult population without a high school diploma is engaged in ABE programs. Only one third of high school dropouts are employed or seeking employment. Due to these issues, a Community College Dropout Recovery Initiative has been established. The initiative pilot efforts are to begin during the 2009 school term. The plan of the initiative is to incorporate FastTrack GED courses for adults, part-time ABE/GED recruiters, expand GED testing schedules and add examiners, offer one free college course to GED recipients attending college for the first time, give college scholarships to high scoring

GED achievers, and payment of the \$40 GED testing fee for eligible test takers.

According to the MS Association of Community and Junior Colleges (MACJC), each of their fifteen colleges was awarded \$100,000 to support the aforementioned dropout recovery initiative by the 2008 Legislature (MACJC Brochure, 2008). These MS community colleges propose to recover 25% of the estimated 14,000 high school dropouts yearly. This will also aid in the attempt to bring the MS dropout rate down from 26% to 20%, which is the national average.

Dickinson (1996) found that students with higher TABE test entry levels tended to persist in the program. Consequently, the higher the TABE test entry level, the less class/study time required of these students.

Displaced Homemakers/Public Assistance/Low Income/Single Parent and GED

Behrman & Stacey (1997) stated the average family income has increased by approximately 6% over the past 20 years. However, these gains have been disproportionately benefited by two parent families in which both parents are employed. If all heads of households in Mississippi had graduated from high school, Mississippi would have over \$1 billion more in accumulated wealth (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). A combination of rising divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births has resulted in more than one fourth of all children living in single parent households. Over half of all children in single parent families live in poverty, while only about 20% of those in two-parent families. The high poverty rate is exacerbated by the lack of financial support from absent fathers. Nearly 40% of persons in families headed by females have incomes below the poverty line, compared to only 13% of all persons in families. Large

portions of observed differences between children raised in single parent families vs. two-parent families can be traced back to economic disadvantages associated with low education levels.

Dabney (1996) found that displaced homemakers are among the most economically vulnerable workers. An effective skills training program for these women in Oklahoma is called the Displaced Homemaker/Single Parent (DH/SP) program. The DH/SP program provided training and courses to recently divorced, widowed, or other women who must suddenly return to the workforce in order to support themselves and their families. The minimum age to enter the program is 19 years old. GED preparatory classes were offered during the day so that mothers could attend while their children were in school. Dabney (1996) reported that in approximately nine years (1996-2005), 47% of the workforce would be women, with 80% growth in the labor market for Hispanic and minority women. Without training these women stand to face sex, age, and race discrimination, as well as occupational segregation in low-wage, no-benefit jobs, and hiring practices that undervalue the skills and experience they possess by raising children and managing a household. The majority of welfare (public assistance) recipients are poor women with children. For these single parents who balance multiple roles of parent, worker, and student, a cash incentive may make persistence in an adult education or GED program more attainable from their perspective. Cash incentives have been offered to GED students that were welfare (public assistance) recipients to encourage them to complete the program. Tennessee's welfare reform administered by the Department of Human Services, Families First, implemented the "Completion Bonus" in March 2000. Those welfare recipients were adults who received welfare (public assistance) and

selected ABE classes as a pre-employment activity, and were required to attend classes for 20 hours per week. The cash incentive provided additional motivation for the Families First (welfare recipients) participants to persist, despite obstacles they encountered. Although there was no reduction in the amount of time to make progress for the preincentive and postincentive groups, there was a significant increase in the number of postincentive welfare recipients who made progress (Ziegler et al., 2004). Also, rural participants reported that the cash incentive motivated them to persist, while urban participants indicated that it was not important. Urban participants stated that internal motivation of receiving a credential needed for employment was more important than external rewards. Therefore, extrinsic rewards can have some positive effects on motivation (Cameron & Pierce, 1994).

Learning Disability and the GED

Adults with physical, mental, or any other disability tend to have lower rates of high school completion compared to adults without disabilities (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993).

It has been estimated that nearly 50% of ABE students have a learning disability (LD) (Perin, 2003). Although the association of LD with low skill levels is clear, less evidence is available to connect LD with educational achievement in adult education programs (Mellard, 2003). Researchers can not come to a consensus on the impact of learning disabilities on achievement in adult education programs (Moore & Stavrianos, 1995). The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) reported a disability (learning, mental and/or physical) incidence of 30% for the adult population (Kutner,

Greenberg, & Baer, 2006). LD tends to persist throughout childhood and into adulthood (Fletcher, 2003; Mellard, 2003), even following interventions to remediate skill deficits (Fowler & Scarborough, 1993). Though, recent evidence suggests that LD manifestations may shift as an individual develops (Gerber, 1998) and focused interventions may fill in specific skill gaps, hence allowing adults to achieve normally in the targeted areas (Mellard, 2003). Another pertinent characteristic of adult learners with LD may be age. Gerber (1998) noted that adults with LD differed according to the phase of adulthood (i.e., early, middle, or late) they experienced. He also found that abilities of adults with LD may decline as they age. The largest percentage of adults with LD in a multinational study tended to be young or middle-aged (under 46 years), likely due to educators making more of an effort in recent years to identify individuals with LD (Vogel & Holt, 2003). The study also found that the percentage of self-reported LD was higher among adults who were 16 to 25 years old vs. adults 26-65 year olds. This finding suggests that comparison of adult learner age with LD incidence could contribute valuable information on adult education program characteristics.

Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have lead to students with all recognized disabilities in many states being offered alternatives to a high school diploma based on the severity of their respective disability. Lord (1994) argued that retaining students in adult education programs would depend on how instructional staff managed LD-related needs. Special training of staff would be required to effectively meet those needs. Lord (1994) also believed that the retention of adults with LD hinged on the accessibility of outside resources. Adult education programs many times cannot afford to

effectively provide intervention services (Fletcher, 2003; Polson & White, 2001) and need resources to offer specialized interventions needed to efficiently teach adults with a disability (Corley, 1995).

Persistence and the GED

Link (2006) reviewed a number of previous studies and found some common themes about adult student retention and persistence in adult education. The common themes were: importance of support provided by families, friends, teachers, and other students; importance of adult learners establishing a specific goal; and importance of self-esteem and self-confidence. Link also found that caring instructors, meaningful direct instruction, integrating computer technology, smaller class sizes, and some higher-intensity services appear to be vitally important factors contributing to student persistence and retention. These result in greater achievement and completion of student goals. Link (2003) reported that student connection with peers and staff may be just as important as having specific goals and making progress toward those goals. An important staff development activity that could result in increased persistence and higher education is training adult education instructors in building community. Teamwork and relationship building appear to be critically important factors that contribute to student retention, persistence, and success. Referrals by instructors to support services such as a job center, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, medical and vision services, day care center, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, victim services, county assistance office, and job training, can assist students in diminishing or removing barriers to success in the ABE program (Jones, 1998). The presence of support is one psychological factor linked to persistence in GED

programs. According to Comings et al. (1999), persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until the adult student reaches his or her educational goal (amount of effort). For the purpose of this research, persistence was measured by completion of adult education classes and obtaining the GED. According to DuBois (1989), family support, as well as supportive instructors, plays a large part in students' persistence and retention in adult education GED programs. Instructors can be instrumental in helping students realize they are progressing, which can be a psychological factor as well. Dr. Bandura, world renowned psychologist from Stanford University, found that people's motivation to increase productivity on a task only improves when they have a challenging goal and receive feedback on their progress (Kouzes & Posner 2003). Thus, the establishment of the need for exploration of factors that may affect persistence is vital. Ziegler & Durant (2001) referred to engagement as a significant influence on persistence. Factors they found to affect engagement were beliefs about teaching and learning (i.e. teachers' belief in adults' ability to learn and adult's belief that participation in the ABE program has beneficial outcomes; and relationships (i.e. interactions between teachers and participants that exhibit mutual respect and acceptance with opportunities for learners to form social and support relationships with one another. Kerka's (2005) research indicated that ABE programs that adopt a learner-centered perspective can engage adult learners in understanding and managing the positive and negative forces that can both, help and hinder learning, as well as, design program structures that support persistence. Comings et al. (2000) identified two aspects of educational experience related to persistence: (a) adult participants with previous basic skills education, self-study, or vocational skills were more likely to persist, and (b) adults that established a goal of assisting their

children or getting a better job upon entering the program. These findings suggest that previous educational experience may increase self-confidence about learning. The relationships suggest that motivation demonstrated by undertaking self-study, or by being clear about the attendance goal, supports persistence.

Comings et al. (2000) have extensively researched persistence and adult learning. In an effort to gain insight into supports and barriers to persistence, a study was conducted of 150 pre-GED students in New England. The participants were interviewed upon arrival in the program and four months later. The study defined persistence as staying in the program for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop out and returning to the program as soon as the demands of their lives allow. Persistent participants were those that upon the second interview, were still in class, or were no longer in class, but were involved in organized self-study, or transferred to another class. Four supports to persistence were identified by the study. The first support indicated was awareness and management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence. Positive forces, such as desire for higher income was noted to support persistence in an adult education program. Negative forces, such as little free time to study, lead adults to drop out of the program. Both positive and negative forces are affecting adult learners from the time they enter the programs until the time they either achieve their goals or dropout. Therefore, any intervention by an ABE program determined to increase persistence must assist adult learners in strengthening the positive forces and reducing the negative forces. The second support to persistence noted was self-efficacy about reaching their goals. ABE programs should provide mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion, and address physiological and

emotional states of adult learners. Mastery experiences allow participants to be successful in learning and have evidence of that success. Vicarious experiences are provided by social models, adults like them that have succeeded in the programs. Social persuasion is support given by staff, teachers, counselors, family, fellow participants, and friends that reinforce self-efficacy. Acknowledgement that negative feelings, such as addressing physiological (i.e. tension, stress, etc) and emotional states, can result from poor self-efficacy and lead to low self-efficacy. Adult learners should be helped to perceive and interpret these states so that they do not affect their self-efficacy. The third support to persistence is the setting of a goal. ABE program staff must assist the adult learner in defining their goal(s) and understand that many instructional objectives must be met in order to meet the goal(s). Teachers use the goal(s) as the context for instruction and periodically review them, as they may change. The fourth support to persistence is actual progress toward reaching a goal.

Adult learners must make progress toward reaching their goal(s) and be able to measure that progress. ABE programs must provide quality services so students make progress and have assessment procedures that allow students to measure their own progress. Most current measures are for program accountability purposes which are not appropriate for student monitoring. Aspects of all four of these supports are present in some programs, but a combination of the four supports may provide a more supportive environment for persistence (Comings et al., 2000).

More information is needed in order to effectively address issues that adversely affect students enrolled in GED programs at rural community colleges. Persistence can be an important factor in a student's success in the program. Factors

identified were examined in an effort to assist in the retention of future participants in the GED program as well. The findings of this study can be utilized to address the issues identified by the data as problems or factors that negatively affect the three groups (GED completion, GED continuation, and GED dropout). Identifying factors that contribute to GED participants dropping out, remaining in the program, and persisting to completion can be helpful in assisting current GED participants to persist and may also be used to help future GED participants.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the level of persistence in high school dropouts enrolled in the GED program at a rural community college. Exploration of the GED program's participant data base assisted in finding common factors that both facilitate and impede participant success. The data consisted of demographic information that can be used to aid in the prediction of success in the program. Most of the data was dichotomous such as: gender (M/F), low income (Y[Yes]/N[No]), displaced homemaker (Y/N), learning disabled (Y/N), public assistance (Y/N), single parent (Y/N), rural (Y/N), and physical/learning/or mental disability (Y/N). While the rest of the data was either numeric or descriptive in nature: age (16 years old and above), entry/exit levels (SL [Skill Level]1-grade equivalent of 0-1.9 [referred to literacy classes], SL2-grade equivalent of 2.0-3.9, SL3-grade equivalent of 4.0-5.9, SL4-grade equivalent of 6.0-8.9 , SL5-grade equivalent of 9.0-10.9 and SL6-grade equivalent of 11.0-12.9), race (American Indian or Native Alaskan-AI, Asian-A, Black/African American-B, Hispanic-H, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander-O, and White/Caucasian-W) and employment status (Employed, Unemployed, or Not in Labor Force). The results indicated impediments to success that will be shared so that interventions may be put in place in an effort to be more proactive in assisting future GED participants.

Persistence can be an important factor in a student's success in the GED program. Persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until the adult student reaches his or her educational goal (amount of effort). For the purpose of this research, persistence is measured by completion of adult education classes and obtaining the GED. Although time in class may not be important for each individual student, it is more likely a measure of persistence for comparison between populations of GED students, which would make it useful for research that supports and/or hinders persistence (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999).

This chapter discusses five major areas: (1) research design, (2) subjects, (3) instrumentation, (4) procedure, and (5) data analysis.

Research Design

A discriminant function analysis, which is a procedure for optimal classification of individuals into groups or classes on the basis of a number of discriminating variables on which each of the individuals has been measured, was performed (Colman, 2001). This is achieved by weighting the variables and combining them into discriminant functions that separate the groups maximally. The discriminating variables are considered as predictor variables and the group membership variables are considered as dummy criterion variables. Also, a quantitative, non-experimental, design was utilized to show the direction and magnitude of the relationships between independent variables. The essential features of the design are the ability to find associations, relate variables, and make predictions. According to Creswell (2005), correlational designs, via use of correlational statistics: intend to measure or predict the relationship between two or more

variables, study one group of individuals (instead of two or more as in an experiment), and are utilized when it is possible or desirable to provide an intervention. There was not an active independent variable in this study. Several independent variables were combined to see how well they predict the dependent variable. The independent variables were demographics such as: age, race, gender, low income, learning disability, physical/learning/or mental disability, displaced homemaker, public assistance, rural, single parent, employment status, single parent, rural, public assistance, and entry/exit levels). The dependent variable is completion of the GED program (participant obtains GED). The relationship between variables was very important.

Population

The subjects for this study consisted of all participants in the GED program during the 2007-2008 enrollment term (July 2007-June 2008). The population comprised of 976 students that ranged in age from 16 to 60. There were 601 White, 355 Black, 11 Asian, and 9 Hispanic participants, of which, 551 were female and 425 were male. The subjects had all dropped out of high school and enrolled in the GED program at Pearl River Community College (PRCC). However, the subjects were from various communities throughout Southern Mississippi. PRCC provides services to six counties: Jefferson Davis, Marion, Lamar, Forrest, Pearl River and Hancock. Participation in the GED program is voluntary for the majority of subjects. However, two exceptions were noted but not identifiable: (a) some students that received public assistance were required to attend a set number of hours of classes; (b) some students were encouraged to attend by their probation officers in an effort to shorten their sentences.



Source: Pearl River Community College Website, 2009

Figure 2. County Map

Instrumentation

Data was collected at Pearl River Community College, Hattiesburg Campus via student files/records. The PRCC Hattiesburg Campus maintains records for the entire multi-campus PRCC GED program. This data consisted of age, race or ethnicity, gender, learning disability, physical/learning/or mental disability, displaced homemaker, low income, employment status, public assistance, rural, single parent, entry/exit levels, and goal obtained (completion of GED). These variables were listed previously in the definition of terms section. For the purpose of this study, most of the variables were utilized in a dichotomous manner in which they either belong to the respective category or not (yes or no). The remaining variables were either numeric or descriptive.

The intake paperwork (demographic sheet-Appendix D) is completed by the students upon their enrollment in the program. Participants are given a locator test after completion of their intake demographic files to determine current level of functioning. Results of the locator tests are utilized to warrant further testing in weak subject areas, develop study schedules to be completed in those areas, and post-testing to determine mastery of the areas. Upon completion of locator tests and/or study schedules, if needed, participants are required to take and pass the practice GED (PGED) test. After all five areas of the PGED are passed, participants may register to take the GED test. Administration of the GED at PRCC (Hattiesburg) is usually offered monthly. Class work (completion of assigned curriculum per entry testing) and tests are kept in each participant's work folder and subsequently maintained by GED instructors and office personnel.

Procedures

This study utilized archived data, so there was no direct contact with subjects. The data did not list any names. Confidentiality of the subjects' data was maintained by entering data in random order. The data was provided by the GED staff via charts and spreadsheets of student files and records (i.e. demographic sheet information, entry tests-locator test or TABE test, pre-GED testing, exit tests-GED, etc.) as outlined in the instrumentation section above.

Data Collection

The researcher contacted the President of the community college to receive permission to conduct research at his community college (Appendix B). Upon receipt of

permission from the President of the institution (Appendix C), the researcher sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Mississippi State University. Once IRB approval was granted (see Appendix A), the researcher contacted the Director of the GED program at the community college to inform him of the study, its procedure, and of the permission granted by the President to conduct the study. Once contact was made, the researcher arranged dates and times with the Director and/or his staff to come to the campus to collect the data from their database. His staff provided print outs of the data they maintained (Appendix E) on their students throughout the 2007-2008 school term.

The researcher asked that no names be associated with any of the data provided on the printouts, to ensure anonymity. There were 979 students enrolled in the GED program during the 2007-2008 term, but there was incomplete data for 3 of the 979 students. Therefore, data for 976 students was utilized.

Data Analysis

Variables (correlation of GED and composite variables) were entered in a discriminate function via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.0. All data was analyzed at the .05 Alpha level. Prediction of GED persistence and/or success was discovered because the variables were discriminated into groups with some confidence (i.e. GED completion, GED continuation, and GED dropout). The dependent variable was the completion of the GED program (participant obtains GED). There was not an active independent variable in this study. Several independent variables were combined to see how well they predicted the dependent variable. The independent variables were demographics such as: age, race, gender, low income, learning disability,

physical/learning/or mental disability, displaced homemaker, public assistance, rural, single parent, employment status, single parent, rural, public assistance, and entry/exit levels). The relationship between variables was very important.

The following research questions and hypotheses were used as the conceptual framework for this study:

- 1) What factors/demographics predict participant completion of the GED program (i.e. age, race, gender, physical/learning/or mental disability, learning disability, employment, low income, displaced homemaker, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels)?
- 2) What factors will the participants who did not complete the GED program but continued have in common?
- 3) What factors will the participants who dropped out of the GED program have in common?

The variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels will significantly discriminate the groups of (1) GED completion, (2) GED continuation, and (3) GED dropouts.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Analyses of the data in the study offer some issues that were very much expected, as well as some that were somewhat unexpected. Table 1 below illustrates that the continuous group was comprised of over 78% of the white participants in the study. White and black participants fell within the completed group fairly equally. Slightly more white participants dropped out of the GED program than any other group. None of the 11 Asian participants dropped out, while an astonishing 9 completed. In contrast, only 1 out of the 9 Hispanic participants completed the GED program and over half dropped out.

Table 1
Enrollment Group by Race

Race	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
Asian	9	3.3	2	0.7	0.0	0.0	11	1.1
Black	130	47.4	58	19.8	167	4.8	355	36.4
Hispanic	1	0.4	3	1.0	5	1.2	9	0.9
White	134	48.9	230	78.5	237	57.9	601	61.6
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

Note: f = frequency, P = Percentage

When exploring the role of gender in GED completion, the study found that more males tended to complete the program, while more females dropped out of the program. Also, the females continued in the GED program at a higher rate than the males. This information is displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Enrollment Group by Gender

Gender	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	F	P
Female	116	42.3	170	58.0	265	64.8	551	56.5
Male	158	57.7	123	42.0	144	35.2	425	43.5
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

Employment status had a small effect on GED completion. The participants that were not employed finished at 56.4%, while the participants that were employed finished at 43.6%. Therefore, the participants without jobs completed the program at a slightly higher rate than participants with jobs. The details of this information are displayed within Table 3 below.

Table 3
Enrollment Group by Employment

Employment	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	f	P	f	P	f	P
No	154	56.4	185	63.1	262	64.1	601	61.6
Yes	119	43.6	108	36.9	147	35.9	374	38.4
Total	273	100	293	100	409	100	975	100

The 422 unemployed participants completed, continued, and dropped at virtually equal rates. Therefore, it had no effect on completion in the study. See Table 4 for this information.

Table 4

Enrollment Group by Unemployment

Unemployment	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
No	163	59.5	151	51.5	240	58.7	554	56.8
Yes	111	40.5	142	48.5	169	41.3	422	43.2
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

The 143 participants not in the labor force dropped out of the GED program at a slightly higher rate, but they completed and continued at somewhat equal rates.

Consequently, not being in the labor force had little to no effect on completion in the study. See Table 5 for more details.

Table 5

Enrollment Group by NILF - Not In Labor Force

NILF	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
No	238	86.9	257	88.0	337	82.4	832	85.3
Yes	36	13.1	35	12.0	72	17.6	143	14.7
Total	274	100	292	100	409	100	975	100

The 143 participants receiving public assistance dropped out of the GED program more than they completed or continued. They were represented the least in the continuous group. However, public assistance did not have a significant impact on the rate of completion of the GED program. Further information pertaining to the public assistance participants can be found in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Enrollment Group by PA - Public Assistance

PA	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	f	P	f	P	f	P
No	237	86.5	265	90.4	331	80.9	833	85.3
Yes	37	13.5	28	9.6	78	19.1	143	14.7
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

Participants (56) within the physical/learning/mental disability group dropped (36) out of the GED program overwhelmingly more than they completed (9) or continued (11) in the program. Table 7 illustrates more specific data for the physical/learning/mental disability group.

Table 7

Enrollment Group by PLMD - Physical/Learning/Mental Disability

PLM	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	f	P	f	P	f	P
No	265	96.7	282	96.2	373	91.2	920	94.3
Yes	9	3.3	11	3.8	36	8.8	56	5.7
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

Table 8 consists of the data for the rural group. Only 190 out of 976 participants considered themselves as having come from a rural area. This aspect of the data is somewhat surprising because the areas served by the participants' community college are all viewed as rural areas.

Table 8
Enrollment Group by Rural

Rural	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	F	P	f	P	f	P	f	P
No	195	71.2	248	84.6	343	83.9	786	80.5
Yes	79	28.8	45	15.4	66	16.1	190	19.5
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

Low income group participants tended to continue in the GED program at a slightly higher rate than they completed or dropped the program. The completed and dropped rates were essentially the same. For more information on the low income participant data, see Table 9.

Table 9

Enrollment Group by Low Income

Low Income	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	F	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
No	179	65.3	169	57.9	276	67.5	624	64.0
Yes	95	34.7	123	42.1	133	32.5	351	36.0
Total	274	100	292	100	409	100	975	100

Another interesting aspect of the data pertaining to the single parent group is the fact that it did not negatively affect the GED program completion rate. The single parent group participants completed, continued, and dropped at comparable rates. The specific data for the single parent group can be found below in Table 10.

Table 10

Enrollment Group by Single Parent

Single Parent	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	F	P	F	P	F	P	f	P
No	233	85.0	240	81.9	335	81.9	808	82.8
Yes	41	15.0	53	18.1	74	18.1	168	17.2
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

The fact that more participants with a learning disability dropped out of the GED program was expected to some degree. They also, continued in the program a bit more than they completed the program. Further information concerning participants with a learning disability is listed in Table 11.

Table 11

Enrollment Group by Learning Disability

Learning Disability	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
No	270	98.5	284	96.9	383	93.6	937	96.0
Yes	4	1.5	9	3.1	26	6.4	39	4.0
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

The displaced homemaker participant group was very small. Of the 11 participants, only 1 completed the GED program. However, membership within this group did not affect GED completion. Results in Table 12 show that group participants continued and dropped at equal rates.

Table 12

Enrollment Group by Displaced Homemaker

Displaced Homemaker	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
No	273	99.6	288	98.3	404	98.8	965	98.9
Yes	1	0.4	5	1.7	5	1.2	11	1.1
Total	274	100	293	100	409	100	976	100

The entry level of GED participants appeared to affect program completion the most. Participants that entered the program on the upper three levels (4, 5, & 6) completed the program at the highest rates. The three levels combined account for over 86% of the participants that completed. Levels 2, 3, and 4 consist of over 85% of the continuous participants in the program. Levels 2, 3, and 4 also consist of almost 85% of the dropped participants as well. More information about all entry levels is illustrated in Table 13 below.

Table 13

Enrollment Group by Entry Level

Entry Level	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
1-Grade level 0-1.9	0	0.0	5	1.7	3	0.7	8	0.8
2-Grade level 2-3.9	10	3.7	59	20.1	42	10.3	111	11.4
3-Grade level 4-5.9	27	10.0	106	36.2	146	35.9	279	28.8
4-Grade level 6-8.9	140	51.9	85	29.0	157	38.6	382	39.4
5-Grade level 9-10.9	61	22.6	31	10.6	27	6.6	119	12.3
6-Grade level 11-12.9	32	11.9	7	2.4	32	7.9	71	7.3
Total	270	100	293	100	407	100	970	100

GED participants within the 18-29 year old age range constituted for over 75% of the completed and 72% of the dropped groups. Younger participants (ages 18-24) continued in the program at more than a 77% rate. Therefore, older students tended to both complete and drop at higher rates than younger participants. Consequently, age played a significant role in completion of the GED program. More details relating to age are located in Table 14 and Table 15 below.

Table 14

Enrollment Group by Age

Age	Completed		Continuous		Dropped		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
16-17	18	6.6	22	7.5	6	1.5	46	4.7
18-20	73	26.6	138	47.1	168	41.2	379	38.9
21-24	69	25.2	90	30.7	50	12.3	209	21.4
25-29	64	23.4	3	1.0	77	18.9	144	14.8
30-39	41	15.0	21	7.2	77	18.9	139	14.8
40-49	6	2.2	13	4.4	23	5.6	42	4.3
50 & up	3	1.1	6	2.0	7	1.7	16	1.6
Total	274	100	293	100	408	100	975	100

Table 15

Descriptives By Age

Age	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation
Completed	274	24.65	6.818
Continuous	293	22.71	8.675
Dropped	408	25.74	8.514
Total	975	24.53	8.216

The answer to the following hypothesis was sought:

The variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels will significantly discriminate the groups of (1) GED completion, (2) GED continuation, and (3) GED dropouts.

According to Garson (2008), if the discriminant function analysis is effective for a set of data, the classification table of correct and incorrect estimates will yield a high percentage correct. He also stated that discriminant function analysis is effective in assessing the relative importance of the independent variables in classifying the dependent variable, testing theories by observing whether cases are classified as predicted, and in investigating differences between or among groups.

Discriminant analysis follows two steps: (1) an F test (Wilks' Lambda) is used to test if the discriminant model as a whole is significant, and (2) if the F test shows significance, then the individual independent variables are assessed to see which differ significantly in mean by group and these are used to classify the dependent variable.

The data from the 976 participants indicated that the two functions were to discriminate GED completed vs. drop-outs and drop-outs vs. continuers. Both were found to be significant.

Research Question One: The factors/demographics that predicted participant completion of the GED program were as follows: entry level, age (older), gender (males), race (white), and rural. Research Question Two: The factor the participants who did not complete the GED program but continued had in common was low income. Research Question Three: The factors the participants who dropped out of the GED program had in

common were gender (females), public assistance, learning disability, and physical/learning/mental disability.

Table 15 illustrates two functions found in the study. Both were significant because each was less than the .05 significance level.

Table 16

Discriminant Function-Wilks' Lambda

		Wilks' Lambda	Chi Square	Df	Sig.
Test of	1 through 2	.698	344.571	26	< .001
Function(s)	2	.928	71.811	12	< .001

Note: $\chi^2(26) = 344.51, p < .001$

$\chi^2(12) = 71.81, p < .001$

The structure matrix displayed in Table 16, shows that entry level, race (white and black), gender, age physical/learning/mental disability, and learning disability were significant in prediction of the GED participants into the completed, continuous, and dropped groups.

Table 17
Structure Matrix

	Function 1	Function 2
Entry Level	.611*	-.222
White	-.417*	-.252
Black	.391*	.306
Displaced Homemaker	-.085	.021
Gender	-.216	.493*
Age	.143	.459*
Physical/Learning/Mental	-.019	.404*
Learning Disability	-.050	.388*
Public Assistance	.071	.378
Low Income	-.103	-.236*
Rural	.226	-.231*
Other ¹	.096	-.173
Employ	.099	-.142
Single Parent	-.053	.055*

Note: Variables ordered by absolute size of correlation within function.

*Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function

The accurate prediction of group membership for the participants in the GED program occurred at a 59.5% rate. This rate is significantly higher than the chance probability rate of 33.3%. The continuous and completed were predicted more accurately than the dropped. See Table 17.

Table 18

Classification Results Predicted Group Membership

Original	Completed		Dropped		Continuous		Total	
	f	P	F	P	f	P	f	P
Completed	183	67.8	43	15.9	44	16.3	270	100
Continuous	39	13.4	207	70.9	46	15.8	292	100
Dropped	93	22.9	127	31.3	186	45.8	406	100
Total	315	100	377	100	276	100	968	100

Note: 59.5% of original grouped cases correctly classified

Summary of Research Questions

The hypothesis proved true that the variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels significantly discriminated into the following groups at a 59.5% rate of accuracy: (1) GED completion, (2) GED continuation, and (3) GED dropouts. The research questions established variables the participants who dropped out of the GED program had in common were gender (females), public assistance, learning disability, and physical/learning/mental disability. Also, the variable the participants who did not complete the GED program but continued had in common was low income. Armed with this information, GED programs can look at students' pre-tests and/or entry levels and predict success in the program. This could assist in increasing the probability that a student will pass the GED by intervening early

with those students identified as possessing the variables that tend to drop out of the program. Intervention with the students that continued in the program but had not completed could also be beneficial. Inquisition into what those students need in order to complete the program could greatly increase their chances of completion as well.

There are other variables, such as, intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, (i.e. drive, self-fulfillment, job acquisition or requirement, better wages, ability to assist children with schoolwork, etc.) not accounted for in this study that greatly impact students' success in the GED program. Investigation of such variables or factors could also be advantageous to GED program development and success.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This chapter presents the conclusions, implications and recommendations for future studies. The analyses in Chapter 4 used the research questions and hypothesis as the conceptual framework. The statistical procedures employed in the study used descriptive statistics and discriminant function analysis. This chapter relates the purpose and the significance of this study to the conclusions, implications and recommendations. The research questions and hypothesis which have guided this study also served as a framework for the discussion in this chapter.

The purpose of this study was to determine the level of persistence in high school dropouts enrolled in the GED program at a rural community college. Exploration of the GED program's participant data base assisted in finding common factors that both facilitate and impede participant success. The data consisted of demographic information that can be used to aid in the prediction of success in the program. Specifically, this study was concerned with the following factors/demographics: age, race, gender, rural, low income, physical/learning/or mental disability, learning disability, employment, displaced homemaker, public assistance, single parent, and entry/exit levels as they predict participant completion of the GED program and/or persistence level.

The analysis of archived data was supplied by the community college's GED program. There were 979 students enrolled in the GED program during the 2007-2008 term, but there was incomplete data for 3 of the 979 students. Therefore, data for 976 students was utilized.

Moreover, the data was analyzed via the utilization of the Discriminant Function Analysis. Entry level was also analyzed via descriptive statistics. The following research questions and hypothesis were tested at the .05 significance level or better in this analysis:

1. What factors/demographics predict participant completion of the GED program (i.e. age, race, gender, physical/learning/or mental disability, learning disability, employment, low income, displaced homemaker, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels)?
2. What factors will the participants who did not complete the GED program but continued have in common?
3. What factors will the participants who dropped out of the GED program have in common?

Hypothesis: The variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels will significantly discriminate the groups of (1) GED completion, (2) GED continuation, and (3) GED dropouts.

Findings

Based on the results of this study, the following findings were observed:

1. The population consisted of 976 students that ranged in age from 16 to 60.

There were 601 White, 355 Black, 11 Asian, and 9 Hispanic participants, of which, 551 were female and 425 were male. In relation to employment status, 374 were employed, 422 unemployed and 143 not in the labor force.

Participants that reported receiving public assistance was 143. While 351 participants reported being in the low income bracket. Only 190 participants indicated coming from rural areas. The participants that indicated having a physical/learning/mental disability was 56. However, there were 39 learning disability participants. There were 168 single parent participants, as well as, 11 displaced homemakers. The entry/exit levels were available for 971 participants and were as follows: Literacy level was 1; Grade equivalent (GE) 0-1.9 was 8; GE 2.0-3.9 was 111; GE 4.0-5.9 was 279; GE 6.0-8.9 was 382; GE 9.0-10.9 was 119; GE 11.0-12.9 was 71. The factors/demographics that predicted participant completion of the GED program were as follows: entry level, age (older), gender (males), race (white), and rural.

2. The factor the participants who did not complete the GED program but continued had in common was low income.
3. The factors the participants who dropped out of the GED program had in common were gender (females), public assistance, learning disability, and physical/learning/mental disability.

4. Hypothesis: The hypothesis proved true that the variables of age, race, gender, employment, public assistance, rural, single parent, and entry/exit levels significantly discriminated into the following groups at a 59.5% rate of accuracy: (1) GED completion, (2) GED continuation, and (3) GED dropouts.

Conclusions

There were a number of interesting findings in this study. Age, race, gender, entry level, and rural had a significant impact on persistence/GED completion.

The data on the variable of age revealed that older participants were more apt to persist and complete the GED program. Almost 50% of those that completed were ages 21-29. Younger participants, ages 16-20 completed at a little over 30%. However, younger participants tended to continue in the program at higher rates (55%). These findings were consistent with those of Comings et al. (2000) and Perin et al. (2006). Perin et al. found that youth dropouts (16-20 years old) enrolled in four urban ABE programs in a northeastern state, experienced low retention and GED attainment rates. Comings, et al. found that students over 30 are more likely to have teenage or grown children. Therefore, they may persist longer because they benefit from maturity that comes with age and they no longer have the responsibilities of caring for younger children.

Race has long been studied in all types of testing situations. The data on the race variable in this study illustrated that white (48.9%) and black (47.4%) participants completed at higher rates respectively. White participants continued in the program at an astounding 78.5%. Black participants dropped at a slightly lower (40.8%) rate than they

completed (47.4%) in the program. This is commensurate with the research of Swanson (2005). He found that the approximately 60.7% of MS high school students graduate. These graduates were comprised of 50% of American Indian, 65.1% Asian, 32.4% Hispanic, 55.9% Black and 65.4% White.

Another significant finding of the current study was the impact of gender on completion of the GED program. Males (57.7%) completed the program at a higher rate than females (42.3%) despite males being 43.5% on the GED program population and females being 56.6%. Females both dropped (64.8%) and continued (58%) the program at higher rates than males dropped (35.2%) or continued (42%), Swanson (2005) however, found that females graduated from high school at higher rates than males. He found overall 54.1% male and 67.8 % female students graduated from high school. With respect to race and gender, only White and Black students were reported as follows 46.6% were Black females, 64.2% Black males, 70.2% White females, and 60.5% White males.

Entry level was another noteworthy finding of the present study. As most would expect, participants with higher entry levels completed the program at higher rates. Specifically, the three highest levels (4, 5, and 6) consisted of more than 85% of the participants that completed the program. Lower entry level (2, 3, and 4) participants dropped (84.8%) and continued (85.3%) at higher rates. These findings correspond with those of Dickinson (1996). Dickinson found that students with higher TABE test entry levels tended to persist in the GED program. Consequently, the higher the TABE test entry level, the less class/study time required of these students before take and pass the GED test.

The last significant finding pertaining to persistence or GED completion in this study was that of rural. While only approximately 20% of all GED participants in the current study considered themselves as having come from rural areas, the majority completed (28.8%) the program. Rural participants continued and dropped at almost equal rates 15.4% and 16.1% respectively. The fact that only 20% considered themselves as coming from rural areas was surprising. The community college that serves this population is considered rural. These findings are comparable to the research of the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (USDA ERS, 2003). The USDA ERS ascertain that rural Americans have more years of education than ever before. The rise in rural achievement continues a long upward trend, reflecting access to comprehensive public education.

Other noted findings of data on variables physical/learning/mental disability (8.8%) and learning disability (6.4%) was they dropped out of the GED program at higher rates than they continued (plm-3.8%; ld-3.1%) or completed (plm-3.3%, ld-1.5%). The findings of this study were similar to research by Kirsch et al. (1993). Kirsch et al. found that adults with any type of disability, difficulty or illness were more likely to perform in the lowest literacy levels on the National Adult Literacy Study (NALS) assessments. Perin (2003) reported that a challenge for GED programs was the high drop out rate of participants at the lower instructional levels.

Low income participants tended to continue (42.1%) in the program at higher rates than they completed (34.7%) or dropped (32.5%). Coming et al. (2000) found that positive forces, such as desire for higher income were noted to support persistence in an adult education program. Positive and negative forces affect adult learners from the time

they enter the programs until the time they either achieve their goals or dropout.

Therefore, any intervention by an ABE program determined to increase persistence must assist adult learners in strengthening the positive forces and reducing the negative forces.

Implications

The findings of this study provided several implications for Adult Education and GED programs:

1. Adult Education programs should find out the number of jobs and/or hours per week each student works. Therefore, determinations can be made about student needs for additional work to take home due to their work schedules not allowing adequate class time. Also, provision of job information (i.e. Workforce Development, Vocational Rehabilitation, etc.) to unemployed students excelling in the program could be utilized as an incentive to continue and complete.
2. The availability of and/or access to childcare needs to be established during the intake session. If warranted, child care services can be sought jointly by the student and Adult Education program in an effort to retain those students with children. The GED program may utilize community agencies as resources.
3. Conducting adequate follow-up, such as an exit interview, with students that complete, continue, and drop out of the GED program would provide invaluable information for program improvement.
4. The development of a support group for students and their families can assist both in better understanding the adult education process and student needs. Students learn that they are not alone in the adult education process, while family

members can gain knowledge of the issues faced by their loved ones. Thus, providing the students with the support needed to immensely improve their chances of completing the GED program. This may be especially helpful in increasing completion rates of single parents, displaced homemakers, students on public assistance, low income, and students with disabilities.

5. A limitation of the study is the inability to control for or manipulate the variables of age, race, and gender. However, entry level can be manipulated.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following are suggestions for further research:

1. Entry level was the best predictor of GED completion in this study. Therefore, GED program staff's reassessment of specific aspects of their program can be expedited by making comparisons of entry and exit levels of individual subjects (i.e. reading, math, and language) for students.
2. The amount of time spent studying outside of class is not known, but should be examined in an effort to improve student success and completion. Have students keep a log of study time spent outside of the GED class.
3. A study conducting adequate follow-up, such as an exit interview or questionnaire, with students that complete, continue, and drop out of the GED program each term would provide invaluable information for program enhancement. Analysis of this information would offer researchers more insight into the GED program and student strengths and weaknesses.

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APPENDIX A
IRB CERTIFICATION LETTER



Mississippi State UNIVERSITY

Office of Regulatory Compliance

Post Office Box 6223
Mississippi State, MS 39762

Compliance Division
Administrative Offices
Animal Care and Use (IACUC)
Human Research Protection
Program (IRB)
1207 Hwy 182 West
Starkville, MS 39759
(662) 325-3496 - fax

Safety Division
Biosafety (IBC)
Radiation Safety
Hazardous Waste
Chemical & Lab Safety
70 Morgan Avenue
Mississippi State, MS 39762
(662) 325-8776 - fax

<http://www.orc.msstate.edu>
compliance@research.msstate.edu
(662) 325-3294

November 17, 2008

Sonja McCaskill-Mitchell
180 Westbrook Estates Drive
Sumrall, MS 39482

RE: IRB Study #08-288: The Level of Persistence of High School Drop-outs
Enrolled in the GED Program at a Rural Community College

Dear Ms. McCaskill-Mitchell:

The above referenced project was reviewed and approved via administrative review on 11/17/2008 in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4). Continuing review is not necessary for this project. However, any modification to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Any failure to adhere to the approved protocol could result in suspension or termination of your project. The IRB reserves the right, at anytime during the project period, to observe you and the additional researchers on this project.

Please note that the MSU IRB is in the process of seeking accreditation for our human subjects protection program. As a result of these efforts, you will likely notice many changes in the IRB's policies and procedures in the coming months. These changes will be posted online at <http://www.orc.msstate.edu/human/aahrpp.php>.

Please refer to your IRB number (#08-288) when contacting our office regarding this application.

Thank you for your cooperation and good luck to you in conducting this research project. If you have questions or concerns, please contact me at cwilliams@research.msstate.edu or call 662-325-5220.

Sincerely,

Christine Williams
IRB Compliance Administrator

cc: James Ed Davis

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE

180 Westbrook Estates Dr.
Sumrall, MS 39482
October 20, 2008

Pearl River Community College
101 Highway 11 North
Poplarville, MS 39470

Dear Dr. Lewis:

I hope all is well with you. This is Sonja McCaskill-Mitchell (part-time faculty) once again. Dr. Lewis, I am truly grateful for all the assistance you have given me throughout my studies at MSU in pursuit of my doctorate degree. Fortunately, I am finally at the dissertation stage, but I am in need of your assistance one more time.

Dr. Lewis, I previously conducted a study of the GED participants on the Hattiesburg campus in 2004 for requirements for my Education Specialists degree. With your permission, I would like to do another study using the data (only) again from the GED program at the Hattiesburg campus. The title of the study would be "The Level of Persistence in High School Drop-outs Enrolled in the GED Program at a Rural Community College." This subject has been of interest to me since working in PRCC Adult Education Program from June 2002 to July 2005, before becoming an adjunct Psychology Instructor. Also contributing to the interest in this subject is my having worked in the K12 sector for seven years now at Petal Schools and seeing the number of students dropping out of school.

Please let me know if this will be possible. It would be great to work with Mr. Barry Upton and Patricia Magee again, on this study.

Sincerely,

Sonja McCaskill-Mitchell
Sonja McCaskill-Mitchell

APPENDIX C

PERMISSION FROM PRCC PRESIDENT

From: William Lewis <wlewis@prcc.edu>
To: sonjavm@aol.com
Cc: Marilyn Dillard <mdillard@prcc.edu>; Barry Upton <bupton@prcc.edu>
Subject: RE: In need of your assistance
Date: Wed, 22 Oct 2008 9:30 am

Sonja: I am sorry for the slowness of my response, but I have taken a few days to determine the impact of our participation in your study. As you know, when you use human subjects in any study of this nature, there needs to be careful coordination with the parties who will be involved. I have now received the assurances that I needed to approve your request. We will be happy to support your study.

William Lewis

APPENDIX D

MS ADULT EDUCATION AEMS PERSONAL DATA SHEET

Mississippi Adult Education AEMS PERSONAL DATA SHEET (Please Print)

Application Update (List Information) _____

DEMOGRAPHIC Enrollment Date _____ Update Date _____

Program Site _____ Class _____ Instructor _____

Social Security No. _____ -- ____ -- ____ Gender Male Female

Student's Name
Last _____ First _____ Mi _____

Date of Birth _____ Age _____ Ethnicity: (Check One)
 American Indian or Native Alaskan
 Asian
 Black or African American
 Hispanic
 Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
 White

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Home Phone No. _____ - _____ - _____

Residing County _____ Email _____

Emergency/Alternate Contact
Name _____ Phone No. _____ - _____ - _____

DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE—FOR PROGRAM USE

Participant Goals or Reasons for Attending

Main Core Follow-Up Measures (Goals)

- G1. Advance My Educational Functioning Level
- G2. Enter Post Secondary Job Training Program
- G3. Gain Employment
- G4. **Increase Involvement in Children's Education
- G5. **Increase Involvement in Children's Literacy
- G6. Obtain GED
- G7. Retain or Improve Employment
- G8. *Achieve Work-Based Project Learning Goal (*Work-Based Learners only)

Labor Force Status (check only one)

- Unemployed
- Not in Labor Force
- Employed—Employer: _____

Disability Status

- Physical, mental or learning disability present

Student Status Measures (check all that apply)

- Low Income Status
- Single Parent Status
- Learning-Disabled Adult
- Displaced Homemaker
- Dislocated Worker Status

Secondary Core Follow-Up Measures (Goals)

- G1. Advance My Educational Functioning Level
- G2. Enter Post Secondary Job Training Program
- G3. Gain Employment
- G4. **Increase Involvement in Children's Education
- G5. **Increase Involvement in Children's Literacy
- G6. Obtain GED
- G7. Retain or Improve Employment
- G8. *Achieve Work-Based Project Learning Goal (*Approved Family Literacy Programs only)

Public Assistance Status

- Currently Receiving Public Assistance

Employer Phone No.: _____

Rural Residency Status

- Live in a rural area, population less than 2,500

Program Type (check only one)

- Adult Basic Education (ABE)
- Adult Secondary Education (ASE)
- Community Corrections
- Correction Facilities
- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- Family Literacy
- Homeless
- Other Institutional Program
- *Work-Based Project Learners (G8)
- Workplace Literacy

Secondary Outcome Measures

Main *Achieve Work-Based Project Learning Goal (G8)

(Work-Based Learners only)

- Increase Involvement in Community Literacy Activities
- Increase Involvement in Community Schooling

Secondary

- Achieve U.S. Citizenship Skills (ESL Only)

- Increase Involvement in Community Activities
- Leave Public Assistance
- Vote for the First Time or Register to Vote

Pre-Test Scores

Date	Test	Reading	Math	Language
	LOCATOR			

TABE Scale Scores

Date	Form	Reading	Math	Language
		L E M D A	L E M D A	L E M D A

BEST Plus

Date	Form (A, B, C, or Computer)	Score	SPL Level

<http://sbcjweb.sbcjcc.ms.us/aems>

revised 07/01/2006

APPENDIX E

GED STUDENT FOLDER (FRONT & BACK)

Class _____ Obtain GED _____ Advanced Ed. level
 _____ Obtain Emp. _____ Retain Emp.
 _____ Enter Post-Secondary Ed.
 _____ Date

____ New Date Enrolled _____ Re-enroll Date _____ 1 2 3 Drop _____
 Last Name _____ First Name _____
 Home Phone: (_____) _____ Alternate phone (_____) _____
 Last High School Attended: _____ NCES Code _____

OFFICIAL GED TEST SCORES: PRCC TESTING CENTER CODE 3000270590

Date _____ Form _____ Read _____ Writing _____ Math _____ Sci _____ Soc _____ Avg _____
 Date _____ Form _____ Read _____ Writing _____ Math _____ Sci _____ Soc _____ Avg _____
 Date _____ Form _____ Read _____ Writing _____ Math _____ Sci _____ Soc _____ Avg _____
 Release of Information: I authorize the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges to release my GED scores to PRCC, and I authorize PRCC to release and receive information on my enrollment, attendance, test scores, progress and any other information requested by the following person or agencies:
 1. Pearl River Community College 2. State Board for Community and Junior Colleges 3. Public Relations Department of PRCC
 4. _____ 5. _____

Student's Signature for Authorization of release stated above: _____

PRE-Test Scores

Date	Test Form	Reading L E M D A	Math L E M D A	Language L E M D A	Entry Level

TABE Level	GRADE EQ	SKILL LEVEL	LEVEL	SS Read	SS Math	SS Lang
L	0-1.9	SL1	Beginning Literacy	0-367	0-313	0-389
E	2.0-3.9	SL2	Basic	368-460	314-441	390-490
M	4.0-5.9	SL3	Low Intermediate	461-517	442-505	491-523
D	6.0-8.9	SL4	High Intermediate	518-566	506-565	524-559
A	9.0-10.9	SL5	Low ASE	567-595	566-594	560-585
A	11.0-12.9	SL6	High AS	596+	595+	586+

POST-Test Scores

Date	Test Form	Reading L E M D A	Math L E M D A	Language L E M D A

NAME _____

GED PRACTICE TEST SCORES:

Date _____	Form _____	Read _____	Writing _____	Math _____	Sci _____	Soc _____	AVG _____
Date _____	Form _____	Read _____	Writing _____	Math _____	Sci _____	Soc _____	AVG _____
Date _____	Form _____	Read _____	Writing _____	Math _____	Sci _____	Soc _____	AVG _____
Date _____	Form _____	Read _____	Writing _____	Math _____	Sci _____	Soc _____	AVG _____

Comments:

Instructor Checklist (Initial and Date)

	Intake	Drop	End of Year
1. Documentation for Enrollment (16 yr olds to have marriage license or birth certificate of child)	_____	_____	_____
2. School Release Form and Withdrawal Form(when required)	_____	_____	_____
3. Results of Locator Test posted on AEMS form	_____	_____	_____
4. Results of TABE Test posted on AEMS form	_____	_____	_____
5. Writing sample in folder (packet)	_____	_____	_____
6. Goals checked upon entry	_____	_____	_____
7. Signature for release of scores	_____	_____	_____
8. TWO copies of official GED Scores	_____	_____	_____
9. Student Evaluation Completed	_____	_____	_____
10. Work Samples – 1 st Module lesson from each SIOA	_____	_____	_____
11. SIOA in folder with individual goal on each	_____	_____	_____
12. Goals Mastered on Exit (match entry)	_____	_____	_____

ATTENDANCE HOURS: _____ July _____ August _____ Sept. _____ Oct. _____ Nov. _____ Dec _____

_____ Jan. _____ Feb. _____ March _____ April _____ May _____ June _____ Total Hours _____

APPENDIX F

VITA

VITA

1970..... Born-Natchez, Mississippi

1992B.S., University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

1998 M.S., University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

2002.....Psychometry Licensure, William Carey University
Hattiesburg, MS

2004 Ed.S., Mississippi State University
Meridian, Mississippi

1992 – 2001 Psychology Technician; Associate Psychologist
Ellisville State School
Ellisville, Mississippi

2001 – 2002 Psychologist I
Boswell Regional Center
Magee, Mississippi

2002 – Present Psychometrist/Behavior Specialist – Special Services

Petal School District

Petal, MS

2002-2005 Adult Education Instructor

Pearl River Community College

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

2005-present..... Adjunct Psychology Instructor

Pearl River Community College

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

2005-present Adjunct Psychology Instructor

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College

Perkinston, MS

Major Field Community College Leadership