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An Exploration of Barriers and Supports of High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) Graduates Transitioning to Postsecondary Education

Chanell Butler Morello

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An Exploration of Barriers and Supports of High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED)
Graduates Transitioning to Postsecondary Education

by
Chanell Butler Morello

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
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Chanell Butler Morello

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Abstract

An Exploration of Barriers and Supports of High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) Graduates Transitioning to Postsecondary Education. Chanell Butler Morello, 2018: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED), General Education Development (GED), adult education, transitions to postsecondary education, barriers to postsecondary education

This applied dissertation was designed to explore the perceived barriers and supports of High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) graduates upon their consideration of attaining a higher education degree at a community college in North Carolina. Other areas explored in this qualitative study included the way completing the HSED program changes a student's perception of learning and/or increases his or her motivation to continue their studies.

A primary objective of the Basic Skills programs, also known as College and Career Readiness programs, is to transition as many students as possible to postsecondary education and employment. In spite of such goals, North Carolina is one of many states nationwide in which an inadequate number of HSED graduates are transitioning to college enrollment.

The researcher utilized a phenomenological approach to explore student perceptions. Interviews were conducted with 7 High School Equivalency students in a semi-structured, in-depth, individual interview format.

This study found that the largest perceived barriers of the HSED graduates upon consideration of transitioning to college were their own insecurities, language barriers, and concerns about having the time and money to complete postsecondary education. The strongest perceived supports of the HSED graduates were their instructors, available technology/distance education, and the small-group instructional settings. The participants reported an increase in motivation to continue their educational journey after graduating with their HSED, as well as an improved perception of self and learning in general.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

A problem exists with High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) graduates

transitioning to higher levels of educational attainment. According to the National Center

for Educational Statistics, 33% of American high school graduates will complete a 4-year

bachelor's degree within six years of graduation, while only 2.7 % of GED graduates will

do the same (Aud et al., 2013). In fact, 66% of all GED graduates will never earn an

educational credential past their GED (Aud et al., 2013). Tinto, a prevalent researcher on

college completion, stated, "Since the National Defense Education Act of 1958, a

primary objective of federal higher education policy has been to increase access to higher

education" (2004, p. 3). The federal government in particular wanted greater enrollment

rates for students from low-income backgrounds who face additional challenges when

attempting to further their education (2004).

The 2006 Spellings Commission Report created by the U.S. Department of

Education stated: "Ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the new information and

service economy will require some postsecondary education" (p. 7). Further, this report

noted that workers who have a 4-year bachelor's degree earn 37% more than those with

only a high school credential (2006). Therefore, it is vital that high school and HSED

graduates transition to higher levels of educational attainment if they wish to be

successful in the current and future economy. The country as a whole depends on the

economy and the ability of the American people to educate themselves and become

successful workers in the future. According to the Spelling Commission Report of 2006,

in past years, the United States was considered at the forefront of educational attainment,

and in the last couple of decades has fallen to 12 among developed countries (p. xii).

Community colleges operate HSED programs with the intention of transitioning as many HSED graduates as possible into 2-year associate degree programs, and 2-year associate degree programs are designed to transfer students into a 4-year bachelor's degree program. At one community college in rural North Carolina, only 3.5% of HSED graduates are currently transitioning each year into college degree-granting programs. This fact is alarming, and this community college should benefit from a study that addressed this phenomenon. Thus, the problem to be solved in this applied dissertation was to determine why HSED graduates at this rural community college in North Carolina are not transitioning to postsecondary education, the barriers these students face, and how their needs could be more supported, as well as why only an estimated 8.5% of students are transitioning to postsecondary courses.

Phenomenon of interest. Nationwide, an inadequate number of HSED graduates are transitioning to college enrollment. President Barack Obama stated at the Community College Summit, "The President's plan will…improve college access and completion by supporting programs and activities designed to boost college persistence and increase graduation rates" (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013, p. 2). President Obama called for an increase in the number of American adults with college degrees by the year 2020 (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010).

Federal viewpoints, backed by federal funding, strongly encourage state legislators to follow suit in educational trends and goals. The North Carolina Community College System Office, the governing body for all basic skills programs that offer HSE instruction in North Carolina, has stated that a primary objective of basic skills programs is to transition as many students as possible to postsecondary education and employment (nccommunitycolleges.edu, 2017). In fact, the System Office has recently begun referring

to basic skills programs as "College and Career Readiness." In spite of such goals, however, as previously mentioned, North Carolina is one of many states nationwide in which relatively few HSED graduates are transitioning to college enrollment.

Background and justification. The researcher of the study is the Executive Director of Basic Skills Education at the abovementioned community college in rural North Carolina. One of the departments the director oversees is the HSED program. The author has noticed a remarkable lack of HSED graduates transitioning to higher levels of educational achievement, such as enrolling in curriculum studies to earn an associate degree. Data from the college demonstrated that in the 2013 calendar year, 481 students graduated with an HSED; however, only 17 of them successfully enrolled in the Associate degree program afterwards. The study, therefore, took place within the Basic Skills Education department of the author's community college in rural North Carolina because the author had daily access to both the HSED students and the college data. In order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon and potentially improve administrative practices, the researcher investigated the perceptions of HSED graduates and their professed reasons for transitioning or not transitioning to higher education.

This study conducted at the researcher's community college to explore the perceptions of HSED graduates could help to increase understanding and influence administrative policies and procedures. The author's college has the opportunity to use the results of the study to make positive changes in the institution to possibly help improve the percentage of HSED graduates enrolling in postsecondary programs.

Deficiencies in the evidence. The available literature regarding HSED graduates transitioning to postsecondary education is limited and has been largely published prior to 2009. For the sake of improving national educational attainment levels and economic

prosperity, more needs to be known regarding barriers to entering and completing degree programs in the United States (Nix & Michalak, 2012; Reder, 2007). This is especially true for HSED graduates desiring a postsecondary degree (Nix & Michalak, 2012; Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). In addition, many studies examine transitions directly to 4-year colleges and universities rather than community colleges. Additional research is necessary because research demonstrates that HSED graduates are more likely to enter into 2-year college programs than 4-year college programs" (Guison-Dowdy, & Patterson, 2011; Maralani, 2011; Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Reder, 2007; Tokpah, Padak, Baycich, Trehan, & Turnidge, 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010).

Because federal and state legislators have only in recent years placed a strong emphasis on transitioning HSED graduates to postsecondary education, there is not as much knowledge on the subject as is needed (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010; Zafft, 2008). The author's study will contribute to a body of literature that needs current data that explored the perceived barriers of HSED graduates who choose not to transition to postsecondary education. Further, most of the existing literature focuses on experiences at larger urban universities, whereas this study targeted perceptions in a rural community college setting.

Audience. The findings of this study will benefit HSED graduate students as well as all higher education institution constituents such as students, faculty, staff, administrators, and policy-makers (particularly in public institutions).

Findings from this kind of research may provide data that can improve understanding and thus be applied to administrative decisions, support institutional transformation, and improve educational environments. These changes may serve to potentially improve levels of program recruitment and completion. There also is the

possibility of policy and procedure reform in higher education institutions, particularly in the community college setting.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this dissertation, the following terms were assigned a specific meaning in relation to this study.

Adult secondary credentials (ASC). Refers to secondary or high school credential including GED and the Adult High School Diploma (AHSD) (nccommunitycolleges.edu, 2017).

Basic skills education (BS/BSE). (Also known as Adult Basic Skills Education/Foundational Studies/Developmental Education/College and Career Readiness) A program that allows adults, generally ages 16 and up, to achieve reading, writing, and math academic skills. Program areas such as GED, English as a Second Language (ESOL), and Adult Basic Education (ABE), which is lower-level literacy, are included under the "umbrella" of basic skills education (Boroch et al., 2007; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013).

College-ready. Describes a student with the appropriate level of academic, cognitive, and affective skills to enter college and succeed (Boroch et al., 2007).

College and career readiness. Another term for basic skills education (nccommunitycolleges.edu, 2017).

General educational development (GED). A secondary credential available to high school dropouts earned through GED preparation in a basic skills education program and a passing score on the official GED exam at the end of such preparation (Reder, 2007).

High school equivalency diploma (HSED). Any secondary credential available

to high school dropouts, such as the General Educational Development (GED), the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) by McGraw-Hill, or the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Postsecondary education (PSE). Educational attainment of a 2-year associates degree, a 4-year bachelor's degree, currently enrollment in college, or the past engagement in college courses (Reder, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived barriers and supports of High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) graduates attaining a higher education degree at a community college in North Carolina, and how completing the HSED program changed a student's perception of learning to increase their motivation to continue their studies at a higher education institution. This study contributed to a body of literature in need of current data (especially in rural areas and community colleges) that explored the lack of HSED graduates transitioning to postsecondary education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Basic skills programs, also known as College and Career Readiness programs, have been charged with the task of transitioning HSED graduates to higher levels of educational attainment and to gain employment. However, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, on a national scale, only 34% of HSED graduates are transitioning to postsecondary education (Aud et al., 2013). One contributing factor to this problem may be the perceived barriers HSED graduates face when considering whether to pursue postsecondary education.

History of the GED

The GED was initially created approximately 70 years ago as a way for returning World War II veterans to achieve a high school credential without having to enter into four years of a traditional high school setting (Reder, 2007; Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012). Often, young men were drafted to the military during their secondary education and therefore had not had the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. In 1947, the GED stopped being an option solely for war veterans and expanded to include civilian test-takers. New York was the pioneer state in this venture, and by 1948, twenty-one other states had followed their initiative (Quinn, 2002; Ryder, & Hagedorn, 2012; Tyler, 2005).

Through the decades, the GED became commonly known as an alternative option to traditional high school education (Reder, 2007; Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012). Approximately 12% of all existing ASC graduates earned a GED credential (Quigley, Patterson & Zhang, 2011). Over 17 million GEDs have been awarded since 1942, with approximately 60% of test-takers stating a principal motivation of earning the GED was to transition to higher levels of educational attainment (ACE, 2009). However, as

previously mentioned, a little more than half of those students will actually achieve that goal.

Demographics and Challenges of HSED Students

According to the GED Testing Service (2017), there are more than 39 million adults (18%) aged 16 and older in the United States who lack a high school credential (2017). HSED students have stopped-out of high school education for a multitude of diverse reasons. Whether it was a teenage pregnancy, a family crisis, behavioral issues, or immigration to the United States, they are "nontraditional" students who have generally faced hardships that have led to them dropping out of school (Glorieux, Heyman, Jegers, & Taelman, 2011). Often, high school dropouts discover along the way how vital a high school credential is to finding successful employment or deciding they would like to go to college; and they turn to a basic skills programs to earn a HSED (high school equivalency diploma) (Patterson et al., 2010).

The GED Testing Service (2013) reported their most recent national data of GED test-takers are as follows: "44.3% were white, 24.3% African American, 14.7% Hispanic, 9.9% Pacific Islander/Hawaiian, 4.0% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2.2% Asian." They further noted an increase in African American test-takers from 20.6% in 2003 to 24.3% in 2012 (GED Testing Service, 2013). Although basic skills programs are certainly comprised of adults of all ages, the average HSED student is just over 26 years old (2013).

Barriers to HSED completion. HSED students may have recently stopped attending high school, or they may be returning to earn high school equivalency diplomas decades later. Regardless of their time away from schooling, HSED students often have anxiety or fear when stepping on a college campus to enroll in a basic skills education

program (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Students who have previously dropped out of high school may have very negative associations with educational institutions and/or poor self-esteem. If students have been away from school for many years, they may have feelings of insecurity about attempting to achieve a credential when their academic skills have not been utilized in a long time. It is common for such students to be very aware of how underdeveloped their skills are in a particular area, for example math, and be unsure of their ability to overcome this in order to pass an HSE exam. Students are often fearful of being looked at as "less than" by others on campus, and this can often become a large deterrent from returning to education (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013).

Adult education students tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged and are one of the most vulnerable groups of students on campus (Glorieux et al., 2011; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Although basic skills education programs do not have any tuition costs, financial issues are one of the top concerns for these students (Zafft, 2008). Issues that arise as a result of such disadvantages include a lack of transportation, lack of childcare, difficulty paying for the HSED examination fee, and the exhaustion of juggling school and work (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Zafft, 2008). All of these factors potentially lead to reasons students fail to enroll in or drop out of HSED programs in community college.

Societal Impact of High School Completion

The number of students who graduate high school each year has an enormous impact on society at large. According to Levin, Belfield, Muenning, and Rouse, "An individual's educational attainment is one of the most important determinants of their life chances in terms of employment, income, health status, housing, and many other amenities (2006, p. 2). It is in the best interest of every American resident and taxpayer to see a population with higher rates of graduation and/or the attainment of a high school

credential. The American Council on Education reported there are approximately 40 million American adults without a high school credential (2010). Quigley, Patterson, and Zang stated, "The personal, societal, cultural, and economic impact of this high school equivalency program is incalculable" (2011, p. 1).

      Economic impact. When the GED was first created, it allowed WWII veterans to achieve their secondary credential upon returning from deployment. Over the years, however, the value of an HSED evolved into a vital component of financial advantages; both for the individual and society as a whole. It is statistical fact that those who drop out of high school will have a much harder time finding employment and will earn less income than those who have graduated (Levin et al., 2006). Song and Patterson (2011) found that GED graduates make significantly more hourly than high school dropouts, at a rate which is very close to those of traditional high school graduates.

      The American Council for Education conducted in-depth research as to the economic and noneconomic outcomes of GED graduates; this research was presented by Song and Hsu in 2008 and revealed vital information regarding the economic and societal impact of HSED attainment. "GED credential recipients are likely to make $115 more weekly than the adults without a high school education" (Song & Hsu, 2008, p. 14). When comparing GED graduates to traditional high school graduates, one encouraging fact the study revealed is that GED graduates and traditional high school graduates on average earn the same weekly wages (Song & Hsu, 2008). Levin et al. wrote, "The average lifetime benefit in terms of additional taxes per expected high school graduate is $139,100" (2006, p. 9).

      In 2016, the Institute of Education Sciences at the National Center for Education Statistics published in their annual report that the average annual earnings of high school

graduates were 20% higher than those without a high school credential (Kena et al., 2016, p. 49). Each individual high school graduate can create an enormous economic impact in the United States. "High school dropouts cost the U.S. $1.8 billion annually" (GED Testing Service, 2017, ¶ 2). According to Levin, Belfield, Muenning, and Rouse (2006), "If the number of high school dropouts in each age cohort was cut in half, the government would reap $45 billion via extra tax revenues and reduced costs of public health, of crime and justice, and in welfare payments." Quite simply, high school graduates earn more money and pay more taxes.

Job satisfaction. The College Board, a nationally known not-for-profit organization that focuses on transitioning students to college, published a report in 2013 that examined various benefits of education on society. Research in the last couple of decades has demonstrated that education has a strong impact on one's level of job satisfaction (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). One area the College Board researched was job satisfaction and any possible correlations to educational attainment. Job satisfaction surveys revealed that as education levels increase, the level of satisfaction individuals feel with their jobs also increases (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

The U.S. Department of Labor sponsors research in the form of longitudinal surveys called The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). These series of surveys utilized a nationally representative sample of American youth to collect detailed information regarding the labor market and education in the hopes of discovering ways to improve student transition into education and employment in adulthood (Song & Patterson, 2011). In their report that summarizes survey NLSY97, Song and Patterson (2011) made various observations regarding job satisfaction. Song and Patterson (2011)

noted that approximately 63 % of GED credentialed recipients reported they were either fairly or very much satisfied with their jobs, and 54 % of high school dropouts reported the same; supporting the assertion that job satisfaction rates increase proportionately with educational attainment (p. 12).

Health. Cutler and Lleras-Muney found that adults with high school credentials have better health and lower mortality rates than high school dropouts (2006). The health benefits only increase with the attainment of postsecondary education (Baum et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2006; Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & Maynard, 2014). Because higher levels of education are associated with greater income potential, it follows that individuals who are more educated are less prone to depend on public health programs such as Medicaid (Levin et al., 2006). Song and Hsu (2008) revealed that "about 65 percent of adults with GED credentials reported that they have employer-or school-provided health insurance, versus 48 percent of adults with less than a high school education" (p. 28). It is a kind of snowball effect; those who graduate high school and college are more likely to gain employment that offers health benefits. With sufficient health insurance, the individual is more likely to utilize preventative care than they would have without any insurance. Preventive care, in turn, leads to better overall health (Levin et al., 2006; Vaughn et al., 2014).

Vaughn, Salas-Wright, and Maynard (2014) utilized data from the United States National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) to analyze differences in health as it correlates to educational attainment. Their research revealed that compared to high school graduates, "high school dropouts were at increased odds of reporting a serious chronic health condition (e.g., asthma, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure)" (Vaughn et al., 2014, p. 270). This has an enormous impact on the quality of life for the high school

graduate, and such results also have a great impact on American society and the economy as a whole. Levin et al., (2006) found that in one's lifetime, "the average saving to the public health system per expected high school graduate is $40,500" (p. 12).

Ross and Wu (1995) expanded on the correlation between educational attainment and increased health and longer life spans. They explained this association in three main features: (a) the work and economic conditions, (b) social-psychological resources, and (c) health lifestyle of individuals who graduated high school and/or college (Ross & Wu, 1995, p. 719). Their findings supported the fact that high school graduates find better quality employment (higher wages and a higher sense of fulfillment from such work) and therefore experience less financial hardship (p. 719). Referring to social-psychological resources, people who are more highly educated have superior levels of social support and a greater sense of control over their lives; perhaps creating a bigger sense of satisfaction with their employment and life (Ross & Wu, 1995, p. 720). Regarding health lifestyle, they found the more educated one is, the less likely that individual is to smoke and/or drink heavily, and the more likely that person is to exercise regularly (Ross & Wu, 1995, p. 720).

Further, Hsu (2007) indicated that adults with a GED/high school credential have demonstrated higher levels of health literacy than non-graduates. All of these factors combined, therefore, lead to a healthier lifestyle and great sense of wellbeing. According to Song and Hsu (2008), "About 47 percent of adults with GED credentials reported that they are in excellent or very good health, versus 41 percent of adults with less than a high school education" (p. 28). Duke and Macmillan (2016) also conducted research for the American Sociological Association that confirmed people with higher levels of educational attainment tend to self-rate their health better than those who never graduated

high school.

  Family function. Parents are undeniably one of the strongest educational influences throughout a child's life. It seems logical that the more educated a person is, the more he/she will be able to offer academically to a learning child. "The ways parents use literacy and engage in educational activities with children at home have a deep impact on children's learning success" (Song & Hsu, 2008, p. 21). Statistically, parents with high school and college credentials tend to be more dedicated to the educational achievement of their children and are more likely to create a habit of frequently teaching them, compared to non-graduates. Research demonstrates that the quality of parenting may be lower for those who do not obtain a high school credential (Baum et al., 2013; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). Song and Hsu (2008) discovered "about 68 percent of GED credential recipients help their children with homework at least a few times a week, compared with 56 percent of adults with less than a high school education" (p. 25). Further, a parent who has successful attainment of a high school credential has set an example for the children, which may provide a positive influence in their future decisions to pursue education.

  The makeup of a family also correlates highly with one's level of educational attainment. According to U.S. Census data, "Among parents who live with a child under the age of 18, 89% of college graduates are married, compared with 64% of parents with less than a high school diploma and 70% of those with just a high school diploma" (Livingston, 2013, p. 1). The educational level and marital status of parents has an impact on the living arrangements of a minor child and may also impact the level of parental involvement related to daily activities as well. There also have been associations made between such family structures and children growing up and quitting school (Tyler &

Lofstrum, 2009, p. 85).

Crime. Research confirms that crime rates are lower among those who have completed secondary and postsecondary education (Levin et al., 2006; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). There is a grave overrepresentation of high school dropouts in prison. Despite the fact that high school dropouts make up 20 % of the U.S. population, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 68% of the nation's state prison inmates are high school dropouts (Bonczar, 2003; Levin et al., 2006, p. 13; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009, p. 88). Although there is not enough research to acknowledge what the specific reason is for this, there are some facts that help explain such a correlation. It has already been established that high school graduates are more likely to attain better jobs and establish a better income than non-graduates (Levin et al., 2006; Song & Hsu, 2008). Those who earn more money have less of an incentive to commit a crime such as theft. Also, an individual who has a fulfilling career with a steady income and health benefits has more to lose by committing a crime than someone in a low-paying job he/she is unsatisfied with; and this may act as a deterrent (Levin et al., 2006). On average, the lifetime financial savings per U.S. high school graduate is $26,000 to the criminal justice system (Levin et al., 2006, p. 14).

Poverty, crime rates, and low educational attainment are closely linked together. The 2011 U.S. Census Bureau revealed that the poverty rate for those without a high school credential was 28%, but for those with a high school credential that percentage was cut in half to 14% (Baum et al., 2013, p. 25). Children raised in impoverished areas are much more likely to drop out of school and/or commit crimes at a relatively young age (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009).

Although there is not enough research to say with certainty what the impact of education on criminal behavior is in the overall population, Lance Lochner and Enrico

Moretti established that a lack of education can indeed influence one's tendency to commit crimes (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009, p. 88). In their research, Lochner and Moretti were even able to break down the types of crimes that education can specifically impact. "They find that, on average, one additional year of schooling will reduce the murder and assault rate by close to 30 percent, motor vehicle theft by 20 percent, arson by 13 percent, and burglary and larceny by about 6 percent" (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009, p. 88). This study demonstrates the powerful societal effect that education can potentially have with regards to crime levels and collective safety.

 Social participation. The level of one's educational attainment is an important part of socioeconomic status (SES) and social participation. Research-driven studies have demonstrated that SES has a strong relationship with social participation (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Nagel, 1987; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Song & Hsu, 2008; Verba & Nie, 1972). The likelihood someone will participate in political activities, such as voting, increases as the level of SES increases (Song & Hsu, 2008). This is due in part to the fact that those who are less educated have a lower SES and lack valuable resources such as money, civic knowledge, transportation, and/or time (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). Song and Hsu (2008) ascertained, "Education not only helps accumulate civil skills that facilitates participation, but also inculcates political interests and motivation" (p. 19).

 GED graduates were found to be more likely to vote in a presidential election, volunteer in community or group organizations, or gather public event information through media or online, when compared with high school dropouts (Song & Hsu, 2008). Song and Hsu (2008) discovered that "48 percent of adults with GED credentials and 38 percent of adults without a high school–level education reported that they voted in the last presidential election" (p. 19). The studies also found that twice as many GED

graduates served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces compared with high school dropouts (p. 21).

In summary, the number of high school graduates in the United States has a massive impact on society in various ways. Society pays for students who drop out each year in a multitude of forms. Tyler and Lofstrum (2009) asserted that "these social costs include lower tax revenues, greater public spending on public assistance and health care, and higher crime rates" (p. 87). Students who possess a high school credential have an opportunity for employment with greater levels of job satisfaction, higher pay rates, improved health, and an overall better quality of life (Baum et al., 2013). It is, therefore, to the benefit of every American resident and taxpayer to live in a country with higher numbers of students attaining a minimum of a high school credential.

GED/High School Equivalency Reform

As previously mentioned, the GED was initially released by the GED Testing Service in 1942 to allow war veterans an opportunity for a secondary credential upon their return from World War II (Reder, 2007; Ryder & Hagedorn, 2012). This pioneer version of the GED was created to assess traditional content knowledge such as "correctness and effectiveness of expression, while success in social studies, science, and literature depended on interpreting reading material" (GED Testing Service, 2017, ¶ 2). Because earning a high school diploma or GED was typically enough to earn employment in the American industrial age, the first series of the GED helped many veterans and civilians achieve this goal (2017).

In 1978, a new version of the GED was released to reflect society's evolving views of education; rather than simply asking for students to recall information, the 1978 GED demanded higher levels of thinking, including the "application of conceptual

knowledge and evaluation of presented information" (GED Testing Service, 2017, ¶ 3). The real-life context integrated into the exam demonstrated that the GED was not only useful to attain a high school credential, but that it could be useful for daily living skills as well.

The third series of the GED exam was released in 1988, which, after years of research and input from various educational professionals, placed an emphasis on more critical thinking and problem-solving skills (GED Testing Service, 2017). A new essay portion was added to the exam as well as a greater integration of real-life contextualized material (2017).

In 2002, a new series of GED exams was released that were designed not only to achieve high-school equivalency, but also to be used as a tool to prove GED graduates were better prepared to transition to postsecondary education through an adherence to national educational content standards (GED Testing Service, 2017).

Then, in 2014, a revolution took place with the GED. In 2014, Pearson Vue, a for-profit corporation, purchased rights from the not-for-profit GED Testing Service to offer the GED exam and is currently doing so. The State of North Carolina contracted with Pearson Vue to be the provider of all official GED exams in the state. The 2014 GED exam is completely computer-based, unlike its paper and pencil predecessor, and comes with a price of $120 per student (GED Testing Service, 2017). However, many high school dropouts are socioeconomically disadvantaged and find it difficult to afford the price and/or lack the skills to properly work a computer. GED Testing Service (2017) stated these changes were made because "this aligned with current high school standards and career- and college-readiness expectations" (¶ 4)

In early 2014, companies such as McGraw-Hill and Educational Testing Service

(ETS) saw the high price point and computer-based format of Pearson Vue's GED as potential to create a competitive product that would be more accessible to students. These two companies created their own exams that would allow students a new way to attain a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED). McGraw-Hill released the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC). The TASC offers both a computer-based and paper-based format for the exam and costs $52 for the entire battery of tests taken in the state of North Carolina (each state is entitled to charge a bit differently). Similarly, ETS released the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) that also offers both a computer-based and paper-based format for the exam, along with a lower price point of $50 for the entire battery of tests in North Carolina. All three of these exams are "nationally-recognized assessments used to obtain a state-issued High School Equivalency credential in North Carolina" (North Carolina Community Colleges, 2017).

Obstacles in Transitioning to Higher Education

The same challenges students faced when dropping out of high school or returning to school for an HSED often still exist when they attempt to transition to college. Reder (2007) analyzed two national educational surveys, the National Household Education Survey/Adult Education Component and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy that revealed "about 27 percent of the national GED population has transitioned into college, compared with about 63 percent of the national population of high school diploma holders" (p. 11). There are numerous additional obstacles HSED graduates face when attempting to transition to higher education. Barriers to transitioning to higher education include student insecurity and feeling stigmatized, financial constraints, poor academic preparation, and a lack of supports at home and at school.

It is typical for HSED graduates to feel fearful and/or insecure when entering a

college campus (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Kist, 2003). Often, the memories and negative experiences they had in the past with educational institutions haunt them. It is common for such students to be very aware of how others will perceive them, especially if they are significantly older, and be concerned about what others, such as professors and peers, will think and if they will be able to succeed (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). A lack of self-confidence and a fundamental belief that one will be a failure is a large barrier for HSED graduates who want to attend college (Wilson, 2006).

HSED and Adult Education graduates tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged and are one of the most vulnerable groups of students on campus (Glorieux et al., 2011; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Kist, 2003). When considering a postsecondary education, financial issues are one of the top concerns for these students (Zafft, 2008). Financial disadvantage means that students will often struggle with finding reliable transportation to get to school, childcare for their children, paying for tuition and/or books and fees, and the exhaustion of juggling school and work—if applicable (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Zafft, 2008). Students who work and have children also find that students who attend college part-time may not be eligible for as much financial aid. These are some reasons HSED graduates may fail to enroll in postsecondary programs in community college.

A lack of support from family and their educational institutions are another disadvantage HSED graduates encounter. High schools typically have college-prep counseling, college fairs, and information freely available to their students. Students have "college-bound peer and college-experienced family networks" as a form of support as well (Reder, 2007, p. 12). Conversely, many HSED graduates are the first in their family to ever attempt entrance to college: "47 percent of the transitioning students with high

school diplomas are first-generation, compared to 65 percent of students starting with GEDs" (Reder, 2007, p. 12). Although adult education programs at community colleges attempt to provide "bridge programs" that transition HSED graduates to postsecondary education, they often lack the resources necessary to create successful pathways into college (Reder, 2007, p. 13). A lack of funding for such endeavors is a common problem adult education/basic skills education programs face. Between a lack of support at home and possibly within the adult education program as well, many HSED graduates simply do not have enough familiarity of what college programs entail (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Goodall, 2009). For example, these students may not understand how to apply for admission or apply for financial aid, or possibly even be aware that financial aid is available (Wilson, 2006; Zafft, 2008).

Reder (2007) also discovered HSED graduates fall under higher risks than traditional high school graduates according to two scales: The Socioeconomic Diversity Index and the postsecondary Risk Index for Non-Persistence (p. 19). The Socioeconomic Diversity Index score is created after examining three factors: the income of the student's family, the highest educational attainment level of the student's parents, and the number of students in the school program eligible for federally subsidized free lunches (p. 19). "A postsecondary Risk Index for non-persistence is comprised of six student characteristics:

- older than typical postsecondary students

- attend part-time rather than full-time

- financially independent

- working full-time while enrolled

- single parent

• have dependents other than spouse. (p. 19)"

These two risk assessments revealed that HSED graduates face nearly double the risk that traditional high school graduates face and have a significantly higher level of socioeconomic disadvantage. Thus, HSED graduates who transition to college are less likely to successfully complete and graduate than traditional high school students.

Last, faculty and staff at postsecondary institutions often have the impression that HSED graduates have less quality academic preparation than traditional high school graduates. Of particular concern are the areas of algebra, critical thinking, study skills, and Prose, Document & Quantitative (PDQ) literacy proficiency (Reder, 2007; Zafft, 2008). HSED graduates may face the challenge of "reorienting themselves away from rote learning towards critical thinking" (Wilson, 2006, p. 25). Some HSE students initially dropped out of high school due to poor academic performance and the embarrassment they felt being in such a predicament (Goodall, 2009). Therefore, having academic skills that are underdeveloped, as well as the stigma associated with such a status, is another barrier for HSED graduates when attempting to transition to postsecondary programs.

The Value of Postsecondary Education

The current labor market demands a higher complexity of skills and education than in decades past. In order to be competitive in an advanced technological and global economy, postsecondary education and/or training is quite often a necessity (Brock, 2010; Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011; Reder, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Consequently, more adult/non-traditional students desire to go to college than ever before (Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011).

Patterson et al., (2010) declared, "Research shows that completing a high school

education and pursuing a postsecondary degree are key to economic advancement and expanded social opportunities" (p. 1). All of the benefits mentioned previously regarding the value of a high school credential are multiplied when referring to the value of postsecondary education (Brock, 2010). Students who attend even some postsecondary education or short-term college training earn more money at their work, pay more taxes, statistically have better quality health, have higher levels of job satisfaction, commit fewer crimes and have higher quality family function (Baum et al., 2013; Brock, 2010; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Levin, et al., 2006; Patterson et al., 2010; Ross & Wu, 1995; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Carnevale and Desrochers (2004) stated, "Since the early 1980s, it has become apparent that postsecondary education and training have emerged as the threshold qualifications for the vast majority of good jobs" (p. 31). Those who have attended at least some postsecondary education, even if they never graduated, are three times more likely to obtain employment, and are also less likely to experience job turnover than those with less education (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Neumark, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). College graduates also earn one to two million dollars more over a lifetime than those who have never attended college (Baum et al., 2013; Guison-Dowdy & Patterson, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Fortunately, as the number of college attendees and graduates has risen over the decades, so has the demand for workers with more advanced skills and educational attainment. Therefore, earnings of workers with at least some postsecondary education continues to rise. Since 1979, the average earnings of workers with some postsecondary education have gone up by approximately 19% (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004).

Kelly and Strawn (2011) asserted, "Between 2008 and 2018 demand for college

educated workers will rise by 16 percent while demand for other workers will stay flat"

(p. 1). Further, by 2018 approximately two-thirds on all American jobs will require some

kind of postsecondary training or education (Kelly & Strawn, 2011; U.S. Department of

Education, 2015). Especially in times of economic challenge, workers who have higher

levels of educational attainment will have more of a competitive edge. Full-time workers

with at least some college earn approximately 14% more annually than high school

graduates; and those who have graduated with an associate's degree earn approximately

27% more annually than high school graduates (Baum et al., 2013, p. 11). Over a

lifetime, the benefits of a college education continue to pay off. Baum et al. (2013)

established, "During a 40-year full-time working life, the median earnings of bachelor's

degree recipients without an advanced degree are 65% higher than the median earnings of

high school graduates" (p. 12).

People who are more highly educated have superior levels of social support and a

greater sense of control over their lives; perhaps creating a bigger sense of satisfaction

with their employment and life (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). Regarding a healthy

lifestyle, they found the more educated one is, the less likely that individual is to smoke

and/or drink heavily, and the more likely that person is to exercise regularly

(Zimmerman, Woolf & Haley, 2015). Further, those who hold postsecondary degrees are

more likely than high school graduates to obtain employment that comes with various

benefits including health insurance (Zimmerman et al., 2015). Hence, college-level

education can have a positive impact on a person's health.

Statistically, parents with high school and college credentials tend to be more

dedicated to the educational achievement of their children and are more likely to create a

habit of frequently teaching them, compared to nongraduates. Research demonstrates that the quality of parenting may be lower for those who do not obtain a high school credential (Baum et al., 2013; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). Parents who have graduated college are also more likely to raise children who will also one day attend college (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). Therefore, a postsecondary education has value for the graduate and also has a ripple effect across society.

Impact of More HSED Graduates Transitioning to College

Approximately 30 % of adults in the United States have never attended any type of postsecondary educational program (CAEL, 2008; Patterson et al., 2010). If these millions of Americans were to attend postsecondary education and/or training, the impact on our country and the global labor market would be enormous. Currently, there are over 11 million American adults who are either low-income, displaced or incarcerated (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004, p. 37). If these Americans were to attend college, they would be able to utilize their new knowledge and skills to contribute over $120 billion dollars into the economy (p. 37). For those who were previously incarcerated, postsecondary education and/or training can "reduce recidivism by as much as 29 percent" (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004, p. 37; Steurer & Smith, 2003).

In the global market, other countries are quickly surpassing the United States when it comes to the percentage of adults attending and graduating college. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) "Education at a Glance" report demonstrated that U.S. college graduation rates rank 19th out of 28 countries studied by the OECD (Weston, 2014). As other countries place a greater cultural emphasis on education and invest financially in technological advancement, it is imperative that the United States attempts the same in order to remain internationally

competitive. "Public funding constitutes a lower percentage of total funding for higher education in the United States than in most other countries." (Baum et al., 2013, p. 45). There are consequences to not placing a high enough priority on postsecondary education. "About half of young people in OECD countries have at least matched their parents' level of education. But in the United States, a larger-than-average proportion had less education (so-called downward mobility)" (Weston, 2014, p. 2). This downward spiral of postsecondary education is alarming. It will mean that America will continue to fall drastically behind other countries in the international labor market if this trend continues.

If the United States were to increase its average level of educational attainment by one year of schooling, economic prosperity would grow by up to 15 % (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004) Kelly and Strawn (2011) asserted, "Helping workers weather economic downturns, helping employers meet their needs for skilled workers, and competing internationally for high-skilled, high-wage jobs are all important goals that will require we help many more adults complete college credentials" (p. 3). In 2018, the United States will have a need for 22 million workers with postsecondary degrees and 4.7 million workers with postsecondary certificates; however, current projections demonstrate the country will fall short by approximately 3 million educated workers (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010). This disconnect between what the American economy will need and the supply of educated workers is greatly concerning and must be remedied.

Postsecondary education has a massive impact not just on the students and their quality of life, but also on all of society as a whole. It is in the best interest of every American to see a population that consists of more people who have attended at least

some postsecondary education. "An individual's educational attainment is one of the most important determinants of their life chances in terms of employment, income, health status, housing, and many other amenities" (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2006, p. 2). Researchers confirm that crime rates are lower amongst those who have completed secondary and postsecondary education (Levin et al., 2006; Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). "Higher education levels are associated not just with higher earnings, but also with better health, more community engagement and more trust in governments, institutions and other people" (Weston, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, in order to have a thriving economy consisting of more well-rounded and contributing citizens, who have been prepared with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed both at work and in society, higher levels of educational attainment is a requisite (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004).

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)

As a response to the skills gap and educated worker shortage, federal legislation known as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was passed in 2014 and signed by President Barack Obama. It went into full effect July 1, 2015, and supplanted the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). "WIOA is designed to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017, p. 1). The establishment of WIOA amended the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and had an enormous impact on the realm of adult education/basic skills education and adult learners. WIOA legislation is vast and complex; however, for the purposes of this dissertation, only the areas pertaining more closely to adult education and literacy programs will be discussed.

WIOA legislation has had a dramatic effect on adult education. At the ground level of local community colleges, it means shifting the traditional focus from academics and high school equivalency completion to transitioning students from basic skills programs to occupational training opportunities and employment. Programs are expected to incorporate workforce preparation activities and embrace integrated education and training programs (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014). For the first time in the history of basic skills programs, funding is promised to become performance-based in the area of student employment. Federal and state entities will track students via social security numbers, names, and birthdates to see if they have utilized their education to obtain successful employment (Whitfield, 2014).

In order for basic skills/college and career readiness programs to successfully transition HSED students into employment, they need to operate under strong regional partnerships. Under WIOA, basic skills programs are expected to work closely and collaboratively with their community college occupational training partners, local workforce development boards, regional employment and training services agencies (in the case of North Carolina, this would be NC Works) as well as Vocational Rehabilitation (which helps people with disabilities gain employment) (Department of Labor, 2017).

Although WIOA legislation specifies that it aims to serve the most vulnerable adult populations of the United States (the unemployed, out-of-school youth, dislocated workers, veterans, adults with disabilities, and various other vulnerable populations), the legislation is left up to each State to interpret and apply to their programs and policies as they see fit (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014; Department of Labor, 2017). In the state of North Carolina, although basic skills programs are being asked to embrace a new focus

and a vast amount of new work, funding is simultaneously being slashed. Local programs are being asked to perform many more duties with dramatically less resources. Instructors are in dire need of training; however, funding for training is nearly impossible to attain.

Historically, BSE programs, as free public education programs, have been open and available to all people who seek to improve their lives through literacy, foundational skills, and by earning high school credentials. However, presently WIOA places a stronger emphasis on serving students with the main goal of transitioning them to employment and career opportunities (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014; Whitfield, 2014). There may be a risk of students who are not interested in employment, being left out of basic skills education in the future. This may affect students who want to earn an education but for some reason are unable to obtain employment (i.e. students with substantial mental or physical disabilities, or students who are undocumented residents of the country who are learning English; all of which are populations traditionally served by basic skills programs). Therefore, there is a risk that this legislation, aimed to serve vulnerable populations, may in the future create unintentional barriers to the education of those it intends to serve.

Theoretical Framework: Persistence and Motivation in Adult Learners

Persistence. To persist is "to go on resolutely or stubbornly in spite of opposition, importunity, or warning" (Merriam-Webster, 2017). There are several researchers who described factors of persistence. Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999) laid a foundation for theories of persistence with regard to adult learners.

Tinto (1975) created the "integration model," which stated that the more connected or integrated a student feels in their educational environment, the more likely that student is to persist. When one feels valued, whether by faculty or peers, it also

increases the chances a student will persist. Tinto's integration model was strongly influenced by other theories such as Durkheim's theory of suicide. "According to Durkheim (1961) suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of society" (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Durkheim found a lack of interaction with fellow members of society, and an individual's value system that clashed with society's collective value system to be two of the greatest causes for disconnection (1975). Similarly, Tinto described the utter importance of students being integrated into both social and academic college systems in order to graduate and succeed (1975). Tinto (1975) stated, "one can reasonably expect, then, that social conditions affecting dropout from the social system of the college would resemble those resulting in suicide in the wider society" (p. 91). Parallels exist between persistence in education and persistence in life in general. Goal commitment, along with social and academic integration, is another vital component of Tinto's integration model.

Another influence on Tinto's integration model is a cost-benefit analysis with regard to educational activities. The cost-benefit theory states that people will put their energy towards endeavors that maximize the amount of benefits they may receive, compared to its cost, over a certain period of time (Tinto, 1975, p. 97). Cost does not have to be financial; it can also be social or any other type of sacrifice one might make to participate in an activity. Examples include, the giving up of free time, cutting back on fun with friends and loved ones, or less time and energy to dedicate to a hobby one enjoys. In cost-benefit analysis an individual must decide if the benefits of the activity outweigh the social and financials costs. With regards to a postsecondary education, the sacrifice can be great, especially for low-income adults: student loan debt, working while studying, arranging for childcare, less time for sleep and the risk of burn out. The benefits

include personal satisfaction, a greater level of knowledge, higher quality career opportunities and higher pay. With this in mind, Tinto acknowledges that the fluctuating job market is an external force that can impact the weight of the benefit of a college degree (1975). Nevertheless, if a student believes that a college degree is able to provide more value in their lives than the energy, money, and time spent earning that degree, they are highly likely to persist towards their goal.

Astin (1999) stated that students' "involvement" greatly contributes to their level of persistence. By involvement, Astin refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy a student is willing to invest in an education (1999). A student who is highly involved will belong to extracurricular organizations, have established rapport with faculty and fellow students, dedicates time to study for classes, and generally spends a large amount of time on campus (1999). The theory of student involvement "emphasizes active participation of the student in the learning process" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). One could see dropping out of college as the ultimate lack of involvement.

Astin noted that community colleges have much higher dropout rates than 4-year universities. He believed this is because the interactions with faculty and students at a community college are "minimal…and a large proportion attend college on a part-time basis" (Astin, 1999, p. 524). He found higher levels of persistence amongst students that live on campus such as is typical in 4-year colleges/universities. Students who live on campus spend more time there and tend to be more involved.

Motivation. Motivation is a concept unique from persistence. There have been numerous theories and scholars over the years to research the concept of motivation. These researchers have typically created their own specific definition of what motivation is. In general, however, most researchers tend to agree that motivation helps to explain

why people think and behave a certain way (Weiner, 1992; Wlodkowski, 2008).

Teachers aim to improve the competence of their students to increase their chances for success. Ford, one of the most renown researchers and theorists on the concept of motivation, found that in order for students to improve their competence, they must also be motivated for themselves (Ford, 1992, 1995). Ford (1992) asserted four basic prerequisites necessary for competence development:

1. The person must have the motivation needed to initiate and maintain relevant goal-directed activity.

2. The person must have the skill needed to construct and execute a pattern of activity that will facilitate progress toward desired goals.

3. The person's biological structure and functioning must be able to support the operation of the motivational and skill components.

4. The person must have the cooperation of a responsive environment that will facilitate, or at least not excessively impede, progress toward desired goals (1992).

Ford also developed the Motivational Systems Theory (MST), which stated that the goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs of a person operate together in an organized pattern to make up one's level of motivation (1995). All three parts of this theory are necessary in order for a person to initiate an activity (Campbell, 2007; Ford, 1992,).

MST described goals as the thoughts a person has about their desired future. Goals allow a person to decide what they want to achieve and the direction they are headed to do so (Ford, 1995). When a person has a particular goal, his or her thoughts steer his or her psychology and behavior, components that Ford referred to as "instrumental troops" towards make that goal a reality (1995). Actions clearly must align

with thoughts in order for a goal to be accomplished.

The emotions or emotional arousal component of MST is comprised of three components: affective (psychological such as subjective feelings), physiological (patterns of biological processing), and transactional (influential expressive gestures) (Ford, 1995). Ford explained in his theory that emotions are a very powerful aspect of motivation in adult learners and can be targeted by educators to enhance student performance (1995).

The last portion of MST is made up of personal agency beliefs that, in simple terms, are the extent to which the individual believes they can succeed in a particular scenario. Personal agency beliefs are made up of capability beliefs and context beliefs. The former being the belief that one has the skill needed to accomplish a goal; the latter is the expectation that the environment will be supportive in the efforts to reach a goal (Ford, 1995). Ford noted that although capability and context beliefs are both very important, true skills and a responsive environment must genuinely be present if one is to achieve a certain goal (1995). Campbell (2007) summarized MST as a representation of the, "direction a person is going, the emotional energy and affective experience supporting or inhibiting movement in that direction, and the expectancies that a person has about reaching their destination or achieving their goals" (p. 13).

Various studies have revealed that establishing relevance for students increases their levels of motivation. One such study of 36 college students found that students highly value relevance particularly as demonstrated by "showing how theory can be applied in practice, establishing relevance to local cases, relating material to everyday applications, or finding applications in current newsworthy issues" (Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008, p. 249). Ballantyne, Bain, and Packer (1999) found that, in particular, creating a direct link between theory and practice in the classroom was of utmost

importance to students. Throughout various studies, adult learners are demonstrating that an important way to keep interest in the classroom is through establishing relevance of materials and topics taught (Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008). Particularly, topics need to be related to student career paths, and other daily applications that are of value to an adult learner.

Self-Determination Theory asserts that all people tend to be active and integrated into society but also are vulnerable to passivity (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Kuhl & Deci, 1997). This theory examines the conditions that allow people's active/ sides to blossom and also to understand the conditions that pull people down towards passiveness and susceptibility (2000). "Motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence and equifinality-all aspects of activation and intention" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69).

The Self-Determination Theory asserted three innate psychological needs that need to be met in order for one to have satisfactory wellbeing and conditions that enhance motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These three psychological needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness (p. 68). Conversely, when these three needs are not met, they create a lack of connectedness, a lack of initiative and psychological distress that decreased motivation (p. 76). Therefore, mental health is an important facet of motivation under the Self-Determination Theory.

HSED students often have negative emotions and personal agency beliefs that may adversely impact their levels of motivation and therefore their studies (Ford, 1995; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). They also suffer from more strains on their mental health than traditional adult college students. It is vital for higher education faculty and staff to understand what motivates students and the active role they can take to increase motivation amongst the students.

Adult learning theory. It is also essential to note that motivation in adult students is different than that of children. Knowles (1984) coined the term *andragogy* to call attention to the unique needs and characteristics adult students have in a learning environment. According to Knowles, four principles can identify adult learners:

1. They are self-directed, must take responsibility for their actions, and want a reason for having to absorb new information.

2. They have a lifetime of experience, which has laid the foundation of their self-identity.

3. They are ready to learn. They are attending secondary/postsecondary education by choice, and, therefore, more likely to actively participate in the learning process.

4. They are task-motivated. Adult students seek education in order to accomplish a specific goal, and their motivation tends to be internal (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Knowles, 1984; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Knowles (1984) demonstrated adult learners need to feel a sense of purpose and find applicability in what they learn to their daily lives in order to feel motivated (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). They generally are not as interested to learn something without understanding how it will directly benefit them and improve the quality of their lives.

Knowles (1984) also discussed the importance of "framing" learning concepts in a way that is appealing to adult learners. Upon re-entry to the educational realm, adult students need to comprehend the value of their education immediately and how it directly relates to their future careers and goals. If educators fail to establish a clear connection between classroom activities, assignments and theories, and their real-life applicability, adults are quick to lose interest and/or motivation (Kenner & Weinerman 2011; Knowles, 1984).

According to Adult Learning Theory, adult learners thrive by being task and goal-oriented. However, it is easy for an adult, such as one who stopped out of high school, to return to an educational environment and feel overwhelmed or unsure of where to begin. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) specified, "One technique that has proven effective is to simplify complex tasks into smaller components" (p. 92). Adult students can then take on one smaller task at a time until an entire activity/project is complete. In this way, the students can "monitor measurable progress" and slowly build confidence in their ability to complete academic assignments (p. 92).

Although pedagogy revolves around specific content that needs to be taught to children and covered throughout the school term, in andragogy the focus is a "process design" (Knowles, 1984, p. 14). Faculty in the andragogocial model should guide adults to various resources and methods by which they can acquire knowledge and accomplish goals, rather than simply imparting content (1984). Adults need to be empowered to utilize various tools by which they can take charge of their education and reach personal goals.

Educators and administrators can utilize Adult Learning Theory to gain deeper insight into their valued students and their needs. Programs can be developed in ways that cater to the uniqueness of adult learners who come to class with a wide variety of life experiences that may help or hinder their classroom learning. Veterans, single parents, emancipated teenagers, recovering addicts, homeless individuals, full-time working professionals, and nonnative English speakers are all examples of adult learners that typically gather together on the college campus with the goal of improving their lives.

Need for Research

"Developmental education can greatly benefit from continued studies that listen directly to students' voices and perceptions of their own college experiences" (Barbartis, 2010, p. 22). Often, studies that examine transition from GED programs to postsecondary education are quantitative in nature and examine statistical data.

Although available research explores the perceptions of GED test-takers, there is very little literature that specifically investigates the perceptions of GED graduates in rural areas, and within the community college setting. Further, many of the studies that have been conducted are outdated.

Contributions were needed to add to a basis of literature that lacks current data to document the perceptions of HSED graduates transitioning to higher education. Studies on this phenomenon add to a very meager body of literature on an important topic in higher education. Further, many of the abovementioned studies focus on experiences at larger urban universities, whereas studies are needed for GED completers in more rural settings. This study provided needed qualitative data pertaining to GED graduate perceptions within a rural, community college setting.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived barriers and supports of HSED graduates attaining a higher education degree at a community college in North Carolina.

1. What barriers do HSED graduates at a rural college in North Carolina perceive hindered them from entering into postsecondary programs?

2. Which aspects of the Adult Secondary Credentials classroom environment did HSED graduates perceive as supportive to their success?

3. How does the successful completion of a HSED program change a student's perception of learning and/or increase their motivation to continue their education at a higher education institution?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived barriers and perceived program supports of HSED graduates' consideration as to whether to attain a higher education degree at a community college in North Carolina and how completing the HSED changes a student's perception of learning and/or increases their motivation to continue their studies. This study contributed to a body of literature in need of current data (especially in rural areas and community colleges) that explores the lack of GED graduates transitioning to postsecondary education. Other areas that were explored include contributing factors to persistence and motivation of GED completers.

Qualitative Research Approach

The design for this qualitative study took a phenomenological approach. "Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p. 11). Because the researcher aimed to understand the perceived barriers of HSED graduates upon their consideration of attaining a higher education degree at a community college, phenomenology was an appropriate fit. This approach was framed through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). "IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). This kind of analysis allowed for perceptions and experiences to be described in their own unique terms instead of predefined systems.

Creswell (2013) stated, "A phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals" (p. 82). As such, the researcher sought to gain a better comprehension of the perceived barriers of HSED students. This deeper understanding presented needed data that provides insight as to the reasons behind

the lack of HSED graduates transitioning to higher education.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a way to conduct qualitative research that is comprised of foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. "The aims set by IPA researchers tend to focus upon people's experiences and/or understanding of particular phenomena" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 46).

"IPA requires the researcher to collect detailed, reflective, first-person accounts from research participants" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 101). These first-person accounts allow for quality self-expression from the participants which can allow one to enter the world of the participant and gain understanding of that person's perceptions and lived experience with regard to a particular phenomenon (assuming good rapport is built with the researcher).

Phenomenology. The phenomenological roots of IPA focus on digging deep into human lived experience and perception. Phenomenology utilizes the philosophical ideas of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Husserl's writings first established the value of focusing on experience and perception. He sought to get to the core of human experience and cared much about people having a true understanding of their own experience. Husserl was, "primarily concerned with what can be broadly classified as individual psychological processes, such as perception, awareness and consciousness" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). Rather than focusing on the phenomenon itself, Husserl placed more value on one's perception of such a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl believed that if a person could have a profound understanding of their own experience, then one could "transcend" their conditions and as such, truly share their experience with others (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102).

Thus, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology aimed to surpass the "everyday assumptions" of human beings to arrive at the "universal essence" of the way a phenomenon reaches human consciousness (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102).

Heidegger, once a student of Husserl, diverged into a method of phenomenology that also leans towards hermeneutics. Heidegger felt Husserl's ideas were too focused on abstract concepts and needed to be more grounded in reality. Heidegger was therefore, "concerned with the conceptual basis of existence" from a "deliberately worldly perspective" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 17).

Merleau-Ponty shared much of Heidegger's phenomenological ideas but emphasized "the lived experience of being a body in the world" (p. 19). He saw the physical human body as a person's way of interacting with the world, rather than being an object of the world (2009). Sartre also shared much of Heidegger's philosophies, such as the "worldliness" of lived experience, but expressed a view that humans are a constantly evolving being (2009). Sartre described humans as an ever-developing work-in-progress whose perceptions would change in the presence or absence of other humans (2009).

Hermeneutics. Although IPA is rooted in phenomenology, it also is founded in the theory of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is what brings the "interpretative" element to IPA and is grounded in the philosophies of Schleiermacher, Heidegger (as previously mentioned) and Gadamer (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Schleiermacher's theories involved interpretation as both "grammatical" and "psychological" embracing a "holistic view" that meaning could be found in both the physical text and through the intuition of the one observing the subject (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 22). Schleiermacher presented a bold claim that at times a researcher can know their subjects better than the

subjects know themselves (2009).

Heidegger, as discussed earlier, believed in a more interpretative form of phenomenology than his mentor Husserl. He posited that researchers bring their pre-conceptions or "fore-structure of understanding" to qualitative studies presenting a hurdle to objectivity in interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 25). Heidegger believed that one could never fully eliminate their preconceptions when conducting research, but that one could at least be aware of the inevitability of a researcher's point of view and life experiences being entangled with the subject matter at hand.

Last, Gadamer only partially agreed with Schleiermacher's assertions. Gadamer agreed that a researcher could discern valuable and accurate meaning from a text, possibly knowing the text better than the author him/herself; but disagreed that this concept also applied to knowing the author better than the author knew him/herself (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Gadamer also emphasized the importance of historical context with regards to texts and their original intended meaning being embedded in the specific time period it was created (2009). He believed we needed to take the circumstance of providing a past text with present-day viewpoints into consideration during the interpretative process (2009).

Idiography. The last major influence of IPA is idiography. Idiography focuses on the particular, or "situating participants in their particular contexts, exploring their personal perspectives, and starting with a detailed examination of each case before moving to more general claims" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 32). Idiographic foundations can clearly be seen in IPA, as it incorporates detailed analysis and the specific perspective and/or experience of the way a phenomenon occurs to a certain group of people.

Summary of IPA. A simple overview of the founding theories of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allows one to have a bit more of an understanding of the intentions and purpose of IPA. The philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography that comprise IPA create a unique method for qualitative research. As such, IPA researchers are able to allow their subjects to share their unique experiences and perspectives in their own words.

Participants

This study took place in a rural community college in North Carolina. The socioeconomic statuses of the students at this school ranged from lower class to lower middle class. The researcher had a small sample size of seven participants. Smith et al. (2009) specified, "IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogenous sample, so that, within the sample, we can examine convergence and divergence in some detail" (p. 3).

The study was conducted through purposive homogenous sampling. "Participants are selected on the basis that they can grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). The researcher sought participants who were both local residents between the ages of 18 and 35 and HSED graduates who had successfully entered into postsecondary courses. Students were invited to participate in the study upon meeting the above-mentioned criteria and were asked to sign consent forms to participate. The students were clearly explained the nature of the study and the fact that they may end their participation at any time and were under no obligation to continue.

The first 10 students to answer the invitation to participate were selected; however, only seven of those students ultimately ended up participating. All seven

participants signed the consent forms. The seven participants consisted of five females and two males. Two of the participants were nonnative English speakers who moved to America from other countries.

Data Collection Tools

Interview questionnaires were used as data collection tools. "The aim of an interview is largely to facilitate an interaction which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). There were several steps used to develop such questionnaires. The researcher created a list of interview questions for the students who had consented to participate in the study. These questions were based on information from the literature review and focused on gathering data and information that effectively answered the research questions of the study (Creswell, 2013). The questions were submitted to a panel of experts comprised of leaders and scholars in continuing education in North Carolina. The panel reviewed the questions and provided feedback on ways such questions could be improved. The researcher made revisions and resubmitted the interview questions for review. Once the panel officially approved the interview questionnaire, it was ready to be used as the data collection tool (located in the Appendix). The questionnaire was utilized in a semi-structured, in-depth, individual interview format. "One-to-one interviews are easily managed, allowing a rapport to be developed and giving participants the space to think, speak and be heard" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). The researcher made every effort to develop positive rapport and make the participants feel comfortable throughout the process.

Procedures

This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach, more specifically, it integrated an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to qualitative

inquiry. As stated earlier, there are three main components to IPA: phenomenology (concerned with the study of experience), hermeneutics (interpreting and making sense of how a phenomenon appears), and idiography (examining details of experiences and the way those details are understood by a participant) (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is very much concerned with personal experiences, particularly the way one makes sense of a major life experience. Smith et al. (2009) indicated, "IPA concurs with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process" (p. 32). This approach is concerned with the way participants make sense of their major life experiences and seeks an in-depth examination of that sense-making in a specific case (2009). Therefore, this approach was appropriate because this study sought to generate a deeper understanding of the perceived barriers and supports of HSED graduates upon their consideration of attaining a higher education degree at a community college.

The researcher first sought the permission of both the site of the study (a rural community college in North Carolina) and the university at which the author is matriculated, Nova Southeastern University. This included IRB approval from both institutions. Both institutions were provided with the purpose of the study, as well as the methods, procedures, and a timeline, which allowed them to make an informed decision. Once permission was granted, the researcher began to invite participants into the study.

Next, the participants were invited through written and verbal invitations by the researcher. They were selected through purposeful homogenous sampling (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher had the advantage of being an administrator over a department at the study site and, therefore, had direct daily access to potential participants. The researcher sought participants who were both local residents between the ages of 18 and 35 and HSED graduates who had successfully entered into curriculum courses.

Participants were provided with information regarding the study, consent forms, and were granted the opportunity to ask questions throughout the process.

The researcher gathered the consent forms from willing students and contacted the students who were invited to participate in the study. A flexible schedule was constructed that served as a guide for conducting semi-structured, in-depth, individual interviews with the participants (Smith et al., 2009). Once the schedule was set, the interviews began. Interviews were created based on mutually convenient times for both the participants and the researcher. Rapport was established at the beginning of the interview in order to make the participants feel relaxed and have a sense of trust with the researcher (2009).

Smith et al. (2009) stated that with regards to interviewing, "A schedule with between six and ten open questions, along with possible prompts, will tend to occupy between 45 and 90 minutes of conversation, depending on the topic" (p. 60). The researcher took this into account to ensure that participants were comfortable and were asked to remain for an appropriate, and not too lengthy, amount of time. Typically interviews lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes, although some participants were short in their responses and had much shorter interviews. The schedule was flexible as well. For the convenience of the participants, interviews took place in the researcher's office that is located across the hall from the HSE classrooms on campus. It was a very easy location for the participants to find as they were already familiar with the building and hallways.

The participants in this study were interviewed individually two times each (with the exception of one participant who failed to attend the second set of interviews). During the process, the author "bracketed" personal experiences and understandings on the

subject matter so they did not interfere with the interview process (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were audio-recorded (for transcription), and the researcher also wrote notes during the interview. By asking the interview questions more than once, the data was able "lead to a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). There were a few discrepancies noted in between some responses of the first set of interviews and the second set of interviews. Transcriptions of the interviews were coded in order to find "shared meanings" (2013).

Data Analysis

"Transcripts of interviews are analyzed case by case through a systematic, qualitative analysis" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 4). That process begins during the interviewing session during which the researcher actively listens and takes notes. In accordance with this, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin developed six steps that can be utilized accordingly to analyze collected data. Therefore, the researcher diligently utilized these steps to conduct the data analysis. These six steps included "(a) reading and re-reading the transcriptions individually, (b) noting anything of interest during interviews, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) finishing the analysis of one participant's transcription and moving on to the next, (f) looking for patterns that demonstrate connections among participants' experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 92-101). The researcher did take note that there were a few discrepancies between some responses of the first set of interviews and the second set of interviews.

Ethical Considerations

There are various ethical considerations that the researcher honored throughout the research process. First, all participants were provided with accurate information upfront that included the purpose of the research study, the procedures and methods of the study, as well as the students' right to confidentiality. Consent forms were signed and collected from all students who wished to participate in the study. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Smith et al., 2009).

Confidentiality of the site of the study and the participants' identities were maintained in any and all related documentation such as the transcription files (Creswell, 2013). Participants were assigned a code letter on documents to create anonymity. Such transcripts will be kept securely on the computer with two passwords to access the digital information. Printed transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher has a key for the next 3 years.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure trustworthiness of the study, interviews were conducted individually and over the course of two sessions. The researcher transcribed, coded, and analyzed data with extreme thoughtfulness and care. Participants reviewed their own transcriptions for accuracy. Additionally, as Creswell (2013) noted, "Extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of a study" (p. 250). The researcher followed Creswell's suggestions in order to ensure trustworthiness of the study.

Potential Research Bias

Any researcher needs to be aware of any potential bias in order to ensure that personal views and feelings do not taint the quality of their study. Researchers must strive to be as subjective as possible when collecting and analyzing data (Creswell, 2013). Because the author serves as an administrator over ASC students, there already existed preconceptions of barriers for the students. However, being aware of personal biases is the first step to assuring a quality study. Therefore, the researcher kept a journal that served as a form of catharsis and reflection throughout the process.

Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative research study utilized a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The researcher sought to explore the perceived barriers and supports of HSED graduates upon their consideration of attaining a higher education degree at a community college as well as to discover any possible changes in motivation and perception of learning. The IPA approach to analysis for this study was fitting to answer the research questions because it allowed the participants to describe their perceptions freely and in their own words. This chapter describes IPA in further detail, discusses the sample of participants, and shares the emergent themes that surfaced in response to the research questions of the study.

The Sample

The study utilized purposive homogenous sampling. The participant sample of this study consisted of seven high school equivalency graduates who had transitioned to postsecondary programing at a rural college in North Carolina. There were five females and two males, and their ages ranged from 18 to 40. Five of the participants were American-born Caucasians, one was foreign-born Hispanic (a nonnative English speaker who went through both the HSED and ESL programs), and one foreign-born Asian (nonnative English speaker who went through both the HSED and ESL programs). All seven participants were local residents who lived near the college in a rural area of North Carolina. The socioeconomic statuses of the participants ranged from lower to lower middle class.

Emergent Themes

As the interviews were conducted, dominant emergent themes became evident. The emergent themes successfully answered the research questions stated previously in

Chapter 2:

1. What barriers do HSED graduates at a rural college in North Carolina perceive hindered them from entering into postsecondary programs?

2. Which aspects of the Adult Secondary Credentials classroom environment did HSED graduates perceive as supportive to their success?

3. How does the successful completion of a HSED program change a student's perception of learning and/or increase their motivation to continue their education at a higher education institution?

The research questions addressed perceived barriers, environmental aspects that students perceived as supportive to their success, and whether HSED completion changed a student's perception of learning and/or increased their motivation to continue their education. The result was qualitative data that provides insight into HSED graduate transitions to postsecondary programs.

Perceived Barriers

The first research question of the study asked, "What barriers do HSED graduates at a rural college in North Carolina perceive hindered them from entering into postsecondary programs?" Upon analysis of the interviews, several emergent themes surfaced with regard to the barriers HSED graduates perceived when considering entering postsecondary education. Namely those barriers were language barriers, feelings of insecurity, concerns about time, and how to pay for college. These concerns repeatedly came up throughout the interviews with the seven students.

Language barrier. The two nonnative English-speaking students who were interviewed twice expressed that their biggest barrier to attending college was the language barrier; specifically, a level of English fluency sufficient to handle college-level

academics. Both students enrolled in the High School Equivalency program as well as in the English as a Second Language program at the college before attempting to enter postsecondary education. One student stated, "I come from a country that we don't speak English so I have to learn a lot of things especially in a college degree you have to learn, I think, what they call like formal words, is a lot of vocabularies that is not really used in umm, what they call daily life, so it will be harder especially like writing or reading." Both students echoed sentiments of "fear," anxiety, and doubt when thinking of entering a college environment as a nonnative English speaker. Further, one of the students mentioned in both interviews that two negative encounters with college personnel she had when registering for college impacted her so strongly that she officially withdrew from school. She described the conversation she had with one college employee, "And she said, 'What? You are coming to apply to get into this class and how are you going to do it if you don't understand what I am saying? If I am saying very simple things?' So, when I leave the office I felt like, gosh, I think this is not for me in that moment--so I start to change my mind in another way." When the researcher probed the student further into describing the way it made her feel, she shared, "I felt stupid…the way that this lady treat me, I thought, and that's the way the teachers will going to treat me." The student's body language (eyes filling with tears) and tone of voice (quivering with emotion) demonstrated how traumatic this experience was for her.

Insecurities. Among the research subjects, feelings of insecurity were another very powerful emergent theme. All seven of the participants stated that they did not feel "capable" or had "doubts" about being able to handle the college-level coursework. One gentleman stated, "I didn't think I was capable. It had been like, I dunno, like 14 years since I had been in school. I didn't even pay attention in school then. You know what I

mean?" One student echoed a very similar sentiment when she stated, "As a high school dropout I felt stupid, like I would never be anything in a way." That belief that she could never amount to anything kept her from applying to college. Two additional subjects used the word "stupid" to describe how they felt about themselves before applying to college. One nonnative English speaker stated, "I felt stupid. Stupid cause I felt too bad, too dumb, to start to understand another language, and I felt that if I feel that dumb in class, I will feel like a dumb in front of paper; it was a very strong feeling of impotency."

Age was another factor that compounded some student's insecurities about entering the college environment. Two of the seven people interviewed stated they were afraid they were "too old." When interviewed the first time, one gentleman stated he never was interested in going to college and only ever wanted an HSED for the express purpose of "getting a job." However, at the second interview when we dove deeper into discussing his fear of being the oldest student in the room, he shared, "Like ugh, it made me feel like I was…I want to say just like an idiot, but that ain't exactly right. Anxiety, definitely. And just kind of like in the back of my head like, why haven't I done it before? Why did I wait so long to do this?" Upon further discussion, he expressed that the fear of being the oldest student in the college classes brought up a sense of regret in not having attended college sooner. However, he did state that once he entered the college classroom, he was so relieved to find that there was a wide range of diversity and ages and, otherwise, and his fear was unfounded.

Another woman felt that being older when she graduated from college would not allow her to achieve her ultimate goal of gaining employment. She stated, "And when I graduate, I will be a person without experience, and too many young people is competing for jobs. So, I thought probably I will never go to the college."

Time. Another concern HSED graduates had upon considering entering postsecondary programming was having the time to do it. Five of the seven research subjects mentioned working full-time, going to school, and having the time to manage each of these necessary priorities. One young woman stated, "I've had a full-time job since I was like 15, so I was thinking, 'Oh, I'll never have time to go to college because like I have to continue working.'" Two of those same five research subjects also described the additional challenge or raising young children. One woman shared, "Balancing personal life…and then 'cause I am raising my daughter, whatever, so it seems more harder when you have to support her and a roof and then go to school too." Juggling various large responsibilities and priorities is a challenge for any person; however, for someone who was unable to finish high school and had to complete at a later age, this multi-tasking lifestyle can seem especially daunting.

Money. Three of the seven research subjects described the hardship of living in poverty and trying to attend school, "You know, just trying to figure out a way to make it and try to study." Some of them received financial aid, and some did not. Another student shared, "I didn't think to go to college too because it's kind of expensive, and that's gonna be a problem for me." The research subjects frequently reiterated the challenge of both working full-time to provide financially and going to school at the same time.

Perceived Supports

The second research question of this study asked, "Which aspects of the Adult Secondary Credentials classroom environment did HSED graduates perceive as supportive to their success?" The interviewed HSED graduates had three main areas they perceived as their greatest supports and favorite classroom components. The research subjects described their supports as their teachers, the small-group instruction of their

break-out classes, and available technology (particularly digital practice tests and distance learning) were the elements that they believed allowed them to make it to graduation.

Teachers. The most notable perceived support throughout the interviews was the teachers, as described by all seven of the seven interviewees. When the research subjects described their teachers, they provided the most animated and enthusiastic responses, notably more so than any other part of the interview. All seven students emphasized strongly (through body language, excited tone of voice, and misty eyes) the support of their teachers and profound impact they had on their educational journey. These graduates each expressed a deep sense of gratitude. Words they used included: "patient," "understanding," "friendly," and "really helpful" to describe the instructors of the HSED program. The words "encouragement" and "helpful" were used three times each by multiple research subjects in describing interactions with instructors. One person stated, "They had a good attitude about what they teach and not just come in like 'Oh, I gotta be here' [laughs]. It gave me encouragement, and that is what helped me."

Four out of the seven students interviewed stated that their teacher was their favorite part of the entire HSED program. When one woman was asked about her favorite program component, she responded, "Instructors 'cause they were very passionate for what they done… and they really enjoyed, like, they really sat down and worked with you until you understood it." Another woman answered how another instructor "would send me emails when I umm, missed one class, she gave me the umm, showed us so I don't miss anything. She called me sometimes…the teachers were the key… all the time she was there for me whenever I need them."

Technology. Research subjects found technology to be instrumental to their

success as well. Five out of the seven students said they believed computers were one of their favorite components of the program. One HSED graduate stated, "The computers were the best… it was the most wonderful tool they gave us." Four out of the seven interviewees stated that the distance learning availability of the HSED program was necessary to their success, and it provided them with the ability to have the time to earn a degree without being physically on campus. One person shared, "It was just a very, very complicated time in my life so for it to be so easy to like, do it [the HSED program] from afar. It just helped me out so much so that was probably my favorite." Three of the seven students stated that they did the vast majority of their program online and rarely had to come to campus, a fact for which they expressed gratitude. Another person really enjoyed being physically on campus each day, but described the distance learning as a necessary supplement to her education.

Another favorite technological component that was repeatedly mentioned was the digital practice tests. All seven research subjects brought up the practice tests at one point or at multiple points during the interviews and described them as very helpful and necessary. One gentleman specified, "They knew exactly where to pinpoint you from all the little pre-tests… that really narrowed it down to what I needed to focus on."

Small-group instruction. At the rural community college where the research was conducted, the HSED program has various learning formats and settings; there are learning labs with larger groups and flexible hours, and break-out classes for small-group direct instruction that has a defined schedule and attendance policy. Three of the seven students specifically mentioned how beneficial they found the break-out classes of small-group instruction. One graduate stated, "I like the break-out classes. It felt like it helped me, 'cause I am a visual learner, so that's what helped me… instead of my sitting down

and reading [in the larger lab classroom]. It will take me longer to do than if somebody show me something then I can understand it and apply it to the other things." Another student responded, "Oh, well, the student-teacher was real good, that helped, so you didn't have to wait forever if you have a question."

Motivation and Perceptions of Learning

The third research question of this study asked, "How does the successful completion of a HSED program change a student's perception of learning and/or increase their motivation to continue their education at a higher education institution?" As mentioned earlier, interviews were conducted twice. When the research subjects were asked about motivation in the two interviews, there was a discrepancy between the responses in the first and second interviews. In the first interview, all seven subjects responded "yes," they did experience an increase in motivation after graduation with an HSED diploma. In the second set of interviews, one student never responded because she failed to attend. Another student who previously stated "yes" in the first interview, felt in her second interview that she was always motivated and graduating with an HSED had not changed that. Nevertheless, it was quite evident through enthusiastic responses that graduating with an HSED brought the majority of these research subjects a substantial increase in motivation. One student answered, "Absolutely! Once I got the GED…it was…I spent years just going 'eh I just gotta stick with restaurants, I have to stick with furniture, just low-level stuff' and then once I got my GED, it was just BOOM the door was open! And I did--I joined the military, I got my position at the city, and now next semester I am getting ready to start my bachelor's which is really exciting."

Students also demonstrated a shift in their perception of learning and self after graduating with an HSED. One young woman stated, "I hated school and learning until I

started getting my HSE and I passed, and I am smart. I felt smarter and I felt just more able to learn…" This correlates with the earlier section of insecurities under the perceived barriers of the students: the barrier of feeling "stupid" or "incapable" of learning.

According to their responses, the journey through the HSED program and successful graduation allowed the students to overcome various fears and insecurities, changing their perception of self. One person stated, "College seemed like this really scary thing to me and like a huge commitment, and I'm afraid of commitment so I think it did kind of change my mind a little bit once I started to come in and realize that, yeah, I can read and write." Another student echoed similar sentiments when he stated, "Before I started GED program, I wasn't 100% sure I could handle the work load. But after doing the GED program, I figured if I could handle that then I could handle the other [college]." Yet another research subject described how relieved he was to not be the oldest person in the room. Confronting and overcoming fears allowed students to think differently about postsecondary education and about themselves.

College is now possible. Nearly all of the interviewees (six out of the seven interviewed) communicated that graduating with an HSED made them believe, for the first time in their lives, that college could be possible for them. "When I started getting my high school equivalent, like, it made it seem more possible…It actually was like okay, like I can do this, so obviously I can go to college and it will be okay." Another student who was facing a language barrier responded, "Yeah, because I feel like I can do the GED, I can do everything—because, at first, I was like, this is hard, the language is hard, I don't think I can do it, but once you [get] into it and you think that you can do it, it's not that hard."

Six of the seven students described passing a practice HSED test and/or the

official HSED test sections as the exact moment they believed they could go to college.

There was emotion in nearly all the participants' voices when they described passing

their first HSED tests. One person enthusiastically shared, "At the moment I passed the

exam of pretest for the GED, I think, I think I can do it! I think I can go to college!"

Two individuals specifically mentioned the impact the graduation ceremony itself

had on them. One woman said, "I actually felt like I accomplished something." Another

reflected, "When I got my GED diploma and I was in that ceremony with my gown and

everything I said- I mean it was incredible, I felt empowered to do it." Students also

reflected on the significance of being the first person in their family to graduate from

high school, or the first person in their family to ever graduate on American soil.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the sample of this small qualitative research study was described as

seven HSED graduates who had successfully entered postsecondary education at a rural

community college in North Carolina. Upon analysis of the data, emergent themes

became evident, and Chapter 4 included a description of the emergent themes as they

pertained to the original research questions regarding perceived barriers, perceived

supports, and shifts in motivation and the perception of learning.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

The aim of this study was to explore the perceived barriers and supports of HSED graduates in the consideration of attaining a higher education degree at a community college in North Carolina and how completing the HSED program changes students' perceptions of learning and motivation to continue their studies at higher education institutions. This was achieved through conducting a qualitative study that utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Few studies have been conducted to examine the perceived barriers and supports of HSED graduates in rural communities. Therefore, this study has the potential to increase knowledge and contribute to previous research conducted on American HSED graduates and their lack of transition to postsecondary programming.

Research Question 1: Perceived Barriers

The first research question in this study inquired, "What barriers do HSED graduates at a rural college in North Carolina perceive hindered them from entering into postsecondary programs?" The qualitative data indicated that for the nonnative English speakers enrolled in the HSED program, the language barrier of not speaking college-level academic English was the biggest concern that made these individuals believe that college was not possible. One such student in the study withdrew from college due to experiences she perceived to be discriminatory and humiliating from two different college staff members who questioned her ability to speak English. Exploring this student's experience sheds valuable insight on a topic rarely discussed. There is very little research that examines nonnative English-speaking HSED students and their experiences when transitioning to postsecondary education. Typically, Basic Skills programs keep

English as a Second Language education separate from High School Equivalency programs. Many colleges, such as the site of the research study, have a gap that exists in services for those seeking to develop or improve college-level academic English, but already have a high school credential.

The interviews provided qualitative data that supports current research that adult learners have a lot of insecurities, fears, and concerns about their capability of handling college-level work after a history of dropping out of high school. This study confirms Grubb and Gabriner's (2013) assertion that a perceived barrier for many adult education students are concerns about the way college faculty, staff, and fellow peers at the college could see HSED graduates/nontraditional students as inferior (due to their advanced age, intellect, language barrier, socioeconomic level). The findings of this study also support research that demonstrates that low self-confidence and an expectation of failure make some HSED students believe they could never go to college (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Wilson, 2006).

The nontraditional students of this study expressed a disadvantage due to their lack of various resources. This supports earlier research of Zafft (2008) who found financial matters to be a top concern of adult education students. Participants repeatedly shared concerns of being able to work full-time, earn enough money to pay the bills and possibly support children, and go to college. Financial issues, the risk of exhaustion and burnout, combined with a lack of familial financial and emotional support were all evident in this study, in adherence to the existing research of Grubb and Gabriner (2013) and Zafft (2008).

Some of the students shared that they were the first in their family to graduate from high school and/or attend college. This supports evidence from Reder (2007) who

wrote about the Socioeconomic Diversity Index and the ways a lack of guidance from family can impact negatively education. This is a barrier that may very well be more prevalent among rural students attending community colleges when compared to suburban/urban students attending universities with generations of family members who have already succeeded at higher educational attainment.

Research Question 2: Perceived Supports

The second research question of this study examined, "Which aspects of the Adult Secondary Credentials classroom environment did HSED graduates perceive as supportive to their success?" The overwhelming response was that the educators of the HSED program were perceived as the greatest support along the journey. This finding is consistent with available literature that defines rapport as a top retention tool in education and the importance of connection with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tinto, 1975). The high level of encouragement seemed to help the students overcome their insecurities. It seemed having someone (an instructor) who believed they could do it, when they did not believe in themselves yet, really helped them to continue on. The research subjects repeatedly described their teachers as comforting and reassuring to them when they were anxious or self-doubting. Again, this finding supports Tinto's integration model and how feeling valued by faculty has the potential to increase a student's level of persistence (1975). Faculty support and encouragement seemed to counter the high-level of insecurities the students had and therefore aided greatly in tearing down that barrier of negative self-perception and an expectation of failure.

Technology was another support among the research subjects that they believed made their journey more feasible. Consistent with the writings of Reder (2007) and Zafft (2008), the HSED/basic skills education participants in this study were from low

socioeconomic backgrounds and for some this was their first exposure to computers. First, the digital practice tests in the classroom allowed anxious students to see exactly what academic areas of the HSE exam were strengths and which were weaknesses. The research subjects believed that the practice tests allowed them to know they were ready for the official HSED exams without wasting the time and money on the official exams and experiencing a failure. The digital practice tests allowed students to discover, in a low-pressure scenario, which subjects they were ready to test in (i.e., math, reading…), and which subjects they needed to focus their time and energy on to improve and be ready to succeed on the official HSE exam. The research subjects described passing these tests as an enormous boost in self-confidence and calming their fears of failure. Others described passing the digital practice test as meeting a goal or defined it as the moment they knew they could go to college. This study demonstrated that the digital practice tests became a direct connection to the students' goal attainment (of graduating and having a better future); this supports the Adult Learning Theory of Knowles (1984) which states that adults will be more motivated to learn when they feel their material is directly related to their goals and real-life achievement.

The option of distance education also meant that for those working full-time, raising children, or facing other personal challenges in their life, that they were able to complete their high school education online instead of having to physically appear on campus. Other students who needed additional effort to achieve twelfth grade level academics, utilized the distance education option as an opportunity for supplemental study time in addition to their on-campus face-to-face classes. This finding correlates to Reder's Postsecondary Risk Index for Nonpersistence that states that students who work full-time while studying, are single parents, or are older than typical students have a

greater risk of dropping out of their education (2007). Therefore, the perceived support of technology and distance education helped tackle the barriers of time/balancing priorities and also financial concerns (i.e. spend less money on transportation).

In the multi-formatted educational offerings at this rural community college, students had the opportunity to choose how they wanted to study. They were given the options of attending large learning lab environments where they could work independently, utilize distance education, attend specific small-group instruction break-out classes (that focused on a particular exam area such as reading or algebra), or attend any combination of the aforementioned formats. The research subjects shared that they found the small-group instruction to be particularly helpful. They discussed benefits of direct instruction and a small learning environment where they received more attention, less waiting time to receive assistance, and were able to develop stronger rapport with the instructors. This study, therefore, demonstrates support for Tinto's integration model and the way that a deeper connection to one's educational environment can increase persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Some participants expressed they were able to learn at a much faster pace due to the direct instruction versus independent learning. This finding supports the research of Hollingsworth and Ybarra (2017) recognizing direct instruction as a best-practice in education and also echoes the benefit of rapport-building as a retention tool.

Research Question 3: Motivation and Perception of Learning

The third research question of this study asked, "How does the successful completion of an HSED program change a student's perception of learning and/or increase their motivation to continue their education at a higher education institution?" The research participants responded with a resounding "yes" that earning an HSED

boosted their motivation to achieve higher levels of educational attainment and seek

better-paying employment opportunities. Some of the participants expressed much more

satisfaction with "white-collar" work as opposed to the "back-breaking labor" they were

forced to accept as high-school dropouts. This supports established research that job

satisfaction raises with higher levels of educational attainment (Baum, Ma, & Payea,

2013; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; Song & Patterson, 2011).

This study provided evidence in support of Ford's Motivational Systems Theory

(MST), especially when it came to the concept of personal agency beliefs (Ford, 1992).

Ford's personal agency beliefs of MST consist of *capability beliefs* (the individual

believing they are capable) and *context beliefs* (the expectation that the environment will

be supportive to the attainment of the individual's goal) (Ford, 1995). This study

demonstrated the power of both capability beliefs and context beliefs in the lives of all

seven research subjects. The act of succeeding in earning an HSED completely shifted

the students' belief in themselves and in the possibility of attending college. Their

perceptions of learning and their own capability to learn became transformed as they

began to pass digital practice tests and official HSE exams. The act of graduating

replaced the belief of being a failure with a fulfilling sense of accomplishment. The

research participants openly shared a shift in capability beliefs from, "I thought I was

stupid and I hated school," to earning an HSED and believing, "I am smart, and I am able

to learn." Regarding context beliefs, the participants found the instructors, small-group

instruction and technological tools as elements that made their environment supportive to

reaching their goal of graduating high school. Additionally, discovering that the college

environment was much more diverse in age than expected, addressed the fear several held

that postsecondary education is only appropriate for the young traditional student.

Therefore, having both their capability and context beliefs successfully addressed, these graduates experienced great shifts in their perception of learning and became more motivated to continue their educational journeys (Ford, 1995).

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study are valuable to faculty and staff, administrators, and policy-makers of both secondary and postsecondary institutions who seek to improve transition rates of HSED students into postsecondary programming. This study provides evidence of the impact that instructors and the classroom environment can have on the life and achievement of an adult student. This research suggests that special attention should be paid to those students who come in with a belief that they are a failure and/or are afraid to be on a college campus, which in reality, tends to be the majority of Basic Skills students.

This study also suggests the value technology and distance education opportunities provide to nontraditional students in allowing them to balance the multiple priorities and challenges they face as they try to continue their education. Institutions of learning must keep in mind that technology is a tool that members of lower socio-economic classes may not be able to afford or a tool to which they may have never been exposed. Policy-makers, administrators, and educators need to find ways to integrate technology as a basic and necessary component for learning in preparation for future academic and career success of students.

With the possibility of improving both "capability beliefs" students hold about themselves and "context beliefs" students perceive of their environments, the findings of this study suggest that educators have the power to greatly improve motivation in their adult learners (Ford, 1995). With an increased sense of motivation and a more positive

perception of learning and of self, adult learners/non-traditional students may be more willing to reach for higher levels of educational attainment. When adult students are more highly motivated, there is the prospect of increased graduation rates at both the secondary and postsecondary level and potential is generated for a more educated community and an improved local economy.

Limitations

This study had various limitations. First, the sample size was small because it was limited to ten participants (in accordance with IPA research methodology); however, in actuality, only seven students participated. Of the seven research subjects who participated, six of those students attended both interviews, and one student attended only the first interview and did not return for the second one. There also were more females then males interviewed (five females and two males) because this researcher accepted the first ten students to answer to the research invitation.

The researcher noted that during the interview process some of the research participants had a much easier time opening up and sharing their feelings compared to others who struggled to produce more than a couple of words at a time. Although the researcher made attempts to further engage such participants in further discussion, she did not anticipate such an issue, and, therefore, felt a bit blindsided and unsure how to handle students who were short and curt with their responses.

The study was also limited to one community college in a rural area of North Carolina. HSED graduates in urban environments may very likely face unique challenges and perceive different supports when compared with rural HSED graduates. This study also was limited in scope to one moment in time, instead of being able to examine HSED graduates at various points in their lives. It is unknown what successes and perceptions

they may potentially have in the future. Therefore, in accordance with the IPA approach, this researcher will not intend to generalize a population based on the qualitative data (Smith et al., 2009).

Recommendations for Further Study

In the future, it would be beneficial to conduct more research on HSED graduates from both rural and urban populations; the former of which has very limited research currently. Studying other rural colleges across North Carolina could provide the state with valuable insight and qualitative data. It could also be quite valuable to conduct a comparative study between graduates in rural and urban environments and explore the similarities and differences in their perceived barriers.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to dive deeper into the interview questions, particularly with students who are more introverted or find it more challenging to answer such kinds of personal interview questions. The researcher should be prepared to encounter research subjects who are more talkative, as well as those from whom eliciting an in-depth response can prove to be more challenging.

An interesting possibility for future research is examining ways to support nonnative English-speaking students as they transition to college. Often English language learners are able to earn an HSED but then find when they transition to college that their English is insufficient. There is a gap that exists in service to these students. America is made up of millions upon millions of immigrants; however, there is very little research that examines nonnative English-speaking HSED students and their experiences when transitioning to postsecondary education. This could make for a fascinating and valuable research study.

Another recommendation for further research would be to turn the exploration of

the perceptions of rural HSED graduates into a longevity study to see the professions and accomplishments of such graduates after five, ten, or more years. It could certainly be beneficial to see if graduates went on to graduate from college, pursue graduate degrees, relocate from the rural area, and continue to increase their professional status and income throughout their lives.

Conclusion

This final chapter revisited a brief overview of the study, followed by a discussion on the three initial research questions and the way the findings contributed to an existing body of literature regarding perceived barriers and supports of High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) graduates. What made this qualitative study unique was the fact that it focused on the perceptions of seven HSED graduates at a rural community college in North Carolina, a topic which up to this point has had very little specific research. It is recommended that further research be conducted to continue exploring the perceived barriers and supports of HSED graduates in both rural and urban locations. Although this research possesses various limitations and does not intend to be used to generalize to a population, it also has a lot of value to faculty, staff, administrators, and policy-makers of both secondary and postsecondary institutions who seek to improve transition rates of HSED students into postsecondary programming.

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

1. Was there ever a time during your HSE studies that you felt you simply would never go to college, and if so, why did you feel that way?

2. Thinking back to when you were an HSE student, what did you think were the biggest barriers to entering college? Were there specific challenges that you saw standing in your way that wouldn't allow you to go to college?

3. When you were in the ASC classroom, what aspects of that environment do you feel helped you the most to be successful?

4. What were your favorite components of the HSE program you were in, and why? (For example: certain programs, classes, activities, computer software programs, instructors, etc.)

5. Were there any particular moments during your HSE journey that made you think: "I can do this, I can go to college." Please tell me about those moments and what inspired you to think differently.

6. Did you feel differently about college when you graduated with your HSED, compared to the way you felt when starting the HSED program?

7. After you graduated with a HSED, did your levels of motivation to accomplish your goals and/or dreams change? Why or why not?