


Fall 2009

The GED and alternative learning center diploma as a factor in post-secondary persistence and success

Michael C. Autenrieth
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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THE GED AND ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CENTER DIPLOMA
AS A FACTOR IN POST-SECONDARY PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

By

Michael C. Autenrieth

Bachelor of Arts
Metropolitan State University
2007

A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Hospitality Administration
William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 2009

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Introduction

Students of high school age in the general population have gained access to post-secondary educations typically through a traditional high school diploma, or a General Education Development (GED) certificate. The relative success of students gaining access to college through the GED certificate is a question that has wide implications for educators in both the secondary and college environments. The benefits of a college degree are well documented in terms of earnings and societal position, and the achievement of a GED should be a steppingstone along that path. Additionally, the rise of Alternative Learning Center (ALC) high schools across the country has provided another, non-traditional route to post-secondary education. This paper will briefly examine the historical precedents for the GED, as well as presenting information regarding the increase in the number of students who graduate from alternative learning centers. Real-time institutional statistics from a career college will be presented and analyzed, and suggestions for future research presented. Based on the research presented, the paper will include recommendations for future institutional improvements in the college matriculation process for GED and ALC students, or conclude that the process is currently viable.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper will be to analyze how graduates of alternative learning high schools and GED certificate holders compare to traditional high school diploma recipients in terms of academic success at post-secondary institutions. A review of the existing literature and statistical analysis of entering students at a private career college will provide both a historical perspective and illustrate pertinent facts surrounding this issue. Analysis of the available

information will provide the foundation for future planning and initiatives designed to improve the process or mitigate any identified inequities.

Justification

While there have been several studies conducted regarding this issue (Goodall, 2009; Ou, 2008), there has been no identifiable study that has combined the GED and ALC factors as an indicator of college persistence or success. The conclusions of this paper could provide an initiative for post-secondary institutions to more comprehensively address any perceived disadvantages for GED and ALC students, and develop strategies accordingly. If research suggests no significant difference between GED/ALC students in terms of college success, the programs can be judged as effective in terms of providing an alternative route to a post-secondary education. Additionally, the information presented could provide incentive for ALC administrators and the GED authors to more accurately gauge the results of their efforts in awarding students high school equivalency certificates and diplomas. Societal implications could include an increase in the number of students who successfully complete college degrees, with the concomitant benefits to the country as a whole.

Constraints

The primary constraint for this study is the lack of information regarded as proprietary by colleges and universities. Institutions of higher learning are reluctant to share internal research, if any has been conducted, surrounding this topic. In any case, certain information is regarded as private due to governmental restrictions such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and student privacy concerns. An additional constraint is that there are no apparent

previous studies that combine both the GED and ALC factors when considering college success. This provides no historical point of reference in attempts to compare current performance with historical perspectives. The availability of students in the study career college is limited, so polling data and sampling is either incomplete or missing. The data presented in tables A through C is representative of one Career College only, and does not provide conclusive educational segment or national post-secondary information. Additionally, the small sampling representation can produce percentages and statistical information that may be unreliable when compared to a much larger study. Student privacy concerns also limit the type and scope of questions that can be asked, further limiting student generated data.

Glossary

GED General Education Development Certificate

Governmental program established to provide a testing method as an alternative to high school graduation.

ALC Alternative Learning Center

Secondary level schools established as a means for student success in a different setting from traditional high schools.

CARS Career College internal data and student management software platform

Proprietary student management software used at Art Institute Career Colleges.

ARC Average registered credit per student

Number of enrolled credits per student per academic quarter.

FPOG Final proof of graduation

Evidence of high school graduation or GED certification.

SSB Starting student body by academic quarter

Number of students enrolled at the college at the beginning of each academic quarter.

S/I Student/Instructor ratio

Average number of students per instructor class per quarter.

SFS Student Financial Services

Campus office of financial aid, accounting, etc.

The Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will consist of two parts. First, the available literature on the foundations of the General Education Development Certificate (GED) will be examined. Included in this section will be sources detailing the change in the certificate programs since its inception, as well as information regarding the research available on the relative success of the program in preparing scholars for post-secondary educations. Secondly, the review will look at the rise of alternative learning centers as a route for students to obtain a high school diploma. Information will be presented on the various types of alternative learning centers (ALC), and the implications of this type of credential in terms of post-secondary education.

The General Education Development Certificate

The General Education Development (GED) certificate was initially established by the Roosevelt administration to assist returning veterans from World War II in their efforts to earn a high school credential that was interrupted by military service. Post-secondary educational institutions used the GED as a means of evaluating veterans without a high school diploma for admission, while the acceptance of veterans provided an additional incentive to colleges and universities since the government was subsidizing tuition through the G.I. benefit program. Overall, the program as established achieved its goal as far as veterans were concerned, successfully re-integrating veterans into the mainstream of the United States economy and staving off a potential unemployment problem (Smith, 2003).

By the year 2001, the annual number of students taking the GED battery of tests in the United States and Canada had exceeded one million. Over 15 million credentials had been issued by 2002, with GEDs accounting for 19 percent of all high school credentials issued by the various state departments of education (Smith, 2003). As recently as March of 2009, it was noted that long waiting lists existed in many states for entrance to GED preparation programs. In California alone, the number of students taking the GED test has risen from over 46,000 in 2005 to almost 60,000 by the year 2008 (Community College Week, 2009). While the GED certification has provided a path to better employment and possible college entrance for some, for others it has proved illusory. Even mainstream comedians such as Chris Rock have suggested that the GED stands for “Good Enough Diploma” (Miller, 2006).

The central issue surrounding the GED is whether it truly is a substitute for a traditional high school diploma. Scholars attempt to earn the GED certificate for a variety of reasons. Included in these possibilities are better employment, to improve their self-esteem, or as a means

to satisfy entrance requirements for post-secondary education. In terms of post secondary aspirations, in 2004 a full sixty-two percent of those students who passed the GED indicated that they had done so for educational reasons. Unfortunately, a study conducted by Boston-based Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit research and advocacy group found that only ten percent of GED recipients ever succeeded in earning a college degree (Miller, 2006).

A study conducted by Suh-Ruu Ou in the journal *Urban Education* examined the differences between high school graduates, GED recipients, and school dropouts. Ou observes that it is important to distinguish high school graduation from high school completion. High school completion includes GED recipients, while high school graduation does not. In the study, Ou notes that while high school completion rates have generally remained steady over the last decade, the percentage of young adults completing high school through the GED process has risen from 5.2% in 1992 to 9.2% in 1999. Essentially, the rate of actual high school graduation has dropped. Ou suggests that the issue is best viewed through a three tiered perspective with dropouts at the bottom, GED recipients in the middle, and high school graduates at the top (Ou, 2008). Through the course of the research, Ou concludes that “In reality, it is not reasonable to assume that a GED credential would be identical to a high school diploma when the requirements to complete them are different” (Ou, 2008, pg 85).

Ou’s study supports other research done in 1997 that examined whether the GED led to more post-secondary education, military service, and training. In this research, it was found that a GED certificate does in fact increase college attendance. Disturbingly, it was found that of GED students that had entered college, less than 20 percent had completed a year or more of college through the age of 26. This contrasted sharply with other statistics indicating that the majority of GED students desired to earn the credential for college admittance (Murnane,

Willett, and Boudett, 1997). Other researchers have questioned the validity of the actual test. The GED battery consists of five sections: mathematics, social studies, science, reading skills and writing skills. The equivalency of this test to the outcomes expected of traditional high school students is not clear. In particular, the English skills required to pass the GED are thought to be incongruent with the skills that high schools students achieve through their experience (Ulin, 1982).

The core reasons that students seek the GED certificate are very often not academic in nature. In fact, the major reasons for students not achieving success in the traditional high school environment are family, job, and the inability to integrate with the expectations of the traditional high school. Reasons often given for dropping out include (a) not liking school, (b) not getting along with teachers and other students, (c) feelings of not belonging in school, and (c) having changed schools too often. Family reasons included (a) parenthood, (b) supporting a family, (c) caring for a family member and (d) marriage. The primary negative influence of jobs was that the student could not reconcile their work and school schedules (Ou, 2008).

The GED recipient also does not have to encounter the same institutional barriers that traditional high school students must master. Since the GED is awarded solely on the result of a test, GED students are not required to do homework, go to class, deal with teachers and administrators, or follow institutional rules (Smith, 2003). In a college setting, the environment is very different from that experienced in the achievement of the GED certification. Students face roadblocks almost immediately upon entering higher education. They are inexperienced with bureaucracy and conforming to a hierarchy. Many GED college students also experience the stigma that the GED brings, fearing that they will be regarded as inferior by other students (Kist, 2003). The lack of socialization skills in GED holders can also affect their ultimate

success in college. The very act of dropping out may indicate that an individual has difficulty adapting to social and institutional norms, and is at risk in a highly structured environment like a college or university (Smith, 2003).

While non-academic factors play heavily into the relative success of GED students in college, there are also academic discrepancies that are in evidence. GED students spend an average of 30 hours in preparation for the GED examination, while high school students typically spend almost 1,200 hours at school prior to graduation (Smith, 2003). At Kent State University in 2003, a study was conducted to measure the college readiness of incoming GED students as measured by their scores on the COMPASS placement exam. The summary of this study showed that GED students placed similarly to high school diploma graduates in the area of reading skills. In contrast, the GED holders needed remediation in writing at almost twice the rate of diploma holders. The comparison was more starkly illustrated in the mathematics skills area. Almost 95 percent of GED students needed remediation in math, compared to 45 percent of high school graduates (Tokpah and Padak, 2003).

The paradox that the research suggests concerning the GED certification is that while the certificate has become generally accepted as a high school equivalency, the relative performance of GED holders in post-secondary institutions is poor compared to their high school diploma contemporaries. One study concluded that only 15 percent of GED holders eventually earned their two year degree, compared with 33 percent of high school diploma recipients. Demand for the GED certification is higher than ever, but the research available does not support the notion that the GED is equivalent to a high school diploma. Colleges and universities have come to accept the GED as a possible way to increase their enrollment base, and high schools can increase their reportable completion rates through the use of the GED (Smith, 2003). There have

been attempts to raise questions regarding the GED certification, most notably in Wisconsin in the 1980's. Unfortunately, the response to the questioning was to raise the passing score of the test, rather than to examine the logic behind considering the GED to be the equivalent of a high school diploma (Smith, 2003).

If the literature surrounding this topic is accurate, then the next question that must be raised is how the performance of GED holders in post-secondary environments can be improved. Many GED holders attend community college as their first post-secondary experience. Several community colleges have recognized this problem, and are developing strategies to bring special assistance to GED holders. In Texas, a community college system has established support systems and policies to guide students through course selection, obtain counseling, help with financial issues, aid in college transition, and guide students through assessment testing. The college also offers help with services such as transportation, childcare, housing, textbooks and tutorial assistance (Goodall, 2009). Special orientation classes can also be helpful in bridging the gap between the GED and the college experience. Procedures, instructions, attendance, deadlines, and course descriptions are provided to GED entrants. As a more comprehensive measure, a separate office for GED scholars can be established to function as a student ombudsman service or clearinghouse for student concerns and questions (Kist, 2003). Alumni who earned their college diploma after entering with a GED certification can also be an effective resource to assist current college GED students.

Academically, the establishment of non-credit bridge programs can assist GED students in improving their basic abilities in core areas such as mathematics and English. In the realm of English skills, the GED test only focuses on a five part essay, and this format will not always serve the GED student while in college. As noted in research above, the need for math

remediation in GED students is documented, and colleges are setting up programs to address these deficiencies (Tokpah and Padak, 2003). At Quinsigamond Community College in Massachusetts, GED classes often had low retention and persistence. The college established a learner retention project, where all GED students were considered “at risk”. A variety of strategies were employed in the project, including personal advising, resource identification, peer mentoring, and dropout follow up. Through the project, completion rates for the GED process were improved from 46 percent to 65 percent. Kent State University has also set up a GED Scholars Initiative to address the needs of GED incoming and continuing students. The initiative provides campus and off-campus referrals, peer mentoring, shadowing programs for prospective students, and partial stipends and scholarships. Tellingly, the first research into this topic at Kent State revealed that in their first control group of 1,384 GED students fully 22 percent had not even finished their first semester. This only served to illustrate the need for a comprehensive program in GED acceptance and ongoing support. (Baycich, 2003).

The Alternative Learning Center

Alternative Learning Centers (ALC) emerged in the 1960’s as a means for students who could not perform in traditional high schools to complete their graduation requirements. This understanding changed in the 1980’s as the alternative programs were generally identified as being for “at risk” students, or problem students. A variety of techniques were established in the alternative schools, including: vocational training, partnering with colleges, and pass/fail grading formats (McKee and Connor, 2007). The popularity of alternative formats proliferated after the turn of the century, with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donating nearly 30 million dollars to alternative high schools in 2003 (Sausner, 2003). Many cities have experimented with

different alternative formats. Indianapolis, Newark, NJ, and Nashville, TN. have all participated in a pilot project designed to develop and expand the alternative offerings in their public school districts. The objective of the project is to prepare students more comprehensively for the work and potential college world (Robelen, 2009). Strategies such as one-on-one advising, internships with area businesses, and the establishment of phase levels instead of grade levels have been implemented. Since these pilot projects are new, there will have to be an evaluation period to gauge the relative effectiveness of these new initiatives.

Obstacles for alternative students often mirror the challenges faced by GED students. One of the thorniest issues is resistance to being placed in an alternative setting in the first place. Students feel stigmatized by what they view as “warehousing” of problem students. A program set up in a Midwestern city called the Branton Institute was established to “intervene in regular education program of at-risk students in order to correct learning deficiencies and increase the odds that students will improve their performance in conventional classroom settings” (Sakayi, 2001). In this program, students were found to be resistant to the entire concept of classroom education. Many of the students did not feel challenged by the work, knowing that the level of instruction was less than that in a traditional high school. As is often the case, outside influences weighed heavily on the ability of students to succeed. Integration back into the mainstream high school setting was also challenging, where many of the academic and non-academic problems of ALC students were not effectively addressed, leading to “backsliding” in many of the students. Having identified these problems, the district and Branton Institute have been working to mitigate some of these problem areas (Sakayi, 2001).

In Virginia, Bryant Alternative High School was established to serve students in grades 9-12 who were not able to perform in a traditional high school setting. Students enrolling at

Bryant go through an extensive orientation process to determine their educational plan or road map. Many of the students at Bryant have jobs (67%), and many work to support families. Most students at Bryant (72%) indicate that they plan to continue their educations after receiving their diploma (McKee and Connor, 2007). Often, students take longer to achieve their credential at an alternative school vs. the traditional setting. While some students will take longer, the administrators at the school believe that “alternative education schools and centers should be fully accountable and held to the same standards as any other schools when it comes to student performance” (McKee and Connor, 2007). Interestingly, in an article published one year after December of 2007, the same authors examined the problem of dropout rates at Bryant. For all of the successes that were achieved at Bryant in the alternative learning environment, fully 60 percent of enrolled Bryant students drop out. Newly enrolled students were found to drop out at a much higher rate than continuing students, pointing out the need for enhanced mentorship programs and other strategies to engage students (Connor and McKee, 2008).

For many school districts, alternative schools serve as both a safety valve and net for under-achieving students. The traditional school can maintain their current curricula and policies, while providing offsite services through the ALC (May and Copeland, 1998). In their study, May and Copeland identified the usual non-academic factors working against ALC students. One important finding was the way that ALC students used coping strategies, with many students using avoidant strategies such as absence and drug/alcohol abuse. In many instances, students avoided the school altogether, preferring to drop out rather than seek available help. It was found useful for students to engage in peer groups, with faculty facilitating the group discussion to more fully engage the students. Academic challenges were more

difficult, with more active learning strategies and teacher engagement outside the classroom thought important (May and Copeland, 1998).

For the purposes of this study, the integration of ALC centers with college admission and retention efforts is of paramount importance. Many community colleges across the country have experimented with establishing ALCs on their college campuses. In California, Moorpark College has partnered with the local public school district to set up an ALC on their campus, with students attending class in small learning communities and spending one day per week on career exploration. Students may also enroll in college level classes to gain credit towards their eventual degrees. Academic fairs are held on campus to engage students with potential employers as well as college staff and faculty. Administrators at the college admit that in order to make the program successful, they need to change the previous habits of students in study and expectations. They note that high school and college are not the same, leading to increased first year dropout rates. The partnership between the ALC and college will be the most important factor in student engagement and eventual college success (Bortolussi, 2006).

This examination of available literature on the relative success of GED and ALC students in college has revealed the central paradox of alternative routes to college admission and persistence. While the ALC schools and GED testing programs provide students with a way to enter college, the very factors that caused their retreat to alternative pathways work to sabotage their attempts at post-secondary institutions. Partnerships between ALC schools and colleges would seem to be critical, as well as bridging programs for entering GED certificate holders.

Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

In terms of study results, the implications for potential GED recipients and ALC graduates for continued success in post-secondary colleges and universities are profound. The actual statistics for GED student persistence at a career college are presented as a means to illustrate the information derived in the literature review. In addition, the connection of the conclusions to the justification for the study will become apparent.

Results

The preponderance of literature available on the study topic indicates a central paradox regarding alternative methods of gaining college admission. It is generally held that the GED is a desirable credential to possess, while the relative lack of college graduation for these individuals compared to traditional high school graduates indicates a range of deficiencies for GED holders as well as ALC graduates. The challenges faced by GED recipients and ALC attendees are similar in nature, and include factors outside the control of mainstream educational institutions. For purposes of providing actual statistical information, an analysis of GED student persistence at a career college in Minneapolis, Minnesota was performed.

The primary statistical information gathered for this study was mined from the college student management system, known as CARS. Several different approaches were employed to determine the most efficient means of answering the research question. The report that provided the most significant information was an analysis of students who dropped out of college on a quarterly basis. Once the GED student population could be isolated from the total, it was simply a matter of determining the percentage of GED drops compared to the total dropping population. Because of the volume of data, the most challenging part of the statistical research was framing

the parameters of the information desired. Data was collected for the winter, spring, summer and fall quarters of 2008, representing a complete academic year of data. The results of the statistical research are presented in table format, to illustrate the differences between GED student drop rates and the drop rates of the total student population. Table 1, illustrated below, is a representation of the total GED student population as a percentage of the total enrollment. An unanticipated outcome of this analysis is apparent in the increasing percentage of GED students.

TABLE 1: Total GED Students as Percentage of Total Enrollment

CALENDAR QUARTER	Total H.S. Diploma Students Enrolled	Total GED Students Enrolled	Total Student Body	% of GED Students in Total Student Body
Winter 2008	1615	57	1672	3.4%
Spring 2008	1516	73	1589	4.6%
Summer 2008	1458	88	1546	5.7%
Fall 2008	1754	118	1872	6.3%

In Table 2, the total number of students dropping by quarter is illustrated. The percentage of total students dropping by quarter is expressed, as well as the total number of GED student drops and the percentage that GED students represent as a part of total drop

TABLE 2: Total Number of Student Drops by Quarter

CALENDAR QUARTER	Total Student Drops by Quarter	Total Drops as a % of Total Enrollment	GED Holder Drops	GED Holder Drops as a % of All Drops
Winter 2008	101	5.4%	12	11.9%
Spring 2008	105	5.7%	18	17.1%
Summer 2008	86	5.0%	13	15.1%
Fall 2008	109	6.2%	19	17.4%

The crucial data for this study is illustrated in Table 3. This table analyzes by quarter the number of traditional high school diploma students dropping as a percentage of the total traditional population, and compares this to the number of GED students dropping as a percentage of total GED population.

TABLE 3: Comparison of HS Diploma Drops vs. GED Drops

CALENDAR QUARTER	Total H.S. Diploma Drops as a % of Total H.S. Diploma Students	Total GED Drops as a % of Total GED Students
Winter 2008	5.5%	21.0%
Spring 2008	5.7%	24.6%
Summer 2008	5.0%	14.8%
Fall 2008	5.1%	16.1%

This statistical information indicates that GED students drop from college at over three times the rate of traditional high school diploma students. While the research conducted in this study anticipated a higher rate, the magnitude of the difference was not expected. It should be noted that the size of the statistical sample may produce percentage comparisons that would be significantly different in a larger institution. The aforementioned increase in the GED population as a part of the total student body has critical implications assuming that the current trends as illustrated continue.

Conclusions

It is evident from the literature available that GED and ALC scholars operate at a significant disadvantage when compared to traditional high school graduates. The statistical information derived from one Career College supports the unfortunate fact that non-traditional college enrollees drop out of college at many times the rate of their high school graduate contemporaries. There has been little research pertaining to the similarities of GED and ALC student college persistence, particularly in terms of how ALC students may fare in post secondary education. The apparent problem spans all types of post- secondary institutions, and is not constrained by geography or demographics. The continuing practice of regarding GED and ALC credentials as high school equivalency for college admission has resulted in a disproportionate rate of failure for the very students the credential was meant to benefit. For colleges and universities the importance of the issue cannot be minimized. The continued practice of regarding GED and ALC credentials as high school equivalency must stop if post-secondary institutions wish to improve the success and graduation rates of these students. New and innovative strategies must be implemented before the students arrive at the college, and after

they are approved for admittance. The risk factors attendant to these students must be acknowledged for any post secondary institution to effectively assist these students in achieving their dreams and degrees.

Recommendations

There have been several notable attempts and programs designed to address the issue of GED and ALC student college admission and persistence. The Moorpark College program that incorporates an alternative learning center on the college campus has resulted in improved student performance for those ultimately enrolling in the college. Special orientation sessions for GED and ALC students can assist in the transition to a college environment. Kist notes that some colleges are setting up separate offices dedicated to providing services to non-traditional students upon their admittance to the institution. A variety of bridging programs have been established to help transition students from their GED/ALC experience to college. Several programs have been established in the Boston area that recognize the need for “next step” type programs that help students look beyond the GED/ALC credential (Reuys, 2009). In Georgia, DeKalb technical college has established another model based on a next step concept. College admissions and financial aid staff are present at GED test registration to provide college information to potential GED certificate holders. GED instructors stress the need for college preparedness, rather than just providing the necessary instruction for the GED test (Lakin, 2009). At LaGuardia Community College in New York, administrators have established a bridging program for both the health and business career areas. Students engage in specialized curriculum which stresses reading, writing and math skills. A comprehensive support network is also available, including computer literacy, counseling and career guidance (CC Times, 2008).

The statistics regarding GED persistence at the career college in this study have resulted in several initiatives to consider and address the issue of GED/ALC drop rates. GED and ALC enrollees are now flagged separately from the general enrollment population. Advisors and academic directors have begun including the topic in continuing student review meetings, and possible intervention strategies are being developed. These may include bridging programs, enhanced assistance for students achieving low entrance examination scores, and individual or group advising sessions with a dedicated student advisor for GED/ALC students. From a global perspective, it would seem necessary to conduct a nationwide survey, including further quantitative analysis of the situation with a larger collegiate sample. Statistics spanning the range of post-secondary institutions should be collected, thereby providing a data base for future remedial strategies. There is a desperate need for further research combining the GED and ALC student experience in college. The GED/ALC student should be recognized as being different from traditional high school diploma holders. In order to provide the same opportunity that diploma holders enjoy, colleges will need to partner with GED/ALC stakeholders for their mutual benefit and student success.

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