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## Identifying Barriers Faced by Adult Learners in General Educational Development Programs

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## ABSTRACT

### IDENTIFYING BARRIERS FACED BY ADULT LEARNERS IN GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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It is estimated that 70% of all newly created jobs in Illinois by 2020 will need education beyond a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) diploma. In Illinois, 12% of adults 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Individuals without a high school diploma or GED are twice as likely to be unemployed and if they are employed are more likely to be in a low-wage position. On average an individual without a high school diploma or GED will earn roughly \$10,000 less annually. Given the increasing need for a high school diploma or equivalent as a gateway to future earning potentials for individuals, community colleges have historically been places where individuals could take courses to prepare them to take the GED exam.

This case study investigated the barriers faced by adult learners at a midwestern community college. The participants for the case study were selected based on having not earned their GED diploma after taking two or more semesters of GED preparation classes. During the case study, 20 GED program participants took part in semi-structured individual interviews. The semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to give their personal narratives on what they perceive as their barriers to completion, as well as where the GED program had gaps in service. The results of the case study revealed three themes: external

barriers, internal barriers, and systematic barriers. Based on the results, it was recommended that the subject community college should increase its efforts to inform GED students about the support services offered through the college, increase instructional supports, and pursue student support services grants.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

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IDENTIFYING BARRIERS FACED BY ADULT LEARNERS IN GENERAL  
EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

BY

MATTHEW BEASLAND  
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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Doctoral Director:  
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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

**Introduction**

The number of adult learners in higher educational settings is on the rise (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). Adult learners are not traditional-age students, generally 25 years of age or older, often with other adult roles and responsibilities, but they may also include students who never completed high school and have adult roles (Education Advisory Board, 2019). These additional roles typically include employment; care of children, parents, or grandparents; and participating in community activities (Kilgore & Rice, 2003). From 1970 to 1990, adult students increased from 28% to 43% of total undergraduate enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). A more recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) stated that enrollments of students 25 and older grew 35% between 2001 and 2015 and is expected to increase by another 11% by 2026 (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). While community colleges are attractive to adult learners because of their open-door policy, many still have programs that were designed for traditional students (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). Traditional programs often meet at times during working hours that are difficult for working adults to attend (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). To meet the increasing numbers and needs of adult learners, community colleges need to better understand the barriers they experience in pursuit of their academic and professional goals.

Roughly 60% of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 64 have no postsecondary education credential, and 10% have less than a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This potentially means there is an educational gap that needs to be filled. In the state of Illinois, 12% of adults 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (Illinois State Library, 2018). Additionally, it is estimated that by 2020, seventy percent of all newly created jobs in Illinois will need education beyond a high school diploma or GED (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Individuals without high school diplomas or GEDs are twice as likely as their educated peers to be unemployed (Weisenthal, 2013). According to the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE, 2017), a person with a high school diploma earns an average of \$9,602 more per year than a nongraduate. The earning power of individuals increases with additional postsecondary education (COABE, 2017). Given the increasing need for a high school diploma or equivalent as a gateway to future earning potentials for individuals, community colleges have historically been places where individuals could take courses to prepare them to take the GED test (COABE, 2017).

While there is an increase of adult learners who need a GED, adult learners often face challenges in completing GED programs and passing the test (Barshay, 2018). Adult learners have different responsibilities that may not affect traditional-age students, such as family responsibilities, financial obligations, employment, parenthood, or lack of a high school equivalency (Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Additionally, the state of Illinois in 2008 adopted the 60 x 2025 goal as part of the Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success (Illinois Board of Higher Education [IBHE], 2017). The purpose of the 60 x 2025 initiative is to have 60% of all Illinois residents earn a postsecondary

credential by the year 2025 (IBHE, 2017). Due to the prevalence of adult learners on community college campuses and the 60 x 2025 goal in Illinois, critical barriers and supports for adult learners need to be explored in order to meet this goal, including barriers to passing the GED test for those enrolled in GED programs.

In 2018, Midwestern Community College (MCC, a pseudonym) enrolled 479 students in its GED program, of which 90 (19%) graduated by passing the high school equivalency exam. Conversely, this means 81% of the students in GED programs at MCC did not earn a diploma. Retention and completion have been identified as a significant issue for the GED program at MCC. In 2018, 19% of GED students dropped out of class before midterm of their first semester, and 29% dropped out before midterm of their second semester. These statistics do not include adult learners who completed their GED exams. The GED program makes up roughly 10% of MCC's enrollments. This is a significant amount of the student body on campus. The GED program is a grant-funded program delivered with limited funding provided by state and federal grants. With the limited funding available to the GED program, it is very important that every dollar is spent in the most effective way. Every grant dollar that the program spends should be done so in an intentional manner. This funding is mostly used to support instructional costs and delivery with additional administrative support. Information regarding barriers to completion is needed to better understand gaps in service to direct the program's limited funds. This case study has provided data that will assist in prioritizing the support services that the GED program spends its limited grant funds on.

## Statement of Problem

Previous research has identified barriers that influence the completion rates of adult learners in higher education (Chartrand, 1992; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Falasca, 2011; Home, 1998; Mercer, 1993; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Terrell, 1990), but there is a gap in the research when it comes to barriers faced by adult learners in high school equivalency programs. By focusing specifically on high school equivalency students, this study adds to existing research on adult learners and shines a light on the experience of adult learners without a high school diploma. Additionally, this case study identifies where the gaps in service are in MCC's high school equivalency program. Understanding the specific barriers that impact the completion rates of adult learners helps community college administrators to prioritize which interventions are implemented in their programs to assist with student retention and student completion.

The purpose of this case study was to understand the perceived barriers of adult learners in GED programs that impact the completion at MCC. This study specifically concentrated on the perceived barriers held by adult learners enrolled in the high school equivalency program at MCC. Guided by Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory, this study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceived barriers that prevent adult learners in the General Educational Development program at Midwestern Community College from completing their diploma programs?

RQ2: Where are the perceived gaps in services for adult learners in the General Educational Development program at Midwestern Community College?

## **Literature Review**

Nontraditional adult learners are on the rise in higher education but are currently not an outreach priority for institutions of higher learning (Chen, 2017). Adult learners often feel like an invisible population in higher education (Chen, 2017). The subpopulation of adult learners in higher education is becoming larger each year and cannot be ignored (IBHE, 2017). In fact, the adult learner population in GED and English as a Second Language classes makes up 10.9% of all Illinois community college credit-generating enrollments (Illinois Community College Board [ICCB], 2019). This literature review will discuss the following: characteristics of adult learners, barriers faced by adult learners, adult learners in GED programs, and current best practices for serving adult learners. The information provided in this literature review is a compilation of general knowledge on adult learners and adult learners in GED programs. This previous research informs what is known about the characteristics and barriers faced by adult learners and provides context as to where we started the research process at MCC.

### **Characteristics of Adult Learners**

Adult learners, often referred to as nontraditional students, come to institutions of higher education with a variety of different characteristics and roles. Some characteristics of adult learners are delayed entry into higher education; having children, dependents, or aging relatives; being a single parent; having full-time employment; being financially independent; enrolling part time; and not having a high school diploma (Kim et al., 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2011). With the many unique characteristics that adult learners bring into the classroom, community colleges will have to be aware of their unique needs.

Adults bring with them their life and work experience from outside academia that shapes their reasons for pursuing additional education and their contributions to the classroom. Adult learners often transfer prior knowledge into the classroom and use this experience to contribute to the overall educational experience (Fairchild, 2003). Adult learners may have different motivations for returning to the classroom. Some may be there to earn a credential, some may want to update their job skills, and others may be there just to learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Nontraditional adult learners often bring a different perspective to the classroom. Adult learners are often seen as self-directed, come with previous knowledge and life experiences, are internally motivated and need to see a reason for their continual development, and appreciate a more problem-centered approach to learning (Falasca, 2011; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These advantages that adult learners bring to the classroom can enhance the overall educational experience for all students in the classroom.

When developing strategies to assist adult learners, the needs of single parents, full-time employed students/part-time students, and academically disadvantaged students must be considered as well. Colleges can employ strategies and supports to assist the unique needs of adult learners by having on-campus childcare, at-a-distance classes, weekend classes, and tutoring centers with day and evening hours. Adults come with additional responsibilities that traditional-age students generally do not have. The complexities that differentiate adult learners from traditional-age students are their other social roles such as parent, employee, spouse, and community member (Cafferella & Barnett, 1994; Fairchild, 2003; Knowles, 1980; Pemberton & McCadden, 2019). These additional roles identify who an adult learner really is, and rarely is student their primary role (Cafferella & Barnett, 1994; Fairchild, 2003; Knowles, 1980;

Pemberton & McCadden, 2019). Thus, when working with adult learners, the following must be taken into consideration: the complex context of adult lives, the experience and prior knowledge they bring to the learning situation, and the ways they go about learning (Cafferella & Barnett, 1994).

### **Barriers Encountered by Adult Learners**

The literature suggests that adult learners in GED programs face some similar barriers to completion that traditional adult learners face such as childcare, employment, and family responsibilities (Cafferella & Barnett, 1994; Cuban, 2003; Fairchild, 2003; Goto & Martin, 2009; Knowles, 1980; Schafft et al., 2008; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). They also prominently face psychological dispositions and poverty as well (Blunt & Yang, 2002; Darkenwald & Hayes, 1986; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990; Schafft et al., 2008). These barriers can be broadly organized into situational barriers, dispositional barriers, and institutional barriers (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993). The following will discuss these three types of barriers.

**Situational barriers.** Situational barriers are life circumstances, for example, family responsibilities, employment, and finances (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Examples of situational barriers include parental guilt, financial strain, and job responsibilities. For instance, parental guilt could include students feeling guilty for being unavailable when their children need them. This generally affects parents with children under the age of 13 (Fairchild, 2003). The younger the child, the more likely it is that the student will stop out (Fairchild, 2003), as the child's needs often trump academic responsibilities. Community colleges might be able to remove barriers associated with being a



parent by offering classes at a distance or by having on-campus childcare. Role characteristics (Falasca, 2011) can also serve as situational barriers for adult learners. Role characteristics can include changes of placement at work, marriage, death of spouse/parent, or having children that affect and interrupt adult learners' academic achievement (Falasca, 2011).

Another situational barrier that impacts academic achievement is financial strain. Finances play a significant role in the ability of adults to complete their academic goals (Fairchild, 2003). In addition to tuition and related expenses, parents with young children may have to pay for childcare while at work and in class (Fairchild, 2003). Adult students are generally independent and have households to maintain. Attending school is expensive and sometimes it may become overwhelming to make ends meet while working and attending school. Lower income families often struggle to afford childcare or summer camp while school is out of session (Stewart, Watson, & Campbell, 2018; Terrell, 1990). The basic needs of the family, like food and rent or mortgage, take priority over educational endeavors (Fairchild 2003; Stewart, Watson, & Campbell, 2018).

Full-time students report role overload, and student, family, and job demands all contribute to role contagion (Home, 1998). The demands on working adult learners can be overwhelming. Adult learners can offset some of the stress from role overload by having a time and expectation management system (Home, 1998). Time and expectation management practices can be taught in class orientations for adult learners. Support from family and friends is essential when adults are making the decision to stay in school or stop out (Chartrand, 1992; Domingo, 2016).

Lastly, job responsibilities often serve as situational barriers to success for adult learners. Some jobs have unpredictable schedules that may not be conducive to adult learners' academic aspirations. Adult students may have to make career compromises for the sake of both their families and their academic work, leading to health and financial consequences (Haslam, Patrick, & Kirby, 2015; Terrell, 1990). Colleges might be able to alleviate stress related to job responsibilities through program design, such as at-a-distance learning.

**Dispositional barriers.** Dispositional barriers are an individual's attitude, self-confidence, and beliefs (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam et al., 2017). Non-traditional adult learners sometimes have some internal struggles or barriers when they enroll in institutions of higher learning (Langer, 1997; Osam et al., 2017). The internal barriers are failing to explore several perspectives due to prior learning habits (Langer, 1997), continuing to depend on remembered facts and learned skills or by trying to make sense of new learning by relying on old habits formed in the past (Langer, 1997) and being anxious and concerned about not being able to succeed in a new learning environment or manifesting negative perceptions of education that create skepticism about the value of learning for adult learners (Learning and Skills Council, 2005). Colleges and universities should keep these possible characteristics in mind when developing adult-centered programs of study.

Lastly, some additional barriers that are characteristic of adult learners are lack of confidence and lack of motivation (Osam et al., 2017; Russell, 2006). The lack of confidence affects returning students who have been out of the classroom for some time, as well as the academically disadvantaged (Osam et al., 2017; Russell, 2006). Student supports such as counseling and tutoring need to be available to help address these issues (Russell, 2006). The

lack of motivation is harder to solve. Adults must see the value in the education that they are receiving, or they will stop out (Russell, 2006). Adult learners already know why they are in school and what life is like without the credential that they are seeking (Russell, 2006).

Occasionally reminding adult learners why they are in class can help to motivate them to complete. Community colleges can assist adult learners in navigating dispositional barriers by providing access to student support services and counseling and by changing their orientation design.

**Institutional barriers.** Institutional barriers are policies and procedures of institutions that can prevent adult learners from participating in educational opportunities (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam et al., 2017). Institutional barriers include the lack of childcare, excessive red tape when trying to enroll, class work that is hard to relate to, and lack of accessible office hours available to the working adult (Fairchild, 2003; Osam et al., 2017). In their academic careers, adult learners may have a difficult time finding a cohort of like-minded students with in which to relate (Fairchild, 2003). Institutions of higher learning may not place the same importance on adult learners' outside responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003). Having proper supports for adult learners is essential for student success and retention. If the supports are available, adult learners will be less likely to stop out (Fairchild, 2003).

### **Adult Learners in GED Programs**

Learners in Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), or GED classes have different needs and obstacles than other types of adult learners (i.e., individuals pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree). For instance, literature suggests that some GED students have had negative classroom experiences in the past that may lead to lower participation

levels (Blunt & Yang, 2002; Darkenwald & Hayes, 1986; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990). Therefore, the academic struggles that some GED students have had in the past may lead them to have low expectations for success in future educational endeavors (Goto & Martin, 2009).

Adult learners' past experiences of failure may contribute to a lack of self-confidence (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Adult learners entering GED programs with prior negative academic experiences, such as failing out of high school, poor interactions with teachers, and negative classroom experience (Blunt & Yang, 2002; Darkenwald & Hayes, 1986; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990), might have lower self-confidence regarding future academic success. Individual psychological and intrinsic motivational barriers are issues that adult education programs need to address in order to support future academic success.

Understanding these needs and prior educational experiences of GED program participants at MCC helped in identifying gaps in service for those participants.

Many of the barriers faced by adult learners in GED programs can be directly related to their home and family responsibilities. External barriers such as family responsibilities and childcare are some of the top contributors to why students are not completing GED programs (Cuban, 2003; Goto & Martin, 2009; Schafft, Prins, & Movit, 2008; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). When adult learners do not have the proper support systems in place at home, they will not be able to succeed in earning their GEDs. GED students, like traditional adult learners, have identified childcare as a prominent barrier to completion (Cuban, 2003; Schafft et al., 2008; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). When it comes to fulfilling family responsibilities or educational responsibilities, family will generally be the top priority. While some adult education

centers offer free childcare to its program participants, this is not always the case. When it comes to single mothers trying to find adequate care for their children, this can become an insurmountable barrier to completion.

Poverty can be another barrier that influences GED completion (Schafft et al., 2008). Students afflicted by poverty are more likely to disengage in school (Ford & Grace, 2017). Low socio-economic status has been linked to hopelessness and depression (Ford & Grace, 2017). Schafft, Prins, and Movit (2008) discussed in their study the impact of poverty and mobility with GED students. Relocation of housing, even short distances, can cause several weeks of disruption in educational services provided to adult learners (Schafft et al., 2008).

### **Best Practices and Supports for Adult Learners**

There are certain practices that can help adult learners be successful at community colleges. Learning environments for adult learners need to be safe, motivating, understanding, and flexible in order to attend to their internal and external needs (Goto & Martin, 2009). Student persistence and completion are increased when the students have set goals (Goto & Martin, 2009). Students should be encouraged to create their own goals to guide and motivate them through their programs of study.

There are many institutions of higher learning that offer programs with built-in supports for the adult learner subpopulation. In Illinois, where MCC is located, there are 45 different community colleges that offer adult education (GED) programs. In the United States of America, GED programs utilize the National Reporting System (NRS) levels for student placement and to measure student skill gains (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education [OCTAE], 2017). There are six NRS levels in Adult Basic Education programs (OCTAE, 2017). NRS levels are

aligned to grade-level equivalencies (GLE) that give general indicators of a participant's educational functioning level (EFL) (OCTAE, 2017). The EFLs of the NRS levels are as follows: NRS Level 1 (0.0-1.9 GLE), NRS Level 2 (2.0-3.9 GLE), NRS Level 3 (4.0-5.9 GLE), NRS Level 4 (6.0-8.9 GLE), NRS Level 5 (9.0-10.9 GLE), and NRS Level 6 (11.0-12.9 GLE) (OCTAE, 2017).

Colleges are often designed for the traditional student, which may not lead to a positive educational experience for an adult learner (Galbraith, 1990). A positive classroom environment could be created by involving learners in mutual planning of methods and curricular directions, involving participants in diagnosing their own learning needs, encouraging learners to formulate their own learning objectives, encouraging learners to identify resources and to devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their objectives, helping learners to carry out their learning plans, and involving learners in evaluating their learning (Galbraith, 1990). In order to keep adult learners engaged and motivated, instructors and institutions should have a friendly atmosphere that demonstrates a positive and meaningful educational experience, keep a low to moderate tension/stress level unless otherwise needed, and keep the level of difficulty high enough to challenge participants, but not so high that they become discouraged (Cross, 2004; Falasca, 2011).

Institutions of higher education should also make the entire educational experience as free flowing as possible and remove as much red tape and institutional barriers as possible (Terrell, 1990). Institutions of higher learning that offer online classes or serve adult learners should have as many support and institutional services online as at the physical campus; an adult learner's time needs to be valued and extra trips to campus could lead to students stopping out

(Cercone, 2008). Extended office hours and convenient registration can go a long way towards serving busy adult learners (Terrell, 1990). Features like the ones previously mentioned are what make for-profit institutions like University of Phoenix and Grand Canyon University so appealing to adult learners. Online course design can also lead to student success for adult learners; a little bit of consideration for the needs of an adult learner could help boost completion rates (Cercone, 2008).

Adult learners can benefit from new student orientations specifically designed for returning adults (Chartrand, 1992). These orientations can address role conflict, expectations, finances, and childcare and help to create support networks (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). If adult learners feel less isolated, they will be more likely to succeed (Cuban, 2003). Adult learners should be required to take an online learning inventory and go through a distance learning orientation to see if online learning is appropriate for them (Cercone, 2008). While the convenience of distance education is appealing, it is not a good fit for every student. Computer self-efficacy should be considered before enrolling in an online course (Cercone, 2008).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory, aiming to understand the perceived barriers that influence adult learner completions and to enhance student supports at MCC. The Adults in Transition framework looks at adults' perspectives during different types of life changes and how they cope with the changes (Anderson et al., 2011). The framework has three parts: Approaching Transitions, which includes transition identification and the transition process; Taking Stock of coping resources utilizing the

4 S system; and Taking Charge by strengthening resources that are available (Anderson et al., 2011). First and foremost, it is important to identify what caused the change in the adult's life as they approach transitions (Anderson et al., 2011). This could be a new baby, new job, death of spouse, or any other life-changing event (Anderson et al., 2011). For the purpose of this case study, I focused on what caused the adult learner to drop out of school. Another aspect of approaching transitions is identifying where in the transitions process the adult is at, based on how much time has gone by since the life-changing event (Anderson et al., 2011). This will help determine if the adult is moving in or out of their life transition (Anderson et al., 2011). By understanding where the participant is in their transition it will help educational professionals guide them to the right resources and supports.

The next step in the framework is taking stock of coping resources utilizing the 4 S system (Anderson et al., 2011). The four Ss are situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2011). Situation describes what is happening, self describes to whom it is happening, support describes what help or supports are available to the individual, and strategies describes how a person manages situations (Anderson et al., 2011). By evaluating the coping resources of the 4 Ss I was able to determine what the Adult Education Department of MCC can do differently to increase adult learner persistence in the GED program. Evaluating the first S, situation that initially triggered the student to not complete the GED program, informed MCC on what supports the Adult Education Department should add or increase to support adult learners (Anderson et al., 2011). In the one-on-one interview sessions I asked open-ended questions that helped to shed light on the adult learners' personal life situations. By determining what situation led the adult learner to not complete their program of study, it informed what interventions or



best practices the Adult Education Department should employ to increase adult learner persistence and completion. Looking to the second S, self, helped identify common characteristics of adult learners who do not persist in the GED program (Anderson et al., 2011). Identifying the main characteristics demonstrated by adult learners in the GED program helped to prioritize the supports that are funded or increased.

The third part of the Adults in Transition framework is taking charge (Anderson et al., 2011). This part of the framework is about how adults learn to manage the resources available to them and to strengthen their support system. By identifying the adult learners' external support system, which represents the third S, support, this study better understood the current support systems that adult learners had outside of MCC. The results of this case study informed MCC about what particular supports would benefit the adult learners in the GED program. Based on the results from the case study, MCC could implement some of the best classroom practices for supporting adult learners, such as creating a positive classroom environment that is flexible to their internal and external needs (Goto & Martin, 2009), personalized goal setting (Galbraith, 1990; Goto & Martin, 2009), or maintaining a low to moderate stress level in the classroom (Cross, 2004; Falasca, 2011). The results from the case study could also be used to guide institutional changes that could be made to make MCC a more adult-learner-friendly institution. Some institutional changes could be expanding support service office hours (Terrell, 1990), offering online support services (Cercone, 2008), and having adult-learner-specific college orientations (Chartrand, 1992; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993, Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). The fourth and final S, strategies, looked at how adult learners in MCC's GED program responded to their personal situations (Anderson et al., 2011). By teaching the

learners coping strategies on how to address anxiety, individual attitudes towards higher education, and self-confidence, MCC could increase student persistence (Anderson et al., 2011). The case study assessed the adult learners' available resources using the 4 S system; with the results, it is my intention help the adult learners to move on to the final step and take charge.

### **Research Design**

An applied qualitative research design was used for this study to understand the perceived barriers of adult learners in completing a GED program. Applied qualitative research seeks to improve the practice of a discipline (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is also used to gain an illustration or narrative explanation of a problem (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). An applied qualitative research design was appropriate as a goal of this research project is to be used to inform administrators and practitioners of the perceived barriers encountered by adult learners in the GED program at MCC in order to improve academic outcomes.

### **Methodological Approach**

The case study approach was most appropriate for this research project because I was seeking to understand one phenomenon well (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Case studies are intensive analyses of a single population, program, or institution all at the same time and location (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For this case study, the phenomenon that was under study was the perceived barriers to completion for adult learners in MCC's GED classes. The case study approach has been used by similar studies in the past. Kos (1991) conducted a case study on middle school students with reading disabilities and their perceptions on what prevented them from progressing. The purpose of the case study was to explore the social and educational factors that may have led to the development of reading disabilities in the participants (Kos, 1991).

Another case study that examined similar ideas as my proposed case study is Cuban's (2003) case study, "So Lucky to Be Like That, Somebody Care." Her case study was an in-depth study on two Hawaiian women and the situational barriers that prevented them from persisting in their GED classes (Cuban, 2003). Both case studies examined external factors that might affect student performance (Cuban, 2003; Kos, 1991).

Case studies are used in decision-based studies where recommendations are made based on the results (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). One desired outcome of this case study was to identify the perceived barriers for adult learners to achieve GED success. By identifying the perceived barriers, the GED program now knows where to best allocate its resources to improve student persistence, retention, and completion. Since decisions will be based on results of the case study and only one program was analyzed, case study was the most appropriate method (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Research Site**

The research site for the case study was Midwestern Community College (MCC, a pseudonym). The college was founded in 1927 as an extension of the local high school district. Sixty percent of the MCC student body identify as African American, 21% Hispanic, 15% White, 1% Asian, and 3% two or more races. MCC's student body is split 39% full time and 61% part time, and currently has an 11% graduation rate. The college's student body is 37% male and 63% female with 51% being adult learners age 25 and up. MCC is located in an economically depressed area of Cook County, Illinois. Sixty-three percent of the students attending MCC receive income-based federal Pell grants intended for low-income students. The largest feeder high school district for the college has a 67% four-year graduation rate.

The program used for the case study was the GED program. The GED is a tuition-free, grant-funded program that operates in three different locations across the community college district. The program employs 16 teachers and 6 paraprofessionals across six different programs. Each semester we run approximately 20 different sections of GED classes. Each session is 12 weeks long. The GED program enrolls between 400 to 500 students each year. The demographics of the GED program differ slightly from the regular college. Eighty-one percent of GED students at MCC identify as African American, 15% Hispanic, 3% White, less than 1% Asian, and less than 1% two or more races. Forty-two percent of the students enrolled in the GED program are male and 58% of the students are female. In the GED program, 42% of students drop out before midterm of their second semester, and 35% are unemployed. Students aged 25 and older make up 58% of the GED student population.

The total population of MCC's community college district is 268,310 people. Sixty-one percent of people within the college district identify as African American, 30% White, and 9% other. The total adult population (16 and older) in the college district is 218,731, with 18% of adults on public assistance and an unemployment rate of 8%. In MCC's community college district 15% of adults live below the poverty line and 14% of adults have less than a high school diploma or GED.

### **Research Sample**

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling of individuals who met certain criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for inclusion were adult learners who have attended GED classes for at least two semesters, in any GED program, without completing their GED. Purposeful sampling was used since participants must meet the criterion of being a GED

student who has attended over two semesters without completing their GED exam (Suri, 2011). By interviewing this specific group of program participants, I was able find useful information that can improve the persistence and completion of the 81% of MCC GED students who did not earn their high school equivalencies. For the case study, I interviewed 20 GED program participants individually. Each year MCC has 30 to 35 returning students who have not completed their GED. By including 20 participants in the case study I was able to collect reasonable data on the perceived barriers faced by adult learners in GED classes and reached data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Individual interviews were well suited to gain personal narratives from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured personal interviews were a better data collection method than focus groups because program participants would feel less vulnerable in a one-on-one setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since some subjects, like specific reason why a participant did not complete the GED program previously, are sensitive a focus group would not have been the ideal setting for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview was conducted in person and audio recorded. Before I started each interview, I explained the study, asked permission to record the interview, collected artifacts in the form of attendance records/placement test scores, and had participants sign the informed consent document. I ensured each participant that I would not use their real names in the study and that they would be referred to by a pseudonym for reporting purposes. During the interviews I took field notes that were coded (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). This helped organize the data and helped to ensure that important information was not forgotten after the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The interview questions were designed around Anderson and colleagues' (2011) Adults in Transition framework. There were questions designed around external, internal, and systematic barriers (Appendix C). Questions began with less personal ones, then I asked questions that probed deeper into the various content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview protocol is in Appendix C. These personal one-on-one interviews gave me insight on the participant's personal thoughts and feelings that could be observed in a natural setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing allowed me to enter the participants' perspective and utilize their own words and own experiences in the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After each interview I collected demographic information (Table 1) from each participant through a short demographic survey (Appendix D). These surveys gave me additional data that was helpful to the case study.

I used a digital recorder to record the interviews and the Transcribe app to transfer the voice recordings into text blocks that were later transformed into transcripts of the interviews. Transcriptions of the interviews happened on the same day as the interview. While Transcribe made the transcription process easier, it did not remove the need to manually relisten to the recorded interviews.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants*

Age	Frequency	Percent
18 - 25	6	30
26 - 35	6	30
36 - 45	3	15
46 - 55	2	10
56+	3	15
Ethnicity		
African American	15	75
Hispanic	4	20
White	0	0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
Asian	0	0
Two or More	1	5
Other	0	0
No Response	0	0
Gender		
Man	8	40
Woman	12	60
Other	0	0
Preferred Not to Answer	0	0
Employment Status		
Employed	7	35
Unemployed	13	65
Hours Worked Per Week		
0 - 5	13	65
5 - 10	1	5
10 - 20	0	0
20 - 30	3	15
30 - 40	1	5
40+	3	15

(Continued on following page)

Table 1 continued

<b>Marital Status</b>			
	Single	13	65
	Married	4	20
	In a Relationship	1	5
	Separated	1	5
	Divorced	0	0
	Widowed	1	5
<b>Housing</b>			
	House – Owned	6	30
	House – Rented	10	50
	Apartment – Rented	4	20
<b>Number of Adults in Household</b>			
	1	6	30
	2	9	45
	3	2	10
	4	1	5
	5+	2	10
<b>Number of Children in Household</b>			
	0	7	35
	1	5	25
	2	4	20
	3	2	10
	4	1	5
	5	1	5
<b>Income</b>			
	Less than \$10,000	14	70
	\$10,000 - \$25,000	2	10
	\$25,000 - \$40,000	3	15
	\$40,000 - \$50,000	1	5
	\$50,000+	0	0
<b>Reading Grade Level Equivalency</b>			
	0.0 – 1.9	0	0
	2.0 – 3.9	3	15
	4.0 – 5.9	10	50
	6.0 – 8.9	5	25
	9.0 – 10.9	2	10
	11.0 – 12.9	0	0

(Continued on following page)



Table 1 continued

<b>Math Grade Level Equivalency</b>			
	0.0 – 1.9	0	0
	2.0 – 3.9	5	31.5
	4.0 – 5.9	10	62.5
	6.0 – 8.9	1	6.25
	9.0 – 10.9	0	0
	11.0 – 12.9	0	0
<b>Persistence Rate</b>			
	90 - 100	7	35
	80 – 90	2	10
	70 – 80	5	25
	60 – 70	2	10
	50 – 60	0	0
	>50	4	20

### Data Analysis

For each participant that I interviewed, I obtained copies of their attendance records and placement test scores from the state database and reviewed the documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case study it assisted in finding the “why” in nontypical attendance patterns. This gave insight into past and present attendance patterns and habits, as well as their educational functioning levels.

While interviews were being conducted, data analysis began. Interviews were coded and analyzed for common themes in participant responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The coding process started as open coding, where key concepts, words, and themes were identified and assigned a unique code (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, after common themes had been identified, I made broader categories and started axial or “analytical” coding to see what barriers to completion were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When I started using analytical coding it was my intention to use the larger categories of external, internal, and systematic barriers while

still identifying specific reoccurring themes (Anderson et al., 2011). Immediately after each interview, I transcribed the recording with notations from the field notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By transcribing the notes and recording directly after the interview I was able to produce the most accurate recollection of the event (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The audio recordings provided me with the exact conversations from the interviews while my field notes provided more reflective data like my thoughts, feelings, and personal speculations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The field notes also documented the behaviors or body language of the participant during the interview that would not have been captured by an audio recorder (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then looked at the notes from all of the field notes, artifacts, and coded transcripts and identified the most commonly perceived barriers. Major themes and patterns regarding perceived barriers became the basis for the findings of the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the case study, I used the internal validity strategy of peer debriefing. In this practice, the researcher solicits feedback from other people to validate their findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The Dean of Adult Education, Dean of Academic Services, and Adult Education Manager at MCC examined the coded data I provided. Each person read the interview transcripts and made their own notes and observations. I brought in a dean from an outside department to ensure that any biases held by the Adult Education Department were identified or reduced. The Dean of Adult Education compiled all the research and reported the findings back to the team.

I also enhanced the trustworthiness of the case study through the strategy of an audit trail. An audit trail informs readers of the researcher's personal thoughts, methods, and reasons for the

findings of the case study (Carcary, 2009). Throughout the report of findings, I presented examples of collected data in the form of direct quotes from interviews and provided my own personal reflections. This allowed the reader to determine the validity of the results from the case study (Carcary, 2009).

### **Positionality Statement**

Having worked in the general educational development program at Midwest Community College as an instructor for several years before moving into administration, I have observed several potential barriers to completion, such as childcare, employment, transportation, and funding. In the Adult Education Department, I have held the positions of instructor, program coordinator, literacy coordinator, program compliance coordinator, and dean. This is also the community in which I was raised and have lived a majority of my adult life. I know this area well and have spent my entire career serving this community. While I have been removed from the classroom and in administration for the past seven years, I still believe that these themes may be the primary barriers. Through the case study I learned of the prominent barriers to completion for adult learners in MCC's GED program.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this case study must be considered with the following limitations. Data obtained from case study research can sometimes be incompatible and contradictory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This can sometimes lead to difficulty making sense of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Another limitation of case study research can be data management (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case studies produce significant amounts of data and organizing the data can be a daunting task (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I coded, categorized, and organized the data based on

Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory. By tying the data to the theory, I was able to make the most use of the data collected. Data collection for this case study was through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews have their limitations in research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Student participation in this case study was voluntary, and participants had to be currently attending the program. This excluded potential participants who no longer attend our program and cannot be located for interviews. Reflecting upon this, I realize that this population could have provided some of the most useful data on perceived barriers. Participants from this population could have provided different perspectives on why they have not been able to return. In the future, MCC could employ a phone or digital exit survey for students who stop out or drop out of the GED program before completing their GED exams. Through this method, MCC could still gather useful data on why a student stops attending. Future research could include additional research staff who could concentrate on community outreach to identify barriers that stop participants from ever returning to the program.

### **Significance**

This case study builds upon previous research on adult learners' attitudes and perceptions of education (e.g., Blunt & Yang, 2002; Darkenwald & Hayes, 1986; Goto & Martin, 2009; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Guided by Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory, this case study identified perceived barriers faced by adult learners in GED programs. This particular case study concentrated on a suburban Chicago community college, but this study has been designed to be easily replicable so it can be conducted in GED programs across the United States. While the findings and results from this case study may only

be significant for one program at a single college, it should be looked at as an example of what perceived barriers to adult learner completion could be identified by conducting a similar case study at a different institution.

The findings of the case study will inform future instructional design for the GED program. Participants in this case study identified certain systematic barriers that adult education practitioners can address through instructional and programmatic design. Specifically, this case study serves to improve the service that MCC is offering its GED students. It was imperative that this case study took place to let the college know how it can better serve students in the GED program. Participants identified that students in the program were unaware of the support services offered through the college. Through this case, MCC was able to identify perceived barriers that if addressed may lead to more program participants earning their GEDs. This will help this student population to increase their wages and give them the ability to enroll in college and career programs. Increased student completion in GED programs will improve program outcomes and in turn increase performance funding. Another benefit of increased program completion is that MCC will prepare a stronger, more capable workforce for the local community, which could lead to increased tax revenue.

The findings in this case study will be used to inform future initiatives in the Adult Education Department at MCC. The case study findings have been shared with the college President, Vice President of Academic Services, Dean of Adult and Continuing Education, Manager of Adult Education, and all Adult Education faculty and staff. A goal was to use the case study findings to write for additional grants that can help support the needs of MCC students. Translating the findings from this case study to application will strengthen MCC's

grant proposals. There are several different funding opportunities and foundations around, but unfortunately there is limited administrative capacity at MCC. The case study findings are going to help MCC's grant proposals to be more focused and intentional. MCC can now search for and write for grants that will directly address the identified gaps in service from the case study.

### **Conclusion**

Adult learners add to the diversity of educational institutions, especially for community colleges. The mission of community colleges is to be open-access institutions that serve the constituents of the local area. Adult learners are a growing population at community colleges, and serving this special population is essential for success of the institutions as well as meeting the goals set out by the state and federal governments. When working with adult learners there are several factors that must be taken into consideration in order to provide the best chances of success. The case study has provided MCC with insight on how to best serve the specific population of adult learners in GED programs. The data collected will impact future program design and support services that can lead to increased persistence, retention, and completion rates.

## CHAPTER II

### WHY DO GED LEARNERS STOP OUT?

#### **Introduction**

Roughly 60% of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 64 have no postsecondary education credential, and 10% have less than a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), indicating an educational gap that needs to be filled. In the state of Illinois, 12% of adults 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (Illinois State Library, 2018). Additionally, it is estimated that by 2020, seventy percent of all newly created jobs in Illinois will need education beyond a high school diploma or GED (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Individuals without high school diplomas or GEDs are twice as likely to be unemployed as their educated peers (Weisenthal, 2013). According to the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE, 2017), a person with a high school diploma earns an average of \$9,602 more per year than a nongraduate. The earning power of individuals increases with additional postsecondary education (COABE, 2017). Given the increasing need for a high school diploma or equivalent as a gateway to future earning potentials for individuals, community colleges have historically been places where individuals could take courses to prepare them to take the GED test (COABE, 2017).

While there is an increase of adult learners who need a GED, adult learners often face challenges in completing GED programs and passing the test (Barshay, 2018). Adult learners have different responsibilities that may not affect traditional-age students, such as family

responsibilities, financial obligations, employment, parenthood, lack of a high school equivalency (Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman 2000; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Additionally, the state of Illinois in 2008 adopted the 60 x 2025 goal as part of the Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success (Illinois Board of Higher Education [IBHE], 2017). The purpose of the 60 x 2025 initiative is to have 60% of all Illinois residents earn a postsecondary credential by the year 2025 (IBHE, 2017). Due to the prevalence of adult learners on community college campuses and the 60 x 2025 goal in Illinois, barriers and supports encountered by adult learners need to be explored in order to meet this goal, including barriers to passing the GED test for those enrolled in GED programs.

Previous research has identified barriers that influence the completion rates of adult learners in higher education (Chartrand, 1992; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Falasca, 2011; Home, 1998; Mercer, 1993; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Terrell, 1990), but there is a gap in the research when it comes to barriers faced by adult learners in high school equivalency programs. By focusing specifically on high school equivalency students, this case study adds to existing research on adult learners and shines a light on the experience of adult learners without a high school diploma. Additionally, this case study identifies where the gaps in service are in MCC's high school equivalency program. Understanding the specific barriers that impact the completion rates of adult learners helps community college administrators to prioritize which interventions are implemented in their programs to assist with student retention and student completion.

The purpose of this case study was to understand the perceived barriers of adult learners in GED programs that impact the completion at MCC. This study specifically concentrated on the perceived barriers held by adult learners enrolled in the high school equivalency program at



MCC. Guided by Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory, this study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceived barriers that prevent adult learners in the General Educational Development program at Midwestern Community College from completing their diploma programs?

RQ2: Where are the perceived gaps in services for adult learners in the General Educational Development program at Midwestern Community College?

### **Literature Review**

Nontraditional adult learners are on the rise in higher education but are currently not an outreach priority for institutions of higher learning (Chen, 2017). Adult learners often feel like an invisible population in higher education (Chen, 2017). The subpopulation of adult learners in higher education is becoming larger each year and cannot be ignored (IBHE, 2017). In fact, the adult learner population in GED and English as a Second Language classes makes up 10.9% of all Illinois community college credit-generating enrollments (Illinois Community College Board [ICCB], 2019). This literature review will discuss barriers faced by adult learners and adult learners in GED programs.

### **Barriers Encountered by Adult Learners and Adult Learners in GED Programs**

The literature suggests that adult learners in GED programs face some barriers to completion similar to those adult learners face, such as childcare, employment, and family responsibilities (Cuban, 2003; Cafferella & Barnett, 1994; Fairchild, 2003; Goto & Martin, 2009; Knowles, 1980; Schafft et al., 2008; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). They also prominently face psychological dispositions and poverty as well (Blunt & Yang, 2002; Darkenwald & Hayes,

1986; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990; Schafft et al., 2008). These barriers can be broadly organized into situational barriers, dispositional barriers, and institutional barriers (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993).

Situational barriers are life circumstances, for example family responsibilities, employment, and finances (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Role characteristics, which include changes of placement at work, marriage, death of spouse/parent, or having children, can also affect and interrupt adult learners' academic achievement (Falasca, 2011). For instance, parental guilt could include students feeling guilty for being unavailable when their children need them. This generally affects parents with children under the age of 13 (Fairchild, 2003). The younger the child, the more likely it is that the student will stop out, as the child's needs often trump academic responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003).

Many of the barriers faced by adult learners in GED completion can be directly related to their home and family responsibilities, such as childcare issues (Cuban, 2003; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). When adult learners do not have the proper support systems in place at home, they will not be able to succeed in earning their GEDs. GED students, like traditional adult learners, have identified childcare as a prominent barrier to completion (Cuban, 2003; Schafft et al., 2008; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). When it comes to fulfilling family responsibilities or educational responsibilities, family will generally be the top priority. While some adult education centers offer free childcare to its program participants, this is not always the case. When it comes to single mothers trying to find adequate care for their children, this can become an insurmountable barrier to completion.

Another situational barrier that impacts academic achievement is financial strain.

Finances play a significant role in the ability of adults to complete their academic goals (Ford & Grace, 2017). In addition to tuition and related expenses, parents with young children may have to pay for childcare while at work and in class (Fairchild, 2003). Adult students are generally independent and have households to maintain. Attending school is expensive and sometimes it may become overwhelming to make ends meet while working and attending school. Lower income families often struggle to afford childcare or summer camp while school is out of session (Stewart, Watson, & Campbell, 2018; Terrell, 1990). The basic needs of the family, like food and rent or mortgage, take priority over educational endeavors (Fairchild 2003; Stewart, Watson, & Campbell, 2018).

Poverty can be barrier that influences GED completion (Schafft et al., 2008). Students afflicted by poverty are more likely to disengage in school (Ford & Grace, 2017). Low socio-economic status has been linked to hopelessness and depression (Ford & Grace, 2017). Schafft, Prins, and Movit (2008) discussed in their study the impact of poverty and mobility on GED students. Relocation of housing, even short distances, can cause several weeks of disruption in educational services provided to adult learners (Schafft et al., 2008). Poverty is an issue in MCC's district and will be further discussed in this paper.

Lastly, job responsibilities often serve as situational barriers to success for adult learners. Some jobs have unpredictable schedules that may not be conducive to adult learners' academic aspirations (Home, 1998). Adult students may have to make career compromises for the sake of both their families and their academic work, leading to health and financial consequences (Haslam, Patrick, & Kirby, 2015; Terrell, 1990).

Dispositional barriers are an individual's attitude, self-confidence, and beliefs (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam et al., 2017). Nontraditional adult learners sometimes have some internal struggles or barriers when they enroll in institutions of higher learning, such as failing to explore several perspectives due to prior learning habits (Langer, 1997; Osam et al., 2017), continuing to depend on remembered facts and learned skills, or by trying to make sense of new learning by relying on old habits formed in the past (Langer, 1997). Being anxious and concerned about not being able to succeed in a new learning environment or manifesting negative perceptions of education can create skepticism about the value of learning for adult learners (Learning and Skills Council, 2005).

Lastly, some additional barriers that are characteristic of adult learners are lack of confidence and lack of motivation (Osam et al., 2017; Russell, 2006). The lack of confidence affects returning students who have been out of the classroom for some time as well as the academically disadvantaged (Osam et al., 2017; Russell, 2006). For instance, some GED students have had negative classroom experiences in the past that may lead to lower participation levels (Darkenwald & Hayes, 1986; Goto & Martin, 2009). Therefore, the academic struggles that some GED students have had in the past may lead them to have low expectations for success in future educational endeavors (Goto & Martin, 2009).

Adult learners' past experiences of failure may contribute to a lack of self-confidence (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Adult learners entering GED programs with prior negative academic experiences, such as failing out of high school, poor interactions with teachers, and negative classroom experience (Blunt & Yang, 2002; Darkenwald & Hayes, 1986; Goto & Martin, 2009; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1990), might have lower self-confidence regarding future

academic success. Individual psychological and intrinsic motivational barriers are issues that adult education programs need to address in order to support future academic success.

Institutional barriers are policies and procedures that institutions have that can prevent adult learners from participating in educational opportunities (Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993; Osam et al., 2017). Institutional barriers include the lack of childcare, excessive red tape when trying to enroll, class work that is hard to relate to, and lack of accessible office hours available to the working adult (Fairchild, 2003; Osam et al., 2017). In their academic careers, adult learners may have a difficult time finding a cohort of like-minded students with which to relate (Fairchild, 2003). Institutions of higher learning may not place the same importance on adult learners' outside responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003). Having proper supports for adult learners is essential for student success and retention. If the supports are available, adult learners will be less likely to stop out (Fairchild, 2003).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory, aiming to understand the perceived barriers that influence adult learner completion and to enhance student supports at MCC. The Adults in Transition framework looks at adults' perspectives during different types of life changes and how they cope with the changes (Anderson et al., 2011). The framework has three parts: Approaching Transitions, which includes transition identification and the transition process; Taking Stock of coping resources utilizing the 4 S system; and Taking Charge by strengthening resources that are available (Anderson et al., 2011). First and foremost, it is important to identify what caused the change in the adult's life as they approach transitions (Anderson et al., 2011). This could be a new baby, new job, death of

spouse, or any other life-changing event (Anderson et al., 2011). For the purpose of this case study, I focused on what caused the adult learner to drop out of school. Another aspect of approaching transitions is identifying where in the transition process the adult is at, based on how much time has gone by since the life-changing event (Anderson et al., 2011). This will help determine if the adult is moving in or out of their life transition (Anderson et al., 2011). By understanding where the participant is in their transition it will help educational professionals guide them to the right resources and supports.

The next step in the framework is taking stock of coping resources utilizing the 4 S system (Anderson et al., 2011). The four Ss are situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2011). Situation describes what is happening, self describes to whom it is happening, support describes what help or supports are available to the individual, and strategies describes how a person manages situations (Anderson et al., 2011). By evaluating the coping resources of the 4 Ss I was able to determine what the Adult Education Department can do differently to increase adult learner persistence in the GED program. Evaluating the first S, situation, that initially triggered the student to not complete the GED program informed MCC on what supports the Adult Education Department should add or increase to support adult learners (Anderson et al., 2011). By determining what situation led the adult learner to not complete their program of study, it informed what interventions or best practices the Adult Education Department should employ to increase adult learner persistence and completion. Looking to the second S, self, helped identify common characteristics of adult learners who do not persist in the GED program (Anderson et al., 2011). Identifying the main characteristics demonstrated by adult learners in the GED program helped to prioritize the supports that are funded or increased.

The third part of the Adults in Transition framework is taking charge (Anderson et al., 2011). This part of the framework is about how adults learn to manage the resources available to them and to strengthen their support system. By identifying adult learners' external support system, which represents the third S, support, this study better understood the current support systems that adult learners had outside of MCC. The results of this case study informed MCC about what particular supports would benefit the adult learners in the GED program. Based on the results from the case study, MCC could implement some of the best classroom practices for supporting adult learners, such as creating a positive classroom environment that is flexible to their internal and external needs (Goto & Martin, 2009), personalized goal setting (Galbraith, 1990; Goto & Martin, 2009), or maintaining a low to moderate stress level in the classroom (Cross, 2004; Falasca, 2011). The results from the case study could also be used to guide institutional changes that could be made to make MCC a more adult-learner-friendly institution. Some institutional changes could be expanding support service office hours (Terrell, 1990), offering online support services (Cercone, 2008), and having adult-learner-specific college orientations (Chartrand, 1992; Comings, 2007; Fairchild, 2003; Mercer, 1993, Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). The fourth and final S, strategies, looked at how adult learners in MCC's GED program responded to their personal situations (Anderson et al., 2011). By teaching the learners coping strategies on how to address anxiety, individual attitudes towards higher education, and self-confidence, MCC could increase student persistence (Anderson et al., 2011). The case study assessed the adult learners' available resources using the 4 S system; with the results, it is my intention help the adult learners to move on to the final step and take charge.

## **Research Design**

An applied qualitative research design, which seeks to improve the practice of a discipline (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was used for this study to understand the perceived barriers of adult learners in completing a GED program. An applied qualitative research design was appropriate because a goal of this case study was to be used to inform administrators and practitioners of the perceived barriers held by adult learners in the GED program at MCC in order to improve academic outcomes. Specifically, case studies are intensive analyses of a single population, program, or institution all at the same time and location (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For this case study, the phenomenon that was under study was the perceived barriers to completion for adult learners in MCC's GED classes.

Case studies are used in decision-based studies where recommendations are made based on the results (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). One desired outcome of this case study was to identify the perceived barriers for adult learners to achieve GED success. By identifying the perceived barriers, the GED program now knows where to best allocate its resources to improve student persistence, retention, and completion. Since decisions will be based on results of the case study and only one program was analyzed, case study was the most appropriate method (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Research Site**

In 2018, Midwestern Community College (MCC, a pseudonym) enrolled 479 students in its GED program, of which 90 (19%) graduated by passing the high school equivalency exam. Conversely, this means 81% of the students in GED programs at MCC did not earn their diploma. Retention and completion have been identified as a significant issue for the GED



program at MCC. In 2018, 19% of GED students dropped out of class before midterm of their first semester, and 29% dropped out before midterm of their second semester without completing their GED exams. The GED program makes up roughly 10% of MCC's enrollment, which is a significant amount of the student body on campus. The GED program is a grant-funded program and delivered with limited funding provided by state and federal grants. With the limited funding available to the GED program, it is very important that every dollar is spent in the most effective way. Every grant dollar that the program spends should be done so in an intentional manner. This funding is mostly used to support instructional costs and delivery with additional administrative support. Information regarding barriers to completion is needed to better understand gaps in service and how to direct the program's limited funds. This case study has provided data that will assist in prioritizing the support services that the GED program spends its limited grant funds.

The research site for the case study was Midwestern Community College (MCC, a pseudonym). The college was founded in 1927 as an extension of the local high school district. Sixty percent of the MCC student body identify as African American, 21% Hispanic, 15% White, 1% Asian, and 3% two or more races. MCC's student body is split 39% full time and 61% part time and currently has an 11% graduation rate. The college's student body is 37% male and 63% female, with 51% being adult learners age 25 and up. MCC is located in an economically depressed area of Cook County, Illinois. Sixty-three percent of the students attending MCC receive income-based federal Pell grants intended for low-income students. The largest feeder high school district for the college has a 67% four-year graduation rate.

The program used for the case study was the GED program. The GED is a tuition-free grant-funded program that operates in three different locations across the community college

district. The program employs 16 teachers and 6 paraprofessionals across six different programs. Each semester we run approximately 20 different sections of GED classes. Each session is 12 weeks long. The GED program enrolls between 400 to 500 students each year. The demographics of the GED program differ slightly from the regular college. Eighty-one percent of GED students at MCC identify as African American, 15% Hispanic, 3% White, less than 1% Asian, and less than 1% two or more races. Forty-two percent of the students enrolled in the GED program are male and 58% of the students are female. In the GED program, 42% of students drop out before midterm of their second semester, and 35% are unemployed. Students aged 25 and older make up 58% of the GED student population.

The total population of MCC's community college district is 268,310 people. Sixty-one percent of people within the college district identify as African American, 30% White, and 9% other. The total adult population (16 and older) in the college district is 218,731, with 18% of adults on public assistance and an unemployment rate of 8%. In MCC's community college district, 15% of adults live below the poverty line and 14% of adults have less than a high school diploma or GED.

### **Research Sample**

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling of individuals who met certain criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for inclusion were adult learners who have attended GED classes for at least two semesters, in any GED program, without completing their GED. Purposeful sampling was used since participants must meet the criterion of being a GED student who has attended over two semesters without completing their GED exam (Suri, 2011). By interviewing this specific group of program participants, I was able to find useful information

that can improve the persistence and completions of the 81% of MCC GED students who did not earn their high school equivalencies. For the case study I interviewed 20 GED program participants individually. Each year MCC has 30 to 35 returning students that have not completed their GED. By including 20 participants in the case study I was able to collect reasonable data on the perceived barriers faced by adult learners in GED classes and reached data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The demographics of the sample are demonstrated in

Table 2.

Table 2

*Participant Information*

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Marital Status
Gladys	African American	Woman	Single
Kathi	African American	Woman	Separated
Libby	African American	Woman	Married
Nick	African American	Man	Married
Melissa	Hispanic	Woman	Single
Veronica	African American	Woman	Widowed
Jennifer	African American	Woman	Single
Bonnie	Two or More	Woman	Married
Aurora	African American	Woman	Single
Michael	African American	Man	Single
Wendy	African American	Woman	Single
Adam	African American	Man	Single
Hilary	African American	Woman	Single
Kim	African American	Woman	Single
John	African American	Man	Single
George	African American	Man	Single
Nina	Hispanic	Woman	Married
Christopher	Hispanic	Man	Single
Donald	Hispanic	Man	In a Relationship
William	African American	Man	Single

## **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Individual interviews were well suited to gain personal narratives from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured personal interviews were a better data collection method than focus groups because program participants would feel less vulnerable in a one-on-one setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since some subjects, like the specific reasons why participants did not complete the GED program previously, are sensitive, a focus group would not have been the ideal setting for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview was 30 to 90 minutes long and conducted in person and audio recorded. Before I started each interview, I explained the study, asked permission to record the interview, collected artifacts in the form of attendance records/placement test scores, and had participants sign the informed consent document. I ensured each participant that I would not use their real name in the study and that they would be referred to by a pseudonym for reporting purposes. During the interviews I took field notes that were coded (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This helped organize the data and helped to ensure that important information was not forgotten after the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The interview questions were designed around Anderson and colleagues' (2011) Adults in Transition framework. There were questions designed around external, internal, and systematic barriers (Appendix C). Questions began with less personal ones, then I asked questions that probed deeper into the various content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview protocol is in Appendix C. These personal one-on-one interviews gave me insight on the participants' personal thoughts and feelings that could be observed in a natural setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing allowed me to enter the participants' perspectives and

utilize their own words and own experiences in the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After each interview, I collected demographic information from each participant through a short demographic survey (Appendix D). These surveys gave me additional data that was helpful to the case study. I used a digital recorder to record the interviews and personally transcribed the interviews. Transcriptions of the interviews happened on the same day as the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

For each participant I interviewed, I obtained copies of their attendance records and placement test scores from the state database and reviewed the documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case study it assisted in finding the “why” in nontypical attendance patterns. This gave insight into past and present attendance patterns and habits, as well as their educational functioning level (see Table 1 for the frequency and percentage of student persistence, math grade level equivalency, and reading grade level equivalency).

While interviews were being conducted, data analysis began. Interviews were coded and analyzed for common themes in participant responses. The coding process started as open coding where key concepts, words, and themes were identified and assigned a unique code (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, after common themes had been identified, I made broader categories and started axial or “analytical” coding to see what barriers to completion were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When I started using analytical coding it was my intention to use the larger categories of external, internal, and systematic barriers while still identifying specific reoccurring themes. Examples of reoccurring themes are family issues, time management, and financial pressures. Immediately after each interview, I transcribed the recording with notations from the

field notes. By transcribing the notes and recording directly after the interview I was able to produce the most accurate recollection of the event (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The audio recordings provided me with the exact conversations from the interviews while my field notes provided more reflective data like my thoughts, feelings, and personal speculations. The field notes also documented the behaviors or body language of the participant during the interview that would not have been captured by an audio recorder (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then analyzed all of the field notes, artifacts, and coded transcripts and identified the most commonly perceived barriers. Major themes and patterns regarding perceived barriers became the basis for the findings of the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the case study, I used the internal validity strategy of peer debriefing. In this practice, the researcher solicits feedback from other people to validate their findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The Dean of Adult Education, Dean of Academic Services, and Adult Education Manager at MCC examined the coded data I provided. Each person read the interview transcripts and made their own notes and observations. I brought in a dean from an outside department to ensure that any biases held by the Adult Education Department were identified or reduced. The Dean of Adult Education compiled all the research and reported the findings back to the team.

I also enhanced the trustworthiness of the case study through the strategy of an audit trail. The audit trail informs readers of my personal thoughts, methods, and reasons for the findings of the case study (Carcary, 2009). Throughout the report of findings, I presented examples of collected data in the form of direct quotes from interviews and provided my own personal

reflections. This allows the reader to determine the validity of the results from the case study (Carcary, 2009).

### **Positionality Statement**

Having worked in the general educational development program at Midwest Community College as an instructor for several years before moving into administration, I have observed several potential barriers to completion, such as childcare, employment, transportation, and funding. In the Adult Education Department, I have held the positions of instructor, program coordinator, literacy coordinator, program compliance coordinator, and dean. This is also the community in which I was raised and have lived a majority of my adult life. I know this area well and have spent my entire career serving this community. While I have been removed from the classroom and in administration for the past seven years, I still believe that these themes may be the primary barriers. Through the case study I learned of the prominent barriers to completion for adult learners in MCC's GED program.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this case study must be considered with the following limitations. Data obtained from case study research can sometimes be incompatible and contradictory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This can sometimes lead to difficulty making sense of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An example of this would be if one participant said that the scheduled class times are not good for working adults while another participant says that they are perfect for working adults. Another limitation of case study research can be data management (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I coded, categorized, and organized the data based on Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg's (2011) adults in transition theory. By tying the data to the theory, I was able to

make the most use of the data collected. Data collection for this case study was through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews have their limitations in research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Student participation in this case study was voluntary, and participants had to be currently attending the program. This excluded potential participants who no longer attend our program and cannot be located for interviews. Reflecting upon this, I realized that this population could have provided some of the most useful data on perceived barriers. Participants from this population could have provided different perspectives on why they have not been able to return.

### **Findings**

The findings of this case study are presented based on each of the research questions guiding the study. Analysis of the data revealed that the perceived barriers for GED students included (a) external barriers, (b) internal barriers, and (c) systematic barriers. The second question explored gaps in service for adult learners in GED programs at MCC.

#### **External Barriers: Finances, Health, and Family**

Adult learners in GED programs, just like adult learners in other higher education settings, have several obligations and responsibilities outside of the classroom. The top external barriers that were identified through the case study were financial barriers. Sixty-five percent of the participants in the case study were unemployed and 80% of the participants made less than \$25,000 per year. Here is one example of how finances affected Bonnie, one of the participants:

My husband broke our glass door out of anger; it was double glass and about four inches thick. It is going to cost \$600 to get replaced. So, what do I do? I am on government assistance and already have trouble paying my bills. I don't work and now have this extra expense. Getting a job is going to have to take priority over school, at least temporarily.

Participants noted that small changes in their financial situation could derail their GED studies.



While GED classes are free at community colleges throughout the state of Illinois, the actual cost of the GED exam can also create a financial barrier. According to Adam:

When I first started, I did not want to take the tests. I was scared; as you know, each test is \$30, and there are four of them. That is a lot of money. At \$30 a piece you can't just keep taking the test. That is a lot of money to me.

Many of the program participants are receiving government assistance and are tightly budgeted. Extra unforeseen expenses often can lead to the participants having to choose between paying their bills, feeding their families, and coming to class.

Financial barriers were not the only external barriers identified. Participants in the case study also identified health issues that not only could prevent them from coming to class but also from finding employment. One participant, Nick, used to work in construction until he fell off the scaffolds and hurt his back. Now he is 57 years old and can no longer work in his trade. He feels that his lack of an education is holding him back. He also knows that his health sometimes prevents him from being able to come to class:

I know that my health issues have prevented me from coming to class. Sometimes if I over do it, mowing the lawn or shoveling snow, it can knock me out for days. Last winter I had to stop coming to class. Sometimes, I just don't want to admit that now I have limits.

Another participant, Veronica, mentioned that she has had to stop coming to class several times due to her health:

I am not in real good health. This is my third time coming here. I get sick every time; there is no fault of the program, there are just things going on with me from when I was young. Poor eating habits and not taking care of myself have caught up with me.

All of the participants who mentioned that their health prevents them from coming to class are unemployed and attribute their poor health to their lack of employment. This is a compounding situation where these individuals are almost in a hopeless situation. They cannot find a job due to

their lack of an education, and they cannot finish their education due to their health issues. These students may not be successful in earning their GEDs in a traditional classroom setting if they do not get their physical health under control.

The second most identified external barrier to completion in the case study was family responsibilities. Several participants identified that childcare and others identified that eldercare sometimes prevented them from coming to class. Many of the participants identified that they had dropped out of school because they became teen parents. When asked, several participants described a typical day in their lives, starting off with activities related to getting their children ready for the day. This demonstrates that the children generally come first in the participants' lives. Some participants in the case study mentioned that if their child must take a sick day or their children have a day off from school, they also need to take the day off. This is a challenge for students who are also parents. In our college district, we serve 21 different communities. Each city has its own elementary school districts, and some have several school districts. While MCC's GED program tries to align its spring and fall breaks with the local schools' schedules, it is difficult to be in alignment with all the districts. George discussed his family responsibilities:

I have a young family, my kids are six and nine. When it comes to taking care of the kids, staying home with the sick ones or being there when they are on break, it falls on me. My girlfriend works the day and I work the night. If I have to stay home it does not cost us money.

When participants were asked about their household responsibilities and their external responsibilities, they mentioned feeling overwhelmed or displayed role overload. One participant, Nina, put it best:

In my house, I have infinite responsibilities; if I try to make a list, I would never finish it. For my children, I am the doctor when they are sick. For my husband, I am his secretary and his translator. On top of that, I have to cook, clean, wash clothes, and all of the other

things that good mothers do. I am a teacher when I have to help my daughters with their homework, and I am a wife for my husband.

The adult learners in the GED program emphasize the importance of making sure that their children and family feel supported and put their needs before their own.

The support, however, does not always go both ways. Participants in the case study did not feel that their families supported their educational endeavors. One participant, Donald, shared how he felt unsupported by his family:

Latino culture is a different culture. You are supposed to be working and not educating yourself. My girlfriend does not like that I am in school. She feels that it is taking away my time and that I should be working all the time to support our family. It is a cultural thing.

It is difficult for someone to be successful if they are not supported or motivated by their immediate family. Family are the people who are looked to for encouragement when individuals are tired or discouraged and the people who are supposed to lift the participants up when they are down. Without their support, it could be hard to stay engaged.

### **Internal Barriers: Previous Classroom Experiences, Math, Time Management, and Mental Health**

External barriers describe outside circumstances that could interfere with adult learners completing their course of study. Conversely, internal barriers are intrinsic tendencies that interfere with adult learners completing their course of study. A common theme throughout the case study is that many of the adult learners had poor prior educational experiences. Some had poor experiences at MCC, and some had bad experiences in other institutions. Their previous educational experiences left lasting impressions that the students are still trying to get past. One participant, Jennifer, described her previous educational experience:

With my previous GED class experience, it felt like it was just a job to them. They didn't really show any concern or, you know, be excited that you are in their class. You had to motivate yourself because they were not there to motivate you.

Another participant, Michael, described his previous experience: "Crazy, it was crazy. The previous program was toxic. Many times I was afraid, it was bad." When students come to MCC with poor prior educational experiences it is very important to create a caring and supportive environment for them. If students feel that this experience is the same as their previous, unsuccessful experience, they may not stick it out to the end.

Another primary theme under internal barriers is that the participants had a fear of math and demonstrated a lack of confidence in finishing their GEDs. Some participants mentioned changes in the math content has been a barrier. One Nick phrased it as:

My first attempt was in my 20's. I did ok, but I did not pass my math. I was afraid that I was not going to do well if I took it again, but I should have just kept with it. Math is so different now than it was back then. It is so different and now I got to somehow deal with this new math.

Even with the fear of math and lack of confidence, when the participants were asked if they used any of the support services provided by the college, such as tutoring or our academic assistance center, many said that they did not use any of the support services.

When discussing previous GED class experiences with the participants, they mentioned stopping out because they had a lack of motivation to finish. The participants felt like they were not getting anything from their previous class experiences and just stopped coming to class.

Kathi was candid about why she stopped attending class previously:

I attempted my GED in 1998 and 2012; both times I felt like I was getting nothing from class, so I stopped coming. I should have been more patient, but now I am back again. This is going to be my last time down this road.

This demonstrates how important it is to keep the students engaged and to offer a variety of assessments to demonstrate to the students how they are growing academically.

Poor time management was an internal barrier that was identified through the case study. When asked how they balanced their home and school responsibilities, participants said that they would do homework if they had the time but did not set aside a specific amount of time every week to study. Some mentioned that if they did get to the homework in class that they did not attempt to do it outside of class. Aurora put it best when she said:

I take care of my granddaddy and my little brother. As to how I balance my home and school responsibilities, when I am at home I am taking care of things at home, and when I am at school I handle my work at school. I don't have time for homework; my responsibilities outside of class don't allow for it.

The final internal barrier that was identified was mental health. Participants identified that they had struggles with mental health. Some disclosed that they lived with depression and others felt isolated in class. One participant, John, discussed his struggles with mental health: "Well, I gotta say, I think I need to get some help. I haven't done it yet, I just feel like I am wandering in a fog. It is so hard trying to be social when you would rather be alone. Depression is real and until you have lived it you can't understand it, you can't judge it." It is important to realize that some students live with mental health conditions, some undiagnosed, and should be made aware of services offered through the college that they could use as supports.

### **Systematic Barriers: Support Services, One-to-One Support, Instructors, Physical College, and Study Groups**

Student success can be directly impacted by the way colleges interact with their students, how they deliver instruction, and how they provide support services (Osam et al., 2017).

Through this case study there were five prominent systematic barriers that participants identified.

The identified barriers were lack of knowledge of support services, lack of one-to-one support, instructors who do not care, the physical condition of the college, and the desire for study groups.

The largest systematic barrier that was identified in the case study was the lack of knowledge of support services. Participants in the case study did not know about a majority of the services offered through the college. One participant, Gladys, stated it best:

At orientation you all mentioned some sort of tutoring that is offered. I could not tell you any other supports that you offer in the program. I am sure there are others, but I don't know what they are or who to talk to about them. We could use other services, but I just don't know what they are. I don't even know where to begin.

Some participants knew about one service that we offered through the department, but when it came to the vast amount of services that the college offered, they were mostly unaware. MCC is not doing enough to inform our students of all of the support services that the college has to offer.

The students in the GED program do not feel that they receive enough one-to-one support. The GED program currently has to share one paraprofessional between four different classes. Several of the participants interviewed mentioned a desire for more one-to-one support in the classroom. Libby stated:

I do wish there was an assistant, like a teacher's aide, for our class. Someone that could step in for a brief moment to give someone a little one-to-one help. Then the teacher could continue on teaching the lesson and the aide could catch them up with the rest of class. I think that would be really helpful.

The participants mentioned that sometimes they felt that they slowed down the pace of the class and that they would benefit from additional one-to-one help.

Along the same lines of students needing additional support is the next identified systematic barrier, that the instructors do not care. Many participants mentioned that they quit attending previous GED classes because they felt that the instructors did not care. Wendy provided an example of instructors not caring:

I used to go to a school in the city. All they did was sit you in front of a computer and expect you to learn on your own. Whenever I would ask for help, the teacher would come by and get sidetracked by the news or politics. That's fine, but I am here to earn a GED. I need to get through and graduate.

The participants mentioned this of many of the local programs, which shows the importance of the role of the instructor. Instructors are the people students interact with the most and their interactions can lead to a student being successful or unsuccessful in the program.

Participants in the case study mentioned the desire to have study groups that meet outside of regular class hours to assist each other. One participant said:

So many people work and are busy when they are not in school. I really wish that we had study groups so we could motivate each other and learn from each other when we are not in class. I think this is something that we should be able to do on Fridays when we are not in class. For some people this school is the only place that we can study; when we leave this building, we really don't have any help.

While in a regular college students will often just form their own study groups, students in the GED program may need a little assistance in setting this up.

The last systematic barrier that was mentioned is the physical appearance of the college and the GED classrooms. The participants felt uninspired by the physical appearance of the college and felt that it was poorly maintained. Libby mentioned how everywhere she looked it was grey and uninspired. She put it best when she said:

What do you see down here? Black and white. There is no inspiration. I love inspirational quotes and that is what this area needs. If everything is old and falling apart it is not

inspirational. So many people come here after work and they are tired. A few words of encouragement could go a long way.

Veronica mentioned how she could barely walk from the bus stop to the building in the winter because the walkway was so icy and poorly maintained. She described it as part of the reason she quit coming to class last winter.

### **Discussion**

The case study shed light on the perceived barriers to completion for GED students and the perceived gaps in service for adult learners at MCC. The participants in the case study discussed positive and negative experiences in GED programs. Participants discussed external barriers (situation), internal barriers (self), and systematic barriers (supports) they experienced in their GED program (Anderson et al., 2011). Analysis of the data found the perceived gaps in services were about (a) financial assistance, (b) lack of affordable on-campus childcare, (c) informing adult learners of available support services, (d) on-campus mental health services, and (e) additional need for individualized instruction. For example, the financial constraints, as an external barrier (Ford & Grace, 2017), made it difficult for them to stay engaged and complete the program. The situation of financial constraints makes it difficult for participants to move through the program and could create an unanticipated transition out of the program. Participants in the long term could be in a better position for economic mobility if they were able to stay in the program. Research by the COABE (2017) showed that students with a GED make almost \$10,000 more on average than those without. Participants of GED programs struggle with attending class due to financial constraints and have to make the hard choice sometimes to take low-paying jobs over academic pursuits. This prevents the participant from earning an education and credential that would allow them to earn a sustainable wage. Institutions of higher education



have limits on how they can assist students financially and it is a difficult situation for GED programs to address.

Childcare and eldercare were the next situations that lead to barriers to completion. The participants in the GED program were all adults and had family obligations. Many of the participants have young families that still require a lot of care and attention, and in some cases, participants have the obligation to take care of aging parents or grandparents. Situations where there is a lack of childcare or eldercare will lead to poor attendance patterns and can interfere with program completion. There are local social service agencies that offer child and elder care for eligible program participants, but the participants need to be aware of the programs first, and they must meet a certain financial criterion to be eligible.

There is a general fear of math in the GED program; this affects the self in the adults in transitions theory (Anderson et al., 2011). Some of the participants mentioned that the math exam has held up their progress in the past and was the only subject that they failed on the GED, which caused the participant to transition out of the program. Now they have transitioned back into class and they are still carrying around this fear of the math portion of the GED. The participants' poor prior learning experiences may lead them to believe that this time it will not be any different when they come to class, that this time they will just fail again. This leads to the students' lack of confidence in their ability to pass the GED exam and eventually their lack of motivation to come to class.

The perceived systematic barriers directly correlate to supports in the adults in transition model. At MCC there is a lack of knowledge of support services, lack of one-to-one support, and a perception that the instructors do not care. It was made apparent through the case study that

GED program participants do not know what support services the college has to offer. That is on the college because the GED program should be informing all students about the services that they are entitled to as students of the institution. The lack of exposure to support services for program participants could lead to premature transitioning out of the program. The participants brought up their desire to see more one-to-one support in the classroom, especially in math. Research has demonstrated how additional academic assistance can lead to higher rates of academic success (Anderson & Speck, 1998; Evans et al., 1996). More teacher's aides should be hired to address the gap that MCC has when it comes to the students' desire for additional one-to-one support. The adult education program currently has no extra supports for students who are struggling in math. MCC has supports for math in the college, but this is currently reserved for the college-credit students.

There were several identified perceived gaps in service (supports) at MCC for the external barriers (Anderson et al., 2011). First, other than offering scholarships for the GED exams, there are no financial supports for students in the GED program. While the program itself is tuition free, there is still the cost of potential lost wages that a student must give up in order to attend GED classes. As an institution, MCC could do more to provide for participants in the GED program. Unfortunately, community colleges cannot pay someone to attend class and earn their GED, but MCC could do things like have an on-campus food pantry to help our students out a little more when it comes to their financial burden. To try and alleviate some of the financial stress involved with earning a GED, MCC does offer a scholarship to pay for the GED exam for students enrolled in its GED program.

Another identified gap in service or missing support is that MCC does not have access to affordable on-campus childcare for our students. This is not just a problem for GED students, but for all adult students at MCC. Community colleges might be able to remove barriers associated with the situation of being a parent by offering classes at a distance or by having on-campus childcare (Fairchild, 2003). Institutions of higher education can help to support student parents by making campuses welcoming and responsive to student parents, providing access to a range of services to support low-income families, and integrating supports for academic and family success (Schumacher, 2013).

Under perceived internal barriers, the largest category affecting the self is that the program participants do not use support services, which can indicate the institution's service gap in informing students of the available support services. Adult learners in GED programs will not use support services if institutions do not do a good job informing them about the services. Current research shows the importance of informing students about support services and the direct impact that it has on student success (Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008). Research also shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be aware of support services than those with higher degrees of social capital (Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008). MCC Adult Education should be providing program participants with a full menu of services when they enroll in our programs. This will empower adult learners to help themselves when they are struggling in the GED program.

There are no on-campus mental health supports available for adult learners in the GED program; this is another example of a gap in service. This could help with any lack of confidence, depression, and other mental health issues the students may have. Having mental

health services may not be enough to help with the previously mentioned issues. Current research shows that a majority of students in higher education seek mental health advice from family and friends, while only a small number use on-campus mental health services (Quinn et al., 2009). Research suggests that students do not want to admit to themselves and others that there are mental health issues (Quinn et al., 2009). Additionally, there is a gap in service to address time management. Several of the program participants displayed time management problems. Time and expectation management practices can be taught in class orientations for adult learners (Chartrand, 1992; Domingo, 2016).

The final gap in service is with the perception that instructors do not care. Professional development on student validation can be provided to the instructors (Rendón, 1994). Something as small as that will demonstrate to the students that the instructors are invested in their success (Barnett, 2008; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Student supports such as counseling and tutoring need to be available to help students to be successful when classroom instruction is not enough (Russell, 2006). Adults must see the value in the education that they are receiving; otherwise, they will stop out (Russell, 2006). Adult learners already know why they are in school and what life is like without the credential that they are seeking (Russell, 2006).

### **Recommendations**

The practical implications and recommendations for adult education professionals are:

1. Connecting students with supports and resources is essential to their success. GED programs should have a support staff member who is responsible for linking program participants with appropriate support services. Adult education programs can also create a list of support services provided by the college and services provided through the local

community. Creating a list of support services will also help to educate and inform all program staff of the services available for program participants.

2. Continuing in the same theme of providing access to support services, GED programs should make conscious efforts to create meaningful partnerships with local social service agencies. Part of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 is that adult education programs must take an active role in a local One Stop Center. These partnerships provide program participants with access to several federally funded social service agencies. The local One Stop Centers provide individual consultations to program participants and link them to training and employment opportunities. Other local social service agencies such as CEDA or Aunt Martha's can assist with housing or childcare. By having active partnerships with local social service agencies, GED programs can play a greater role in eliminating barriers to success for program participants.
3. GED instructors have a pivotal role in student success. Their interactions with students can be lasting and may be the reason that the students keep coming to class. Instructors can build confidence and breed success. Instructors can build confidence in GED program participants by showing the students how much they have grown while they have been in class. This can be demonstrated by sharing pre-and posttest results, GED practice exams, and through classroom demonstrations. Instructors who teach in GED class settings should take professional development classes in working with disadvantaged populations. This can help to give instructors the tools that they need to connect and build trust with at risk populations.

## **Conclusion**

This case study sheds light on the perceived barriers of the students at MCC and demonstrates gaps in support services in the GED program. Adult learners add to the diversity of educational institutions, especially for community colleges. The mission of community colleges is to be open-access institutions that serve the constituents of the local area. Adult learners are a growing population at community colleges, and serving this special population is essential for success of the institutions as well as meeting the goals set out by the state and federal governments. When working with adult learners there are several factors that must be taken into consideration in order to provide the best chances of success. The case study has provided MCC with insight on how to best serve the specific population of adult learners in GED programs. The data collected will impact future program design and support services that can lead to increased persistence, retention, and completion rates.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

This case study was a very informative experience for the GED program at Midwestern Community College (MCC, a pseudonym). Through the case study, perceived barriers that prevent adult learners in GED programs from completing their diploma programs as well as the perceived gaps in services were identified. The intended goal of the project was to discover how MCC could improve student persistence, retention, and completion by identifying perceived barriers to completion. Another goal of the project was to find out what services are needed for program participants to be more successful in their studies. The case study was able to provide useful information that will enhance the GED program so MCC can better serve students in the GED program.

Going into the case study there were some assumptions on what would be discovered through the personal interviews. One assumption was that transportation would be one of the top barriers to completion. In the past many students used public transportation and relied on bus passes provided by the college to get to and from class. The bus pass system that the college used was discontinued six years ago and was assumed to have a major impact. Through the study it was identified that transportation issues were not found to be a barrier to completion. It was discovered, however, that even though this is a program that is provided tuition free, finances were still a barrier to completion. While MCC cannot pay students to attend GED classes, the college can research and educate our instructional and support staff on what social services are

available through local, state, and federal social service agencies. This can ensure that MCC's instructors and staff can recommend services to students who display the need for assistance. MCC's Foundation does have a Second Chance Scholarship for GED students. This scholarship pays for the GED exam for current GED students. This can help alleviate some of the financial stress associated with earning a GED.

Another finding of the case study was that many of our students face the barrier of being a parent. The need for affordable childcare at MCC is apparent. MCC used to have a childcare facility on campus that was shut down during Illinois' budget impasse. By contacting other local community colleges in the area, it was identified that there are local companies that will come and open and operate a Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)-approved childcare facility on campus. This would not only benefit the participants in the GED program but also all parent students who attend MCC. With the facility being DCFS approved, students with financial barriers would be able to utilize the facility for free or for a reduced rate. This is an issue that will be presented to MCC's higher administration right away because it will provide a needed service to many students at MCC. In the immediate future MCC Adult Education will form partnerships with local DCFS-approved childcare facilities to develop a referral system where we can refer participants to the facility if they are having childcare difficulties.

It was also identified through the case study that GED program participants do not know about or do not use support services offered by the college. If students in the GED program knew what services were offered through the college they could utilize more of the student support services. GED program participants are allowed to use all of the same support services that are available to the college-credit students. To help inform GED students of all of the services



offered, MCC Adult Education is going to partner with MCC Student Services to create a menu of services that will be available both in print and online. MCC Adult Education students will be given the student support services menu when they register for class and they will also receive an in-person presentation on student services during the mandatory student orientation. Another approach that MCC Adult Education and Student Services will utilize to engage students with the goal of increasing the use of student support services is to create a referral form that instructors and staff can use to recommend services to the students. Actively engaging the program participants through a referral process will demonstrate to the students that we do care about their success and we will help them to access the services that they need.

It was discovered through the case study that GED program participants have a fear of math. Some of the research participants even mentioned that the math portion of the GED exam has held them back from earning their diploma for years. To help the program participants overcome their fear of math, MCC Adult Education will employ additional paraprofessional educators so each math class has a teacher and an aide. The new math paraprofessionals will be a great classroom resource that will be able to provide individualized instruction when a student is struggling to learn a concept, or even provide small group instruction when instruction needs to be differentiated by ability groups. MCC Adult Education will also develop a Math Club that will meet weekly to provide students with additional help outside of the classroom and can assist students with forming study groups.

A common theme that participants discussed in the case study was poor prior learning experiences and a lack of confidence. To address this at a programmatic level, MCC Adult Education will start by developing individualized educational plans for each student with short-

term and long-term goals. The goals will be set directly after the instructor reviews the student placement test results. Based on the test results, the instructor can develop a logical list of short-term goals that can be built upon and eventually lead to their long-term goal. Regular assessments will be administered so the students can see their progress and build their personal confidence.

This project has been important to the GED program at MCC as it has given the program greater insight into the needs of our students. Case studies like this should be completed at least every three years to identify gaps in services for students in our GED programs. The findings of the case study demonstrated the importance of student support services for the adult education student population. The case study demonstrated that the department needs to do a better job of informing the students, instructors, and program staff about what support services are available and that MCC Adult Education needs to work much closer with that side of the college. If MCC wants students to be successful, the college needs to make sure that they have access to all the services that they need to remove their perceived barriers. Through this case study, MCC Adult Education was able to find clarity on the direction to take the GED program to improve persistence, retention, and completion of adult learners in GED programs. The GED program is going to have to allocate more funds for direct instruction so it can hire more paraprofessionals to provide one-to-one support. MCC Adult Education are also going to need to be involved in the writing process for student support service grants. This will make sure that when MCC is awarded these grants that there are specific goals and funding allocated for adult education initiatives.

From a broader perspective, the design of this case study is such that it can be implemented by programs all across the country. Many programs are currently looking for ways to improve their persistence, retention, and completion rates of GED students in Illinois. By completing a case study like the one that MCC conducted they will be able to come up with their own individualized results for their programs. Illinois is a large state with many programs in urban, suburban, and rural areas, so results will vary, but by conducting a case study like this they will be able to identify where their gaps in services are as well as their students' perceived barriers.

### **Practical Implications and Recommendations**

The practical implications and recommendations for adult education professionals are:

- 1) Connecting students with supports and resources is essential to their success. GED programs should have a support staff member that is responsible for linking program participants with appropriate support services. Adult education programs can also create a list of support services provided by the college and services provided through the local community. Creating a list of support services will also help to educate and inform all program staff of the services available for program participants.
- 2) Continuing in the same theme of providing access to support services, GED programs should make conscious efforts to create meaningful partnerships with local social service agencies. Part of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 is that adult education programs must take an active role in a local One Stop Center. These partnerships provide program participants with access to several federally funded social service agencies. The local One Stop Centers provide individual consultations to program

participants and link them to training and employment opportunities. Other local social service agencies such as CEDA or Aunt Martha's can assist with housing or childcare. By having active partnerships with local social service agencies, GED programs can play a greater role in eliminating barriers to success for program participants.

- 3) GED instructors have a pivotal role in student success. Their interactions with students can be lasting and may be the reason that the students keep coming to class. Instructors can build confidence and breed success. Instructors can build confidence in GED program participants by showing the students how much they have grown while they have been in class. This can be demonstrated by sharing pre-and posttest results, GED practice exams, and through classroom demonstrations. Instructors who teach in GED class settings should take professional development classes in working with disadvantaged populations. This can help to give instructors the tools that they need to connect and build trust with at risk populations.

### **Future Research**

Future research interests that came from this case study are: What are the most successful GED programs statewide and nationwide doing to address student financial barriers, and what are the most successful strategies for adult education, developmental education, and elementary education for helping students overcome a fear of math? If MCC can find the answers to those questions, the college will be able to remove two of the largest barriers to completion that MCC GED students have. In the future it is recommended that MCC expand its research to find out what the best strategies are for addressing financial barriers of GED students and trying to replicate those best practices at the college. With the prominence of the fear of math that MCC

GED students have, MCC should research what national best practices are for overcoming fears of math. It is recommended to keep the focus broad; MCC should research effective practices from all levels of the educational system. MCC should then take those practices and repackage the methods so they are appropriate for adult learners.

### **Self-Reflection**

The case study was an eye-opening and transformative experience. Through the case study I was able to expose unknown areas of weakness within the GED program at MCC. By utilizing the adults in transition framework for the study and analysis I was able to identify if the participants' barriers were from their situation (external barriers), self (internal barriers), or from their supports or lack of them (systematic barriers). I now know that the Adult Education Department and Student Services need to work more closely together to address the issues of adult learner retention, persistence, and completion. I was able to debunk some false assumptions about barriers that impact adult learners in MCC's GED program. It was an assumption of the department that transportation was a major barrier to completion for the program participants. During the case study, transportation did not come up as a barrier to completion. A prominent barrier that I did not foresee was the lack of exposure to student support services for GED students. The case study has demonstrated to me that the MCC Adult Education Department needs to be more proactive about exposing students to and connecting students to support services. The biggest takeaway for me from the case study is the importance of having an internal partnership between student services and adult education. A successful partnership could help to expose adult learners to the support services provided through the college and in turn connect the students with services.

I also found the value in program evaluation through this case study. By doing the case study I learned of practices that we should have been doing in the department. Program evaluations should take place periodically to ensure that service providers do not become complacent. It is my belief that a case study like the one I conducted should be done every three years to ensure that adult education programs are still providing supports for the prominent barriers effecting their students. Some of the barriers that surfaced through this case study are very easy to address. Many participants discussed the desire for additional one-to-one assistance in the classroom. While we do have a teacher's aide in the department, she is torn between several classes. As a result of this case study, MCC Adult Education is going to invest in more teacher's aides to work with the students on a one-to-one basis. Participants also mentioned that they would like to have study groups. This is something that MCC can do at the program level with little to no additional cost by providing them with space to meet and access to instructional materials. The program can assist with facilitating the creation of the study groups and hand over control of the groups to the students. This could be empowering to the students in the GED program.

Barriers for adult learners in GED programs differ from typical community college students in a few substantial ways. The first way that GED program participant barriers are different is that GED participants do not have access to all of the services that typical community college students have. Adult learners in GED classes have often had negative classroom experiences that have driven them out of the classroom before. These negative classroom experiences make it more difficult for GED students to return to the academic setting (Goto & Martin, 2009). The final difference between GED students and typical community college

students is that they are more heavily impacted by poverty (Schafft et al., 2008). This case study demonstrated that even small financial differences could derail GED students on their educational journey.

Professionally, this experience has made me a better administrator and researcher. Prior to conducting this case study, if I had wanted to know why a student phenomenon was happening, I would consult my coworkers, other practitioners from across the state, and the literature. Having conducted the case study I now know that student opinions are just as important as the other sources.

Currently in the state of Illinois, adult learner retention, persistence, and completion are under study. A task force has been assigned the job of creating a best practices guide for improving the retention, persistence, and completion of adult learners in GED programs. This case study design is ideal for identifying the different barriers that programs could encounter. Then based on their individual results, programs could look at the best practices to address their identified barriers. In my opinion this is the most impactful result of the case study.

### **Conclusion**

By identifying the perceived barriers and gaps in services for adult learners in GED programs at MCC, the college was provided with valuable information that will help to increase persistence, retention, and completion rates of adult learners in GED programs. The findings from the case study have demonstrated the importance of teaming up with the Student Services Division to provide the best supports for adult education students and that it is the responsibility of everyone to inform the students of what services are available. The case study also informed the program of the importance of knowing what fears the students have and how they feel they

should be best addressed. Immediate changes in instructional design and accessibility to student support services will increase persistence, retention and completion rates of adult learners in MCC's GED program.



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APPENDIX A

IRB EXEMPTION LETTER

### Exempt Determination

19-Sep-2019  
Matthew Beasland (Z1826101@students.niu.edu)  
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS20-0084 "Identifying Barriers Faced by Adult Learners in General Education Development Programs"

Dear Matthew Beasland,

Your application for institutional review of research involving human subjects was reviewed by Institutional Review Board #1 on 19-Sep-2019 and it was determined that it meets the criteria for exemption 2.

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents.

Please include the protocol number (HS20-0084) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM



**Title of Study:** Identifying Barriers Faced by Adult Learners in General Educational Development Programs

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**Investigators**

**Name:** **Matthew Beasland**      **Dept:** HESA      **Phone:** 708-263-7537

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_      **Dept:** \_\_\_\_\_      **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_      **Dept:** \_\_\_\_\_      **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Key Information**

- This is a voluntary research study on identifying barriers faced by adult learners in General Educational Development programs at South Suburban College.
- This short study involves individual interviews.
- The benefit to the program participants is going to be improved program design for the GED program at South Suburban College; this is a low risk case study with no foreseeable risks to case study participants.

**Description of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to identify the perceived barriers that prevent adult learners in the General Educational Development program at South Suburban College from completing their diploma programs. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Participate in one half hour individual interview.

**Risks and Benefits**

There are no reasonably foreseeable or expected risks.

The benefits are that you will be given the opportunity identify perceived barriers that effect our program participants. By identifying the barriers, they will help the college identify where the program needs to increase its support services.

**Confidentiality**

This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Digital audio recordings will be made of each interview and will be destroyed after successful dissertation defense. Only the researcher will have access to the audio files and your identity will not be used in the recordings. All digital files will be password protected for security purposes. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Your Rights**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Matthew Beasland at [Z1826101@students.niu.edu](mailto:Z1826101@students.niu.edu) or by telephone at 708-263-7537, or Dr. Xiaodan Hu, [Xiaodan.Hu@niu.edu](mailto:Xiaodan.Hu@niu.edu), 815-753-6878. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

### **Future Use of the Research Data**

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

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Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the individual interviews for this case study.

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

APPENDIX C

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

## Individual Interview Protocols

### Interview 1- Introduction and Background Interview

#### Part 1: Review Informed Consent Document

1. Provide students the informed consent document prior to meeting
2. During meeting, discuss, review, and sign document
3. Review the interview and topics of the interview
4. Ask students if they have any questions
5. Sign form and give copy to student

#### Part 2: Open-Ended Questions Themes and Representative Questions:

##### Home Life

1. Tell me about a typical day in your life?
2. Who lives in your home with you? How do they feel about you returning to school to finish your high school equivalency?
3. What are your household responsibilities? How do these impact your ability to attend GED classes?
4. What responsibilities do you have outside of the home?

##### GED Class Experience

5. Tell me about your journey so far to earn your GED?
6. What have you found to be most challenging in earning your GED? Where have you found the most success?
7. Tell me about your previous GED classroom experience?
8. Can you please tell me about your experiences with MCC's Instructors and GED program staff?
9. Can you please describe your interactions with other students in the GED program?
10. What can MCC do differently to improve your student experience?

##### Time Management

11. How do you balance your school and home responsibilities?
12. How does this impact your home life?

13. What other responsibilities do you have that demand your time? How do you make it all work?

#### Support/Lack of Support

14. What are support systems in place for GED students at MCC?
  15. What supports provided by MCC do you take advantage of?
  16. What do you find to be the most helpful support at MCC?
  17. What supports do you wish you had at MCC?
- 

#### Participant Questions

1. Are there questions you wished I had asked you today?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

#### Closing Remarks

1. Thank student for involvement
2. Might contact if I need further clarification about response
3. Might be contacted for a follow up study

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

## Demographic Survey

1. Age: What is your age?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46-55
  - e. 56+
  
2. Ethnicity(or Race): Please specify your ethnicity:
  - a. Hispanics of any race
  - b. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - c. Asian
  - d. Black or African American
  - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - f. White
  - g. Two or more races
  - h. Race and Ethnicity Unknown
  - i. Other(please specify)
  - j. Prefer not to respond
  
3. Gender: What is your gender?
  - a. Man
  - b. Woman
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to respond
  
4. Employment: Are you currently employed?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
5. Employment: How many hours do you work per week?
  - a. Less than 5
  - b. 5-10
  - c. 10-20
  - d. 20-30
  - e. 30-40
  - f. 40+



6. Marital Status: What is your marital status?
  - a. Single
  - b. In a relationship
  - c. Married
  - d. Separated
  - e. Divorced
  - f. Widowed
  
7. Housing: Which best describes where you currently live?
  - a. House - Owned
  - b. House - Rented
  - c. Apartment – Rented
  
8. Housing: How many adults (18 years and older) live in your home?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5+
  
9. Housing: How many children (less than 18 years old) live in your home?
  - a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5+
  
10. Income: What is your total annual income before taxes?
  - a. Less than \$10,000
  - b. \$10,000-\$25,000
  - c. \$25,000-\$40,000
  - d. \$40,000-\$50,000
  - e. \$50,000 +