



Self-Efficacy: How Does It Influence Academic Success?

Colleges and universities today are not only serving traditional high school graduates, but also students who have earned a General Educational Development (GED) diploma. Through the GED tests, individuals who did not complete high school or were home schooled can earn an alternative high school diploma. In 1942, the GED test was developed under the direction of the American Council of Education, to provide World War II veterans a way of earning an alternative high school diploma so that they could take advantage of the postsecondary education benefits provided by the GI Bill (Tyler, 2003). In the 1950s, the test was made available to all adults who had not completed high school.

The Ohio Department of Education's Office of Assessment issued a news release dated June 4, 2003, stating that in 2001, 41,000 Ohioans took the GED test. At Kent State University (KSU), there are more than 1,000 GED graduates enrolled as undergraduate students among the eight regional campuses (Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness, 2002). A study conducted by Dowdy and Golden (2004) showed that GED graduates possess a wide range of diverse characteristics that distinguish them from traditional high school graduates in higher education. Many GED graduates have been in the workforce or are still in the workforce, married, parenting, and may have some college experience (Golden, 2003). Thus, their diversity brings a much richer and lived experience to the classroom, as opposed to high school graduates; however, they may not be as prepared for college as are high school graduates who are exposed to college preparatory courses and career and vocational guidance in secondary education (Golden).

To further their academic skills or obtain their GED, some individuals enroll in adult basic education (ABE) programs to receive formal training in improving or enhancing basic skills.

For example, in Ohio, 56,607 adults participated in ABE programs during 2004 (Ohio Adult Basic and Literacy Education). Most of these programs provide students with instructional strategies for taking the GED test or to improve or enhance their basic skills (e.g., reading, writing, and math). A study conducted by Sheehan-Holt and Smith (2000) indicated that although participation in ABE classes improves adults' personal goals of obtaining their GED, communicating more effectively with their children, and reading the Bible, these goals do not necessarily improve their literacy abilities in a way that benefits the broader social context of becoming productive citizens.

Thus, many students in these programs do not receive preparation for employment, skills to improve their employment situation, career advice, or exposure to postsecondary education. Furthermore, many GED graduates never enroll in ABE classes, particularly home schoolers. They, as well as others, just take the GED test. This means that their exposure to college does not exist, unless it is obtained through other sources such as family members, co-workers, or some other medium. Perhaps, then, for some GED graduates, their beliefs and attitudes in their capabilities drive their success in college. Self-efficacy as defined by Bandura in Goddard and Goddard (2001) is "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce to given attainments" (p. 807).

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This article is part of a series discussing our findings from GED graduates who participated in a research study at KSU. The first article provides background information about the study and briefly discusses how GED graduates approached postsecondary education. The purpose of this article is to explore how self-efficacy influences the persistence of GED graduates to succeed academically in postsecondary education.

Although there has been research on college preparation for high school students, there is almost no research that focuses on college preparation for GED graduates. Several studies show that college preparatory courses included in secondary school curricula help smooth the transition from high school to college for college-bound students (Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001; Kirst & Venezia, 2001; Weiss, 2001). For example, one study evaluated the effects of high school preparation and remedial placement in college. This study showed that students who only completed three years of English required college remedial education courses and only a few students who completed Advanced Placement (AP) English needed those courses (Hoyt & Sorensen).

But, there is a great deal of controversy as to whether secondary schools should be solely responsible for preparing students and the disparity of who has access to college preparatory courses. Weiss (2001) reports high schools that have strong academic curricula determine whether high school graduates will earn a bachelor's degree. Many reports indicate that a rigorous curriculum in high schools should include at least three years of English, three years of a foreign language, three years of social studies, four years of math (including pre-calculus or higher), three years of science, and at least one AP course (Hoyt & Sorensen, 2001, Weiss). These are recommendations and suggestions to assist high school graduates in being academically successful in college.

Lack of college preparedness for GED graduates may potentially pose problems for college personnel, faculty, and ABE programs. For example, if faculty and staff assume that all college students are high school graduates, there is a greater potential that GED graduates may feel "invisible" in the classroom and their learning will suffer. Colleges' and universities' student services programs may also need to enhance services to address the needs of this population, such as dealing with childcare issues, parenting programs, soft skills in time management, and balancing school, work, and family. Further, preliminary research conducted by the research team of the GED Scholars Initiative at KSU has shown that many GED graduates do not complete a four-year degree at KSU (GED Scholars Initiative). This poses another problem for colleges and universities as it relates to retention.

On the other hand, the success of some GED graduates in college could be related to the high self-efficacy levels they possess. One participant stated, "I get too much achievement just out of being here everyday and coming to the classes and doing the work—that makes me no longer feel like a failure." The participants in our study revealed they were quite often driven by determination, self-survival skills, and/or perseverance to achieve their goal.

Through individual interviews and focus groups with GED graduates matriculating at KSU, we learned that high self-efficacy also determines their success in completing college. Within or under the umbrella of self-efficacy, a strong sense of self, helping others, and receiving academic accolades, i.e. scholarships and high GPAs, were also essential for academic success and reaching their goals of obtaining a four-year degree.

Self-knowledge drives how they will approach their successes and their challenges. Another participant claimed, "I did it because I could. I always deep down thought that I could go to college or go to school and

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be successful in that realm. I just wasn't focused." If students are self-motivated, confident, and engaged learners, they will be more determined to persist in college and complete their program of study.

Thus, recognizing strengths and weaknesses, setting goals, and staying focused on a career are just a few determining factors for building "self" survival skills. Among other areas discussed, possessing high self-efficacy, self-perseverance, and determination allowed these students to stay on course. It was further revealed that overcoming barriers to learning was necessary and achieved through acknowledging their weaknesses and then improving skills in areas such as writing. For example, a participant stated that "the fact that I progress in my writings was something that was also building my confidence." Some also indicated that helping others and becoming involved with student groups and organizations help to heighten their self-efficacy.

In addition to executing new skills to accomplish academic success, they also had to learn how to navigate through the university, socialize with others, make sense of the political context of grades, and "explore new ways of learning and being successful in college." Adult learners, particularly GED graduates in higher education, are highly motivated intrinsically and extrinsically, determined, and persistent; however, to maintain those characteristics they must also have strong beliefs about how they approach and think about learning.

Implications for Adult Educators

Educating adult students should focus on developing cognitive skills that address their self-awareness and self-efficacy. How students think about themselves as learners and how others think about them as learners play an integral part in their academic success. High levels of efficacy, as well as other characteristics of cognition, heighten and intrinsically motivate adult learners to be engaged and active participants in their learning. One participant succinctly stated,

I have been very lucky even with all of the negative things that have happened in my life. My stepfather would constantly tell me that I was worthless, I would be nothing. [College] is proof to me that I am smart enough, that I am capable. I am good as anybody who comes from a family that is making over \$100,000 a year.

Thus, adult educators can be instrumental in how adult students approach new content areas by facilitating and encouraging a learning environment that provides positive reinforcement and rewards the learners' behaviors to increase their level of self-efficacy. Students that possess strong beliefs about themselves and their learning will be academically successful. Teachers may consider adopting cooperative, collaborative, and constructivist approaches to learning in their classrooms. These approaches engage students to utilize prior knowledge to connect with academic skills they are learning in the classroom. These approaches also allow learners to become active participants in their learning and develop as critical thinkers.

Conclusion

Heightened levels of self-efficacy, high self-esteem, and high self-confidence are key to the academic success of GED students in college. The three characteristics were also relevant in terms of these students' abilities to overcome learning barriers and build a learning community. Through the interviews and focus groups, it was evident that although these students had not completed high school, they were very efficient and effective as college students. They exhibited tenacity in achieving their goals. Hensley and Kinser (2001) described tenacious adult learners as those who, for whatever reason, stop out of college, but eventually return.

GED graduates are faced with many challenges as college students. Many must learn how to navigate on a college campus, learn how to balance school, work, and family, develop time management skills, build a network and support system within the college community, and maintain rigorous academic standards to remain in college. All of these factors, along with a strong sense of self-efficacy, impact their college experience and success as college students.

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