The Decision to Pursue Postsecondary Education for Women who Hold GED Credentials

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Lila Johnson Goff

Abstract

Although they are increasing in absolute and relative numbers among degree seekers, few adult women GED holders successfully complete 4-year degrees. In order to develop a more complete picture of the postsecondary education experiences of adult women GED holders who seek 4-year degrees, an understanding of the experience of deciding to pursue a 4-year degree is needed.

This research studied the experience of deciding to pursue postsecondary education for adult women GED holders entering postsecondary education for the first time later in life. The guiding questions were: Why do adult women who earned their GED credentials choose to pursue postsecondary education? What is the process of choosing to engage in postsecondary education for female GED holders? Descriptive case study interviews with seven women who held GED credentials and who had completed at least one year of study were used to develop a Grounded Theory of the decision to pursue postsecondary education.

The salient themes that emerged from this research were: self-efficacy, life change, external support, aspiration and opportunity, short-term goals, and information seeking. Situating these findings into a visual Grounded Theory model provided the framework for a model of the decision to pursue postsecondary education for women with GED credentials. The findings indicate that successful interventions for increasing the number of women who choose to pursue postsecondary education after attaining GED credentials include strategic outreach during life-changing events and the use of stackable credentials at every level of postsecondary education.

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The Decision to Pursue Postsecondary Education for Women With GED Credentials

I come from a family of seven siblings with dozens of cousins. Relatively few people in my immediate or extended family have chosen to pursue any type of postsecondary education and my most intelligent and capable relatives opted for the world of work over that of education. I could see that in the case of my family members, it was not a question of differentiated capacity or resources; they simply did not choose to pursue postsecondary education. I have been long fascinated by the question of why some choose to pursue postsecondary education while others do not.

This question continued to gnaw at me as I worked in an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program that taught office skills to adults with limited English proficiency. Every session, there were one or two students who would ask me for help with college applications and financial aid forms. I could not understand what motivated some of these very capable and ambitious adults with the multiple challenges of large families, multiple jobs, and myriad responsibilities to pursue postsecondary education while others—who were equally capable and in some cases better poised to embark on this journey—would not. Understanding more about the experience of committing to postsecondary education for nontraditional students is an important step in understanding how to engage more adult students in postsecondary education in meaningful ways that will improve their experiences and empower postsecondary institutions to provide effective pathways to degree completion for one of the most vulnerable populations in higher education.

The phrase “nontraditional student” will probably become an anachronism in future years as the number of so-called traditional students—those who enter postsecondary education directly from high school attending full time while being financially supported by their families—shrinks, while the number of so-called nontraditional students who participate in higher education continues to grow (Ruppert, 2003). Nontraditional students now represent well over half of the students enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). However, they do not represent over half of the postsecondary graduates and are less likely to achieve their postsecondary goals than their peers who are considered traditional postsecondary students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2007) data, a mere 16.9% of nontraditional students—meeting one or more of the nontraditional classifications (i.e., over 24 years-old, delaying entry following high school graduation, working over 35 hours per week, financially independent)—complete 4-year degrees within 5 years versus 53.9% of traditional students who graduate within that same timeframe. Each facet of nontraditional student status decreases the likelihood of degree attainment (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Adult women make up a growing number and percentage of students entering postsecondary education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, the majority do not persist to completion. These women are classified as “nontraditional” students on multiple facets, placing them among those students least likely to complete a 4-year degree (Boudett, Murname, & Willett, 2000). Those students who hold General Education Development (GED) credentials—because they passed the GED exam rather than completing the graduation requirements for high school—are the subset of this demographic least likely to achieve their postsecondary goals. A deeper understanding the initial decision to pursue postsecondary education for this specific subset of adult learners is needed.

The educational aspirations of adults who hold GED credentials do not align with their postsecondary enrollment patterns. The absolute number and percentage of GED holders who plan to pursue some form of postsecondary education after receiving their GED increased steadily over the past 50 years. (Baycich, 2003). The percent of GED holders who plan to pursue some form of postsecondary education has increased from 36% in 1967 to over 66% of those surveyed by the American Council on Education in 2000 (Brown, 2004). However, in a longitudinal study using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth completed in 1991, Murnane, Willitt, and Boudett (1997) found that only 33% had attempted to complete at least 1 year of college and that over 75% of GED holders who enter postsecondary institutions leave after one semester. In a follow up study, Boudett, Murname, and Willett (2000) found that female GED holders had a 4-year degree attainment rate of roughly one half of one percent. Because female GED holders are one of the demographic groups least likely to successfully achieve their postsecondary education goals, a deeper understanding of the process through which they choose to pursue higher education represents a critical case that could inform beneficial interventions for the programs that support them in getting their GED credentials and the postsecondary institutions in which they enroll.

There is no question that there are tremendous personal benefits in the pursuit of some form of postsecondary education. First, there are quantified economic incentives for individuals to pursue postsecondary education. Although there is an ongoing debate as to exactly what that return is, most studies indicate that there is an increase of roughly 10% on an individual's earnings for every year of postsecondary schooling. Bernasek (2006) found that if an individual were to be earning a household income of $42,000—which is the national median income—each extra year of postsecondary education could reflect an additional $4,200 a year. This could add up to a half-million dollars during a lifetime of earning. There are also long-term health benefits to education attainment beyond high school. Those who pursue postsecondary education were found to have lower blood pressure even after the results were adjusted for age, race, gender, and other socioeconomic factors (Yin et al., 2011). There are additional nonmarket benefits for individuals who increase their educational attainment including positive impact on psychological well being (Grossman & Joyce, 2006; Smith, 2005). These increases are seen not only for those individuals who pursue postsecondary education but also for GED holders when compared with high school dropouts who do not pursue the GED credential. This represents a spectrum of health and economic benefits with those who dropped out of high school and do not hold GED credentials on the negative end of the spectrum and those who have met their postsecondary education goals on the positive end of the continuum.

For society at large, there are also quantifiable benefits to individuals achieving their postsecondary education goals. Seminal work by economists Lawrence F. Katz and Claudia Goldin (2006) in looking at the longitudinal effect of increases in educational attainment in the United States labor force from 1915 to 1999 estimated that education gains resulted in at least 23% of the overall growth in productivity, or around 10% of growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Additionally many voices outside of the academy have joined in chorus to assert that the United States needs an increasingly educated workforce to remain competitive in the world economy. Bernasek (2005) argued,

> If economists are right, it is not just part of the cost of maintaining a functioning democracy, but a source of wealth creation for all. That means that investing in the education of every American is in everyone's self-interest.

Both the legislative and executive branches of government have also weighed in on the importance of postsecondary education. In an address to the joint session of congress in 2009, President Obama said,

> In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, it is a pre-requisite. That is why it will be the goal of this Administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive

> education—from the day they are born to the day they begin a career. (Obama, 2009)

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL, 2011) echoed this sentiment,

> The importance of postsecondary education has increased significantly in the last decade. A high school diploma is no longer sufficient in the 21st century. In order to be successful in today's global economy a person must receive some form of postsecondary education.

It is clear that finding pathways to postsecondary education success for all—even the one million individuals who drop out of high school every year—is a vital priority especially considering the fact that 30% of adults in the United States have never attempted any form of postsecondary education (Zhang, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Although they are increasing in absolute and relative numbers among degree seekers, few adult women GED holders successfully complete 4-year degrees. There are multiple and obvious barriers to completion for these students. Most of them hold full-time employment while attending school, many of them attend only part time, many have family obligations outside of school, and many of them are the first generation in their families to attend college, and so do not have parents who have already navigated the system to a 4-year degree. Myriad research has identified both supports and barriers to completion (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cook, & King, 2005; Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wang, & Grimes, 2001) for these nontraditional students. It today's economic reality, it is more important than ever for individuals (Bernasek, 2005; Ou, 2008) and the society in which they live (Baum & Ma, 2008) that we increase the number of adults who successfully pursue postsecondary education. In order to develop a more complete picture of the postsecondary education experiences of adult women who seek 4-year degrees, an understanding of the experience of deciding to pursue a 4-year degree must be undertaken with the goal of better engaging this population in postsecondary education and developing institutional interventions to encourage the pursuit and completion of postsecondary goals.

Research Questions

In order to understand the experiences of female nontraditional students, this research studied in depth the experience of choosing to pursue postsecondary education for a specific subset of the population: adult women GED holders entering postsecondary education for the first time later in life. The guiding questions are: Why do adult women who earned their GED credentials choose to pursue postsecondary education? What is the process of choosing to engage in postsecondary education for female GED holders?

Significance of the Study

Although there are increasing numbers of nontraditional adult students—including those who hold GED credentials rather than high school diplomas—pursuing postsecondary education, they are not obtaining the degrees that they seek in acceptable numbers. Much attention has been paid to their experiences once enrolled in postsecondary education but very little is known about the process of choosing to pursue those elusive postsecondary goals. An increased understanding of the choice process for these women could lead to a better understanding of their overall experiences, motivations, expectations, and external forces. This increased understanding could play a role in the creation of interventions, programs, and services that support these students in a more effective way and could potentially result in higher levels of degree attainment.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The goal of my research is to understand the experience of adult women GED holders as they choose to pursue postsecondary education. I chose to use methodology situated in the interpretive research paradigm and the data generated from this study is qualitative. Interpretive research reconstructs and describes phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which is an epistemological fit with the goals of my research, in which I sought to both “reconstruct and understand” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 113) the experience of adult women who choose to pursue a higher education. The methodology chosen follows a constructivist paradigm because the goals are not the verification of hypotheses in an effort to explain or predict, rather this research has taken an in depth look at the lived experiences of women who decided to pursue postsecondary education after receiving their GED credentials. I will use Grounded Theory methodology to address the research question acknowledging the importance and validity of firsthand knowledge in constructing empirical worlds and experience (Charmaz, 2003). Grounded Theory methods do not specify data collection techniques; this allows a variety of data gathering techniques—qualitative or quantitative—to be used depending on the question addressed by the research. Descriptive case study interviews with adult female GED holders provided the initial unit of analysis for the development of this Grounded Theory. The goal of the descriptive case study is to inform theory using real and vivid anecdotal information (Morra & Friedlander,1999). The number of cases used was small, reflecting the concept of "critical cases" that is central to Grounded Theory research.

Qualifications of the Researcher

I am a graduate student who has completed all of the required coursework in the Adult Education program in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development. I have an undergraduate degree in Spanish and Portuguese with a certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. My coursework has included multiple courses on qualitative interpretive research. I have over 10 years of experience working in a wide variety of K-16 educational settings teaching ESL, and basic reading in elementary schools, community colleges, research universities, and in ABE programs in the United States and Brazil. I have served as a member of the editorial team for peer-reviewed journals and monographs, as well as numerous books and proceedings. I have published articles on the subjects of access to postsecondary curriculum and nontraditional students in postsecondary education in peer-reviewed journals. I am currently the Coordinator of Undergraduate Education for the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota.

Definition of Terms

Adult Education: Defined by federal guidelines as services or instruction below the postsecondary level for individuals who are over 16 years old and are not enrolled in or required to be enrolled in secondary school. Additionally, they must lack mastery of basic educational skills; not have a secondary diploma or its equivalent; or be unable to read, speak, or write English (Adult Education Act, 1966).

Adult Basic Education (ABE): Recognized by Federal guidelines as a component of adult education that includes reading, writing, and mathematics skills at a level below ninth grade.

Adult English as a Second Language (ESL): Instruction for adults whose primary language is not English to improve speaking, reading, and writing skills in English.

Adult Nontraditional Student: A student over the age of 25 who meets the criteria for nontraditional student as described by Horn (1996) as those who possess one or more of the following characteristics: (a) has delayed enrollment following high school graduation, (b) is a part-time student for at least a part of the academic year, (c) works 35 hours or more per week while enrolled, (d) is considered financially independent under financial aid qualification guidelines, or (e) is a de facto single parent

(Horn, 1996). This definition is being used for the purposes of this study as the works cited in the literature review frequently use it.

General Educational Development (GED): The product of passing a five-part, 7.5-hour-long battery of five subtests that includes a two-part mathematics section, science, social studies, reading, and writing, which represents the completion of high school-level work. In most states, learners must be 16 to take the tests. Most states also require a minimum score of 410 out of 800 points on each section of the tests and an overall score of at least 2250 is required for a passing grade (American Council on Education, n.d.)

GED holder: An individual who had passed all sections of the GED exam and earned the GED credential.

Part-Time Student: A student enrolled for less than a full schedule of semester credit hours in a fall or spring term as defined by Federal Guidelines.

Postsecondary Education: A level of education that is provided by colleges, universities, vocational and technical institutions, community colleges, institutes of technology and other collegiate-level institutions that award academic degrees or professional certifications.

Traditional Student: A student who, after completing high school, immediately enrolls full time in college. These students are dependent upon parents for financial support and usually do not work full time during the school year (Pascerella & Terenzini, 2005).

Organization of the Study

The next chapter will present a review of the existing literature and research surrounding nontraditional adult students' participation in postsecondary and adult basic education. Additional research regarding the history of the GED exam and the experiences of GED holders within different education systems as adults will further contextualize the experience of the subjects of this study. Pathways to postsecondary education and retention in a variety of educational and profession settings will be explored. Chapter Three will outline in detail the qualitative epistemological basis for the research design and will describe the methods used to complete the study. Chapter Four will describe and categorize the findings of this study. Chapter Five will discuss and situate the results in a larger body of research on postsecondary participation and adult learning theory as well as offering suggestions for practical application of the findings and possibilities for future research.

Chapter 2

Review of Relevant Literature

In keeping with the Grounded Theory methodology described by Glaser (1978), this data was collected preceding the literature review. In Glaser's words,

> The logic of phasing reading with research differs greatly between predominantly deductive and inductive research. In deductive research, the analyst first reads the literature of the field to the fullest. . . Because of his [*sic*] initial scholarship and deduction; his [*sic*] findings are directly woven into the literature of the field. (p. 12)

However, in keeping with the conventions of the social sciences, this literature review precedes the findings and will be referenced throughout the subsequent chapters to contextualize the findings and their placement within the larger body of research literature exploring similar phenomena.

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the context that informs this dissertation it was necessary to look into multiple educational experiences in a variety of postsecondary settings, as well as other noneducational factors impacting the lived experiences of adult learners. In order to contextualize the findings about adult women GED holders choosing to enroll in postsecondary education, it was important to include the four broad areas of research that have informed this dissertation. The first area is that of ABE including pathways from ABE through the GED exam to postsecondary education. The second is that of retention in postsecondary, community, and professional settings. The third is the large body of published research regarding the experience of nontraditional students in postsecondary education, including those students who hold GED credentials. The last covers the benefits that have been identified from educational attainment for both individuals and society.

Adult Basic Education

Because so many adults who eventually attempt the GED exams have been or are concurrently enrolled in ABE programming, adult education is an important area of the literature that can inform the experience of the adult learner choosing to pursue postsecondary education. This section reviews the literature that has explored ABE participants, ABE programs including those that prepare students for the GED exams, and models and pathways for transitioning from ABE programs to postsecondary education.

Adult Basic Education Participants

ABE programs have traditionally targeted individuals over the age of 16 without a high school diploma who would benefit from their services because of a lack of basic literacy or numeracy skills that hampers their ability to participate fully in all aspects of our society (Alemprese, 2004). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), it is estimated that there are roughly 40 million individuals who fit that definition in the United States. Lester and Elliott (2005) mined the United States census data from 2000 to provide an important profile of the target population for ABE services. Their findings confirmed that,

> More than 40 million adults, or approximately 21 percent of the adult population of the United States, possess limited literacy capability—that is, they have not completed a high school diploma or equivalent. These individuals make up the adult education target population. (p. 5)

Other studies have found that this target population is increasingly female (NCES, 2003) and made up of nonnative English speakers (Blumenthal, 2002; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). Although the target population for ABE programming is important to consider, other studies have provided an important analysis of who is actually participating in ABE programs. Of the 40 million adults identified as that target population for ABE, only 2,581,281 participated in 2004-2005 and the majority of participants in every age group was female (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2007). The ethnicity of participants at different ages is represented in Table 1.

Table 1

Adult Education Enrollment by Ethnicity and Age

	16-18	19-24	25-44	45-59	60 +	Total
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Asian	2%	4%	8%	13%	22%	7%
Black or African American	23%	23%	18%	19%	14%	20%
Hispanic or Latino	30%	41%	50%	40%	31%	43%
Native Hawaiian	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
White	42%	29%	22%	26%	32%	27%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Theories of Participation in Adult Education

Multiple theories of participation in adult education have been developed over the past 100 years. Many of these theories are also applied to models of retention in education programs and will be explored in following sections. However, because they are often used as the basis for predicting participation, they are crucial to contextualize the research surrounding prediction of participation. Lewin (1947) proposed the force-field model in which negative and positive forces and their relative strengths push and pull on the adult to influence participation. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory has also been used to analyze and explain participation. In this theoretical model, participation is influenced by the extent to which primary and secondary needs have already been met. The congruence model (Boshier, 1973) posits that participation is dependent on a congruency between the educational activity and the individual's self perception. The life-transitions model proposed by Sheehy (1976) explains that participation is triggered by changes in life circumstance such as divorce or job loss. All of these models were drawn upon by K. Patricia Cross (1981) to develop her chain of response model of participation.

In her influential book *Adults as Learners*, Cross (1981) presented a seven - theoretical model of participation. This chain of response model argued that,

> Participation in a learning activity, whether in organized classes or self-directed, is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evolution of the position of the individual in his or her environment. (p. 27)

This model presents a series of seven steps: (a) self evaluation, (b) attitudes about education, (c) the importance of goals and the expectations that these will be met, (d) life transitions, (e) opportunities and barriers, (f) information on educational opportunities, and (g) the decision to participate that leads to participation in education opportunities. Cross argued that this is a linear process in which the steps interact and build on each other in a cumulative way. This is an important model in that it illustrates the many forces that are interacting and influencing adults' decision and ability to participate in education. However, it is difficult to imagine that the process is so exactly linear in practice.

Choosing to Participate in GED Preparation Programs: Applied Research

For adults to attend ABE classes, including those that would prepare them to take the GED exams, researchers have found that most adults overcome barriers to participation (Brassett-Grundy, 2002; Goto & Martin, 2009). Most research on interventions in the ABE world currently focuses on institutional barriers—such as a lack of childcare or transportation (Crudden, Sansing, & Butler, 2005), or informational—such as a misunderstanding of financial aid or lack of awareness of helpful classes taught in their communities (King, 2002). Less attention has been paid to psychological barriers (Goto & Martin, 2009). However, Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) found that addressing psychological barriers was an important factor impacting participation. They found that students who had specific goals for a given class were more likely to enroll and this was then correlated to persistence if the students believed that participation in the class was bringing them closer to their goal.

Goto and Martin (2009) published a qualitative study that examined the ways in which adult learners negotiate education-related challenges in order to participate in a GED preparation course. This study collected survey data from a non-random convenience sample of 15 GED preparation class participants that asked them about their decision to enroll in the course. Those adults in the study who were identified as most committed to their education through their participation in the GED curriculum were identified by the researchers as tending to have: (a) robust motivation to build a better life, (b) strong self-efficacy beliefs, and (c) a clear understanding of institutional pathways. These finding support the idea that adult learners who are well equipped to address their psychological barriers in addition to navigating institutional or situational barriers to participation are most likely to take the steps needed to achieve their educational goals.

The GED

Before I move on to discuss the transition of adults from ABE programs to postsecondary education, it important to develop a clear picture of the General Educational Development (GED) test, which is a milestone many adults enrolled in ABE programming must pass in order to reach their educational or occupational goals (Zhang, 2009). The GED test was created by the American Council on Education in 1942 in response to a request by the United States Armed Forces for an educational assessment of those Armed Forces personnel who had not completed high school. The five original topics covered by the exam were English grammar, social studies, natural science, literature and mathematics. The exam was originally normed on nearly 40,000 graduating seniors representing every state. The test was made available for the first time to civilians just 5 years later in 1947 when the state of New York began to use it as an alternative to high school graduation for those who were able to pass the exam. In the early 1950s states took over the administration of the exam from the Armed Forces and by the end of that decade more civilians than active duty personnel were taking the exam. States slowly adopted and began to administer the exam with California being the last state to offer the GED credential as an alternative to high school graduation in 1973 (GED Testing Service, 2006).

The American Council on Education (2010) estimated that since its creation in 1942, roughly 18 million people have passed the GED exam and today over 500,000 people pass the exam every year. Benners and George-Ezzelle (2006) described the process of taking the GED examination. An average of 60% of test takers pass the GED exam every year. Study time to prepare for the exam is estimated to be between 20 and 200 hours depending on the previous educational attainment of the test taker. The direct costs of taking the exam are estimated to be between $20 and $30 depending on the state and municipality offering the exam. The test today takes roughly 7.5 hours to complete if all subject areas were to be taken all at the same time. However, the tests can be—and often are—completed in separate sittings.

Since 1942, the tests have been revised to reflect the changing expectations of the high school curriculum. It is interesting to note that the test remained virtually unchanged for the first 36 years before it was modified in 1988 to include a reading section that required test takers to evaluate information (GED Testing Service, 2006). Only 10 years later, in 1998, it was again modified to include more critical thinking requirements. In 2002 the test was once again revised to include much more interpretation of visual information such as graphs (GED Testing Service, 2006). The exam is now 60% more visual than at any other time. The current iteration of the exam also requires the use of a scientific calculator, which is provided by the testing center during the mathematics portion of the exam.

The number of individuals who have earned a GED has more than doubled over the past 30 years (Benners & George-Ezzelle, 2006). Unfortunately, those who pass the GED exam represent only half of the one million students who drop out of high school every year (Tyler, 2010). Today there are roughly 40 million individuals in the United States over the age of 16 who have neither graduated from high school nor passed the GED exam (American Council on Education, 2010).

Transitions From ABE to Postsecondary Programs

Due to the numbers of ABE participants who would like to continue their educations in postsecondary settings (Baycich, 2006) along with increasing pressure to add to the number of adults participating in postsecondary education (Bernasek, 2005) there are a variety of models that attempt to serve as a transition between ABE and postsecondary education. There is some indication of this in a research study by Roueche and Roueche (1999), which found that locating programming for low literacy adults in community colleges increased the articulation between Adult Basic Education programs and the baccalaureate or vocational offerings of the community colleges in which the ABE programs were held. Roueche and Roueche indicated that further research was needed to determine if this increased articulation would lead to higher levels of degree attainment by low-literacy adults.

More evidence in support of a move toward formal transitions between

ABE and postsecondary education is noted by Zafft, Kallenbach, and Spohn (2006), who wrote that although “providing formal transition supports and services is a relatively new area of concern for Adult Education” (p.1), myriad programs currently attempt to bridge the gap between ABE and postsecondary education. In a comprehensive descriptive analysis, Zafft, Kallenbach, and Spohn (2006) presented a typology of the current models in use. They found five different transition models, which are presented in Figure 1.

The advising model is focused on information on postsecondary options, individual advising and varying intensity of service. The GED-plus model, which features the addition of critical thinking skills and algebra concepts to academic content, is geared toward students who already intend to pursue postsecondary education and is less costly than traditional college-prep models. The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) model is focused on advanced language skills required for academic settings, specific curricula with clear benchmarks for entry into program, and is generally resource intense. The career pathways model, which has a contextualized curriculum related to vocational interest and access to college-level occupational training rather than academic courses, is closely aligned with workforce centers and local employers, and creates pathways toward both career certificates and academic credentials. Last, there is the college prep model, which includes instruction in college-level math, reading strategies, and critical thinking and has aligned its curriculum with postsecondary entry courses. This last model aims to save student financial resources by helping students to place into college level courses and creates cohorts within the transition program.

Figure 1. ABE to Postsecondary Transition Models.

ABE to Postsecondary Transition Model	Features of model
Advising	• Is focused on providing information on postsecondary options • Offers individual advising • Has varying intensity of service.
GED-plus	• Features the addition of critical thinking skills and algebra concepts to academic content • Is geared toward students who already intend to pursue postsecondary education • Is less costly than traditional college-prep models
ESOL	• Is focused on advanced language skills required for academic settings • Has specific curricula with clear benchmarks for entry into program • Is generally resource intense
Career Pathways	• Has a contextualized curriculum related to vocational interest • Features access to college-level occupational training rather than academic courses • Is closely aligned with workforce centers and local employers • Creates pathways toward both career certificates and academic credentials
College Prep	• Includes instruction in college-level math, reading strategies, and critical thinking • Has aligned its curriculum with postsecondary entry courses • Saves student financial resources by helping students to place into college level courses

Although each of these models addresses different needs identified by research that ABE students have during their postsecondary transitions, there is no research supporting the efficacy of one model over the other in terms of best supporting this important transition (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006).

Pathways to Postsecondary Education for GED Holders

Although GED holders are less likely to pursue postsecondary education than their high school graduate peers, they are more likely to do so than those students who dropped out of high school without completing the GED exams (Almeda, Johnson, & Steinberg, 2006). This is not surprising data considering the fact that 90% of postsecondary programs in the United States require either a high school diploma or GED in order to enroll (Zhang, 2010). However, other research has shown that there are motivational as well as structural factors that could be influencing this participation. Research by Boudett, Murnane, Richard, and Willett (2000) on the educational pathways for GED holders versus students who dropped out of high school without this credential showed that GED holders are more likely to participate in all types of “off the job” training including community education and parenting classes than those who dropped out of high school without pursuing the GED. The results of this research indicate a greater interest in pursuing education for those who pursue the GEDthan their peers who dropped out of school without completing the GED exam. This study also found that there were positive economic gains to all forms of additional education with the greatest gains found in postsecondary participation. However, sample bias is problematic as there was self selection into the three groups measured—high school dropouts without GED credentials, those with GED credentials, and those who graduated from high school.

A longitudinal study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research (Tyler& Lofstrom, 2010) attempted to overcome the sample bias inherent in looking at the question of postsecondary pathways for two different groups of students after they have already had dropped out of school or not dropped out. This represents a self-selecting into the groups that are measured as either high school graduates, high school graduates who do not have a GED credential, and GED holders. In order to overcome this bias in sample, this study tracked a group of students who were labeled as “at risk” in the eighth grade and looked at their postsecondary pathways. Tyler and Lofstrom found that after 3 years, those students who obtained a GED rather than graduating from high school were 29% less likely to have enrolled in any form of postsecondary education. However, it is important to note that after 6 years this gap shrinks to 18%. These data illustrated an important aspect of pathways to postsecondary pursuit for GED holders: More GED holders pursue postsecondary education later in life than their high school graduate counterparts.

Choosing to Participate in Postsecondary Education

Research on pathways to postsecondary education includes multiple studies that have identified an increase in intent to participate in postsecondary education for all groups. Using data from the National Reporting System (NRS), the state-administered accountability system used by the Office of Adult and Vocational Education and the U.S. Department of Education, Zafft (2008) found that the overall percentage of all participants in ABE programs who indicated an interest in some form of postsecondary education as a goal for their participation in ABE increased by 10% over the previous 10 years from 24% to the current reported total of 34%. For GED test takers, the percentage of students who identify postsecondary education as one of their motivations for taking the test is 60%. This is in sharp contrast with the 97% of graduating high school seniors who plan to pursue some form of postsecondary education at some future date or the 79% who plan to do so immediately after high school. Between 60% and 67% of high school graduates do pursue postsecondary opportunities immediately after graduation (Zafft, 2008).

Another study conducted in Canada (Looker, 2002) but informative also to postsecondary pathways in the United States given the lack of national data to inform this transition, looked at the question from the opposite angle—why do students choose not to participate in postsecondary education? The study used data gathered from two large-scale national studies. The first was commissioned by the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation and surveyed a sample of Canadian youth from all 10 provinces who chose not to attend postsecondary education. The survey asked respondents to identify the most important factor in the decision not to pursue postsecondary education. Although the most common response was financial constraints, this accounted for only 23% of respondents and the majority of respondents identified non-financial reasons for not pursuing postsecondary education. More respondents chose, “couldn’t decide what to do” rather than, “had no interest in pursuing further education.” The second study gathered data from in-depth interviews with 62 students living in or around Montreal. The results from this qualitative study reinforced the findings of the first: barriers such as a lack of understanding about how to seek postsecondary education were found to be more salient than barriers such as cost of attendance or disinterest. This data reinforces the importance of institutional support of creating clear pathways through postsecondary education that are not explicit to nontraditional students who represent the majority of those students with GEDs who transition into postsecondary education.

Retention in Educational and Professional Settings

A common theme in both the community college research literature and the ABE literature is student retention or the lack thereof for many nontraditional adult learners. Research in nearly every educational setting has paid significant attention to retention. Researchers working in different educational environments have approached retention from very different viewpoints using different theoretical models and defining retention differently. Research on retention in postsecondary education settings defines attrition as leaving the institution before the completion of the certificate or degree (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975). In ABE settings, retention has been more broadly defined (Zeigler et al., 2006) to accommodate the varying nature of ABE programming but usually includes parameters around attending a certain established percentage of programming. In professional settings, retention is defined as remaining with an organization or within an occupation with the intent to remain until retirement (Meyer & Allen, 1991)

Retention of Traditional Students in 4-Year Institutions

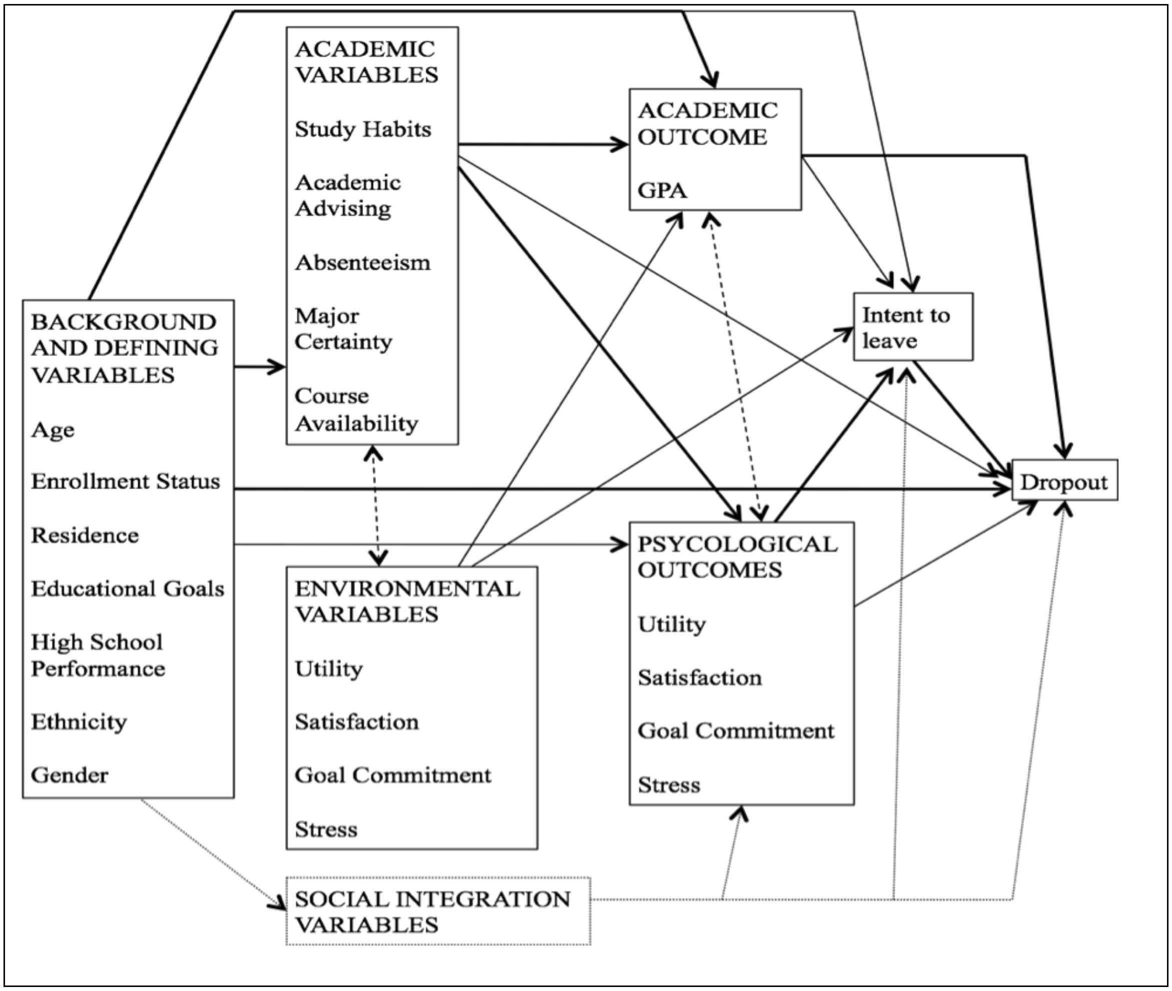
Research on retention at the postsecondary level has been strongly influenced by research and a theory of student attrition developed by Vincint Tinto (1975). Tinto studied variables that correlated with student attrition at traditional 4-year colleges and universities. Tinto identified factors that contributed to student retention: a student's pre-entry attributes (prior schooling and family background), goals and commitment (the student's individual aspirations in the institution), experience at the institution (academics and faculty and peer interactions), external commitments(family or community obligations), employment while at the institution; and integration both academically and socially.

While Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that Tinto's research on the causes of student attrition is one of the most widely-cited pieces of research in postsecondary literature, Tinto found his own model to be inadequate to describe the attrition experience of nontraditional students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rovai, 2002; Tinto, 1993). There are two reasons for its inadequacy for describing nontraditional student attrition. The first is that age is not included as a possible variable in his model. The second is that the data that he collected to develop this model were collected using the experiences of traditional-age students at 4-year colleges. In addition, unlike nontraditional students, the majority of the students were non-commuters, thus greatly increasing the socialization effects of college, which was found by Tinto to be highly predictive of student retention. Since this early research researchers have developed alternate models of attrition that include the unique situation of nontraditional students.

Retention of Nontraditional Students in Postsecondary Education

In order to create a model of student retention that took into consideration the unique nature of the nontraditional student experience, Bean and Metzner (1985) used data collected from a meta analysis of 30 years of research. Their model looked less at the socialization that happens during college for traditional students and focused more on the environmental attributes that can influence nontraditional students to stay in school or decide to leave. They concluded that in addition to shaping student commitments, environmental factors exert a powerful influence that can trump the socialization and academic experiences of the students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Figure 2. A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. Adapted from Bean & Metzner, 1987, p. 17.


ACADEMIC VARIABLES
Study Habits
Academic Advising
Absenteeism
Major Certainty
Course Availability
ACADEMIC OUTCOME
GPA
Intent to leave
BACKGROUND AND DEFINING VARIABLES
Age
Enrollment Status
Residence
Educational Goals
High School Performance
Ethnicity
Gender
Dropout
PSYCOLOGICAL OUTCOMES
Utility
Satisfaction
Goal Commitment
Stress
ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES
Utility
Satisfaction
Goal Commitment
Stress
SOCIAL INTEGRATION VARIABLES

For example, if students do not have sufficient resources, they may take fewer courses or find work off campus. Thus, students' perceptions of their financial situations can lead to more limited social and academic integration (Brock & LeBlanc, 2005). This model represents an important improvement over Tinto's as it takes into account a wider variety of variables impacting students including external pressures from outside of the classroom or college environment. When these models are applied to assess the impact of different variables on student retention, the results have been largely inconclusive because of the difficulty in parsing out significant findings where there are so many confounding variables (Bers & Smith, 1991; Hoyt, 1999). However, the importance of background variables—most of which differentiate GED holders in higher education—are important to consider when looking at the connection between GED holders and postsecondary retention.

Another study by Hoyt (1999) looked at the retention of students who enrolled in remedial courses in community college and attempted to identify the variables that had the strongest direct relationship with student attrition. Hoyt’s study analyzed a variety of student cohorts who were placed in one or more remedial courses during their first semester of their enrollment at a Utah community college from 1993 to 1998. The study used variables from both Tinto’s (1975) model and Bean and Metzner’s (1985)model divided into four sections: demographic variables, goal commitment variables, academic variables and financial support variables. Hoyt used multiple regression analysis to find the factors most strongly correlated with persistence. This research found that for all students including those enrolled in remedial coursework, “the students’ first-term academic performance had the strongest relationship with student retention” (p. 56). This is a strong argument for the correct placement of adults into developmental coursework that is appropriate to their ability level and that will allow them the chance to succeed during their first semester. The next most influential factor was the receipt of financial aid, which reinforces the need for a robust financial aid system.

Retention in Adult Basic Education

Adult Basic Education has relied less on Tinto (1975) or Bean and Metzner's (1985) models to explain and analyze student retention and has instead favored Lewin's (1999) force-field analysis to investigate student persistence (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 2000; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2006). In Lewin's model, understanding the ways in which a variety of forces—specific to the situation of each learner—push for and against successful persistence is the key to predicting persistence (Commings et al., 2000). An additional and important difference is how "persistence" is defined. Persistence in 4-year or community colleges is determined by successful, timely degree completion (Tinto, 1975), a process that can take a number of years. Persistence in Adult Basic Education is more broadly defined as attending until the individual's goals are met (Comings et al., 2000). Because this is an imprecise measure, other ABE studies have measured persistence as completing a formal course, completing a GED, or passing another specific and measurable milestone such as a certificate (Ziegler et al., 2006).

The measure of successful retention used by Commings et al. (2000) was the successful completion of a GED course. In this qualitative project relying on in-depth interviews with 150 students who had successfully completed a GED course, the researchers found that the greatest positive force identified by persistent learners was external support from family, friends, or employers. High—or increased—levels of self-efficacy and goal attainment were also identified by interviewees as important positive forces in their persistence.

Some of the most recent research on persistence in ABE comes from Ziegler et al. (2006), who looked specifically at women's participation and persistence as related to dispositional variables previously identified by Comings et al. (2000) as significant. Zeigler sought to determine the relative power of the dispositional variables of school beliefs, self-efficacy, and resilience on persistence in a workplace literacy program in Tennessee. Participants were women enrolled in this program during a 90-day period. A total of 245 responses were gathered and the respondents' profiles mirrored an approximation of the state's demographic breakdown. Researchers administered 30 attitudinal questions from the Adult Education Persistence Scale. Persistence was measured as attending more than 75% of classes; missing more than 75% of classes was considered attrition. This study found that positive dispositional variables when aggregated were positively correlated with persistence, while low scores were correlated with attrition. However, none of the individual dispositional variables as disaggregated from the others produced statistically significant results. The overall correlation between dispositional variables and persistence was much lower than were found in other populations such as in 4-year college students at 4-year institutions. Although it is interesting that there is a correlation—however weak—between dispositional variables and persistence, this study had a number of limitations that question the credibility of its findings: (a) the data on dispositional variables was self reported, (b) the instrument had not been normed on a low-literacy population, and (c) so little of the actual variance in persistence was accounted for by dispositional variables. Overall the findings were not strong enough to influence policy or practice.

Although the results across the studies of retention and attrition for nontraditional students present slightly different versions of the same reality, they all reflect the severe challenges faced by adults in most educational settings. These results beg the questions: Why do adult women choose to pursue postsecondary education? What is the process of choosing to engage in postsecondary education for these women?

Retention in Professional Settings

Given the unique nature of the adult learners experience in educational settings and the perceived inadequacy of current findings on predictors of adult retention in educational settings, a look at the literature examining measures and predictors of retention in professional settings is helpful to better contextualize the findings in this dissertation. Retention in professional settings has been looked at in myriad situations using a wide variety of models and theoretical frameworks. In order to bound this review, I will limit my analysis to a few studies that have looked at retention of nurses using organization commitment models. A look at nursing is relevant as it is a profession that—like adults in postsecondary education—suffers from low retention rates beyond the first months and in which new professionals suffer from “reality shock” (Gambino, 2010) similar to the experience of some adults in postsecondary education.

One lens through which retention in professional settings is viewed is through organization commitment. Meyer and Allen (1991) defined organization commitment as having three possible factors described in the following table

Figure 3. Organization Commitment.

Affective	"Want to stay"	An employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in a given organization
Continuance	"Need to stay"	An employee's awareness of the cost associated with leaving an organization
Normative	"Ought to stay"	An employee's feeling of obligation to continue employment because of previous experiences with the employer

All of these factors can be measured in an individual in a given place of employment and all can be predictors of retention (Goswami, 2007; Meyer & Allen, 1991). However, normative and affective commitments have been positively correlated with job performance and continuance commitment have been negatively correlated with job performance. Gambino (2010) used Meyer, Allen, and Smith's (1993) factors of organizational commitment to look at the relationship between new nurses' motivation for entering the profession, the type and intensity of organizational commitment, and intent to remain with employer until retirement. In her study, a survey of 150 licensed Registered Nurses (RNs), she found that normative commitment was the strongest predictor of intent to remain in the profession. However, in a similar study looking at the same three factors of organization commitment but with a larger sample and a higher response rate, Meyer and Herschovitch (2001) found that affective commitment was highly correlated with actually remaining in the profession while normative commitment was negatively correlated with actual retention. They argued that normative commitment was likely correlated with the ability to rationalize departure from the profession. These conflicting findings demonstrate that the difficulty of predicting retention in professional settings is as difficult as it is in educational settings.

Nontraditional Students in Postsecondary Settings

The following section details recent and seminal research regarding nontraditional students who enroll in postsecondary education. Although the phrase nontraditional encompasses a broad range of experiences and multiple characteristics (Bean & Metzner, 1985), the women interviewed for this dissertation all shared multiple aspects of nontraditional student status and an understanding of their experiences once enrolled in postsecondary settings is an important consideration when looking at their decision to participate. Research studies were selected based on their ability to illustrate salient characteristics of adult women who pursue postsecondary education and the institutions that they attend. Special attention is paid to the experience of adults who hold GEDs and the uniqueness of their experiences in education.

Definition of Nontraditional Student

In order to define the parameters of the nontraditional student for their model of student retention, Bean and Metzner (1985) used a meta-analysis of previously published studies to define the nontraditional college student, “A nontraditional student is older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence (i.e., is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors” (p. 489).

A new study that provides important insight into the profile of nontraditional students is a 2005 study sponsored by the United States Department of Education using data from the NCES to profile students who delay entry into college by one or more years after high school (Horn, Cataldi, & Sikore, 2005). They found that in addition to being more likely to enter into 2-year community college programs than those students who did not delay entry, these students were also significantly more likely to be from low-income families, single parents, females, from an underrepresented ethnic group, to be first-generation college students, and to speak a language other than English as their native language. Most of these are also factors that impact retention as shown in the earlier models (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Brock & Richburg-Hayes, 2006).

Institutional Factors that Impact Retention

Additional information on the factors that impact degree completion for nontraditional students can be found in the research surrounding institutional characteristics. Bailey et al. (2005) used a multiple regression analysis to look at specific institutional characteristics and how these characteristics were correlated with successful degree completion for nontraditional students. They found that nontraditional students enrolled in colleges with fewer than 1000 students were statistically more likely to obtain a degree than those enrolled in larger institutions. These findings were consistent with earlier research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). They also found that at community colleges the employment of larger numbers of part-time faculty was negatively correlated with degree completion. This research is supported by the findings from Curry (2001), who used a qualitative ethnographic study to profile the effect of social capital on nontraditional student persistence. Curry's research analyzed the different forms of capital that students had at their disposal in the college classroom. The less educated immigrant and refugee students were the first to leave the course, which ended with a 75% attrition rate; Curry found that this was due in part to the comparatively reduced level of social capital of those participants.

Another important study that looked at both institutional and affective factors that impact degree completion found that nontraditional students were less susceptible to college-based socialization than their traditional counterparts. In a review of over 20 years of research, Bean and Metzner (1985) found that the reduced socialization impact of nontraditional students could be because of a less intense or lengthy interaction with faculty and college peers on their campuses. It is important to note that this research is over 20 years old; today campus climates may be very different for nontraditional students on campuses across the country. However, the breadth of research contained in their analysis has not been replicated and, as such, is still relevant.

Impact of 2-Year Programs on Nontraditional Student Retention

Because so many adult students pursue postsecondary education, it is encouraging that although the socialization impacts of community college might be less than their 4-year counterparts, other recent research had demonstrated that participation in 2-year colleges can result in significant learning and socio-psychological gains for students. In an important finding from a meta-analysis of quantitative data gathered since 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported that:

> When precollege ability, motivation, and other confounding influences were taken into account, students at two- and four-year colleges are essentially equal in first-year gains in reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking and in gains over two years of college in science reasoning and writing skills. (p. 592)

This indicates that if nontraditional students are able to persist in community college, they have the same chance as those students in 4-year institutions to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

GED Holders in Postsecondary Education

A growing number of GED holders attempt some form of postsecondary education (Zhang, 2010). A longitudinal study ending in 1991 found that over 33% of GED holders have participated in some form of postsecondary education (Baycich, 2003). However, this represents slightly more than half of GED test takers who indicated postsecondary education as a goal. An even smaller percentage of these individuals makes it beyond the first semester of postsecondary education. From a random sample of 1,000 GED test takers in a

2003 cohort, Patterson, Song, and Zhang (2009) found that for 307 GED holders who chose to pursue some form of postsecondary education 77% enrolled for only one semester.

GED Holders and 4-Year Degree Completion

There is no evidence in the literature of the historical 4-year postsecondary degree completion rate of adults who hold GEDs. However, there is evidence that of all student, adults who hold a GED are the *least* likely to complete a 4-year degree. In an analysis done in 2006, Almeida, Johnson, and Steinberg found that GED holders were 20% as likely as their high school graduate counterparts to earn a 4-year degree with an overall degree attainment rate of only 10%. Unfortunately, this is the most positive statistic. In another study published in the same year, Boudett, Murname, and Willett (2000) found that female GED holders had a 4-year degree attainment rate of roughly one half of one percent. This is problematic in part because of the limited economic opportunities available to GED holders who do not complete additional education.

A recent study (Stephens, 2010) looked into some of the reasons for this attrition; specifically GED holders' expectations for their postsecondary experiences. Stephens surveyed GED graduates from ABE programs in Illinois. Participants were asked to identify perceived and real barriers to postsecondary success. This study found that although the majority of GED holders did not perceive that they were facing demographic or socioeconomic barriers to postsecondary success, data gathered on these individuals suggests that they would, in fact, be facing these barriers. Perhaps an early intervention about overcoming these barriers and about having realistic expectations of the challenges that they might face in postseondary education would impact retention of GED students in postsecondary settings.

GED Students in Community Colleges

The majority of GED holders choose to pursue their education at public institutions that offer degrees and certificates of 2 years or less. Patterson (2010) tracked GED holders from the 2003 test cohort and found that 32% of test passers enrolled in institutions offering degrees and certificates of 2 years or less. In another sample, Patterson, Song, and Zhang (2009) found that among GED holders who do enter a postsecondary institution, 78% enroll in public 2-year institutions, 12% enroll in 4-year public institutions, and 7% enroll in private postsecondary institutions. In light of these enrollment trends, it is important to note that, according the Digest of Educational Statistics (2001), students beginning at 2-year institutions earn a bachelors degree at a rate of 34.4% versus 60.4% for those who start at a 4-year institution.

Until recently, there were few studies that followed GED holders in postsecondary settings. However, it has been well documented in recent studies covering a variety of cohorts that the vast majority of GED holders do not achieve their postsecondary goals. In another study of the 2003 test cohort, Patterson, Zhang, Song, and Guison-Dowdy (2010) found that 31.5% of GED holders enrolled in 2-year institutions. They found that these students had a completion rate of roughly 12%, including those students who sought both

Associates Degrees and short-term certificates. Over 40% of the cohort examined for this study stopped out of postsecondary education after one semester. Full-time enrollment was strongly positively correlated with completion.

There has been a newfound interest in the educational trajectory of GED holders and the factors that impact their postsecondary experience. In his 2006 dissertation, Pollard identified salient themes in the postsecondary experiences of those GED holders who completed a 4-year degree and of those who did not finish. Enrolling initially in a 2-year college, motherhood, and domestic abuse were identified as salient themes of the experiences of those who did not complete. For those who did attain a 4-year degree, career-driven majors, family support, and uninterrupted attendance were the salient themes of the postsecondary experience. However, it is important to note that holding a GED is only one facet of many nontraditional students' identities, all of which interact with and impact their postsecondary experience.

Age is also an important consideration in the subject of postsecondary participation for GED holders. As noted earlier, this is reflected in the recent work by Tyler and Lofstrom (2010), who noted an 11% decrease in the enrollment gap of GED holders and their high school graduate counterparts when looking at enrollment trends 3 and 6 years after high school graduation. In their longitudinal analysis of the 2003 GED test-taking cohort, Boudett, Murnane, Richard and Willet (2000) reported that twice as many female GED holders have completed some college by the end of their 20s than those below the age of 24. Zhang (2010) also found that age was an important predictor of participation in postsecondary education for GED holders, with older adults more likely to participate than their younger peers. The likelihood of participation in postsecondary education for GED holders after the age of 35 was greater even than that of high school graduates.

Researchers at Kent State University (Baycich, 2003) in partnership with the Ohio Literacy Resource Center conducted a series of interviews with GED holders who went on to attend Kent State University. This study found that encouragement from family members, a desire to set a good example for others, and a desire for better employment were recurring reasons given for pursuing postsecondary education. Baycich noted that although the individuals interviewed identified family members as a source of support in their pursuit of postsecondary education, none of those interviewed identified education professionals or their GED instructors as sources of encouragement. One particularly surprising study that looked at a large data set from the National Household Education Survey to capture patterns of postsecondary participation for GED holders found that income was not associated with likelihood GED holders participation in postsecondary education (Zhang, 2010).

Benefits of Pursuing Education

There is increased interest in measuring the socioeconomic impact of higher levels of education as evidenced in the large numbers of recent studies that have looked at this question.

Benefits to Individuals From Increased Education

There are quantifiable economic gains in obtaining GED credentials for students who drop out of high school and even greater gains for those who pursue postsecondary education. GED holders see modest gains in lifetime earnings over those students who drop out of high school without the GED credential (Patterson and Lofstrom, 2010). Using data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study, which followed a large cohort of low-income ethnic minority children in Chicago, Ou (2008) analyzed the impact of the GED credential on five factors: income, life satisfaction, health insurance, future optimism, and mental health. The study included controls for demographic factors, early cognitive skills, and participation in years of schooling. Ou found that obtaining GED credentials was positively correlated with increased income, life satisfaction, and future optimism, and negatively correlated with rates of depression when compared with other individuals who dropped out of high school.

Benefits to Society From Continued Education

Myriad research studies have also identified quantifiable benefits to postsecondary education for our society. Katz and Goldin (2007) found that increases in educational attainment in the United States labor force from 1915 to 1999 estimated that education gains resulted in at least 23% of the overall growth in productivity, or around 10% of growth in gross domestic product. Other benefits to society were identified by Baum and Ma (2007), who found in a meta-analysis of studies that college graduates have lower smoking rates; healthier lifestyles; and higher levels of civic participation, including volunteer work, voting, and blood donation. Finding more effective pathways for all adults to be successful in postsecondary goals would have a positive impact for those individuals and for our society.

Conclusion

The research referenced for this chapter clearly demonstrated that although more nontraditional students are participating in higher education than ever before, they do not graduate or meet their goals at the same rate as students who go into postsecondary education directly from high school. The benefits to individuals from postsecondary education extend from increased financial opportunities to increased health and well being. We know from the existing research that adults who attend postsecondary education later in life face myriad barriers to participation and retention. We need to understand more about why they choose to pursue postsecondary education and what motivates them to continue when their peers desist.

There is a need to understand more about the navigation from ABE programs and services to postsecondary education. What are the resources that GED holders are bringing with them as they enter postsecondary institutions? What do they anticipate the barriers and supports will be once they are enrolled? How do their expectations for postsecondary education align with reality of attendance? The research in this dissertation attempts to fill some of the gaps that are found between the world of Adult Basic Education and the GED credential and the postsecondary experience for women who have successfully navigated the transition and persisted for at least one year of postsecondary education. Given the many barriers to completion of postsecondary education, goals identified in this chapter for women GED holders in postsecondary education women who have been retained beyond their first year are considered to have successfully navigated the transition between the GED and postsecondary participation. Understanding more about their choice to pursue postsecondary education is an important step in improving their postsecondary experience.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The goal of this research was to better understand or reconstruct the experience of adult women GED holders as they chose to pursue postsecondary education, therefore the qualitative research paradigm was most appropriate for guiding the study. In order to construct a tentative theory of this choice process, Grounded Theory as pioneered by Glaser (1999, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)—using descriptive case studies as the unit of analysis—served as the overarching research methodology.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

A method located in the qualitative paradigm was selected to answer the research questions. Qualitative research is based on subjective and naturalistic observation and reflects an interpretive stance toward reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Spradley, 1979). This research is additionally grounded in the constructivist paradigm in as much as it is not seeking to verify hypotheses in an effort to explain or predict—as is the case with research grounded in the positivistic paradigm. Qualitative research seeks to understand or reconstruct (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which is an epistemological fit with the goals of this research, which seeks to both “reconstruct and understand” (Guba & Lincoln, p. 113) the experience of adult women who choose to pursue a higher education. The qualitative constructivist paradigm seeks to add to a growing body of knowledge through the understanding of the vicarious experiences of participants through the analysis of cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). The research that informed this study used the constant comparative method to analyze interviews conducted using critical case study methodology to develop a grounded theory of commitment for adult female GED holders making their initial decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory was first developed and introduced by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss as the methodology in *Awareness of Dying* (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). It is the generation of theory from data that represents both inductive and deductive thinking (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The main goal of a Grounded Theory is the formulation of hypotheses based on data that is gathered and constantly compared to additional information from a variety of sources—these comparisons contain deductive steps that work together to construct a theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that the questions asked by Grounded Theory are "What is going on?" and "What is the main problem of the participants and how are they trying to solve it?" The broader goal of Grounded Theory research is to generate concepts that explain actions, experiences, and phenomena that can be generalized beyond the limits of the subjects of the original research.

Glaser (2002) described the process of developing Grounded Theor as,

> The generation of emergent conceptualizations into integrated patterns, which are denoted by categories and their properties. This is

> accomplished by the many rigorous steps of Grounded Theory woven together by the constant comparison process, which is designed to generate concepts from data. Most frequently, qualitative data incidents are used. (p.2)

Grounded Theory is a systematic research method that generates theory from observed data during the process of conducting research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). In Grounded Theory, the researcher does not begin with a hypothesis and gather data to support or disprove that hypothesis. Instead, data collection comes first and through the processes of coding, memoing, sorting, and writing categories and concepts are formed. This is a research method that emphasizes emergence and inductive reasoning over the validation of preconceived or previously hypothesized truths (Glaser, 1999, 2002). The development of a Grounded Theory utilizes theoretical sampling with systematic data collection, coding and analysis to generate a theory that reflects the data gathered during the research process and is expressed clearly enough to withstand further testing (Conrad, 1982). Through its generative methodology and inductive nature, grounded theory is able to explore and uncover more complex phenomena than other positivistic models that are generally applied to theory building (McLeod, 2002). Grounded Theory offers a different perspective on both data and theory. It contends that there is tremendous value in the conceptualizing and in the conceptual ordering of research data into a body of theory rather than generating data *from* that body of existing theory (Glaser, 1978).

In this dissertation Glaserian grounded theory methodology was used to develop a tentative theory of choosing to pursue postseondary education for adult women who have earned GED credentials rather than a traditional high school diploma. Grounded Theory methodology cautions against entering into the interviews with preconceived notions about the nature of participants' experiences. As the theory begins to emerge through the data collection, coding, memoing, and sorting, relevant research will be consulted and reviewed to enrich and inform the analysis. This is central to the theory-building process and is called the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1998), which will be described in greater detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Sampling

Fundamental to using Grounded Theory methodology is the sample selection, as this sample will provide the building blocks of the theory (Glaser, 2002). Seven women were identified as critical cases using Flyvbjerg's (2004) critical case criteria; in-depth interviews with these critical cases were the initial basis for the study. Critical cases must be those that have been identified as "having strategic importance in relation to the general problem" (p. 229). Critical cases were continually identified as the research progressed and more was uncovered about the experience of the women interviewed as they choose to pursue a higher education.

Interview Protocol

Descriptive case study methodology (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990) was used in conjunction with Grounded Theory to guide the interview protocol. It is both common and epistemologically sound to use multiple methods of qualitative research to better understand research questions (Merriam 1988; Patton 1990; Stake 1995) and Grounded Theory is generated using a wide variety of data collection techniques. Yin (1994) defined case study research as an enquiry "that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between context and phenomenon are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p. 23). A descriptive case study is described by Gerring (2004) as an intensive study of a single unit with the aim to "elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena" (p. 342). Morra and Friedlander (1999) observed that case studies are closely associated with in-depth interviews and thick descriptions that align perfectly with the data-gathering needs of Grounded Theory methodology. Descriptive case studies are a subset of the larger case study paradigm. The goal of the descriptive case study is to inform the case with real and vivid anecdotal information (Morra & Friedlander, 1999). The number of cases used is generally small and reflects the concept of "critical cases" that is also central to Grounded Theory protocol. Merriam defined descriptive case research as those studies that produce a "rich thick description of the phenomenon under study" (p. 30). This is in contrast to the other two case study methodologies as described in Figure 2.

Figure 4. Case Study Methodologies.

Case Study Methodologies	Characteristics
Heuristic	Confirms hypothesis, extends readers experience
Particularistic	Focuses on events or situations
Descriptive	Provides description of a particular phenomenon

In order for the descriptive data gathered through descriptive case study interviews to aid in the formation of a Grounded Theory, the selection of cases must be representative enough that the resulting data will cover the depth and breadth of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 1994). It is important that the sample for this dissertation be purposeful and representative of the pathways to postsecondary education of GED holders. To that end, the sample included women who pursued their education at public 2-year, public 4-year, and private 4-year postsecondary institutions. Also, because of the myriad factors that impact the retention of adults in postsecondary education, I interviewed women who completed at least 1 year of postsecondary education rather than limiting my selection to those who had completed their degrees. These women represented persistence greater than 75% of all GED holders who choose to participate in postsecondary education (Murname, Willitt, & Boudett, 1997). Yin's (1994) protocol for gathering descriptive case study data to generate a Grounded Theory was used to construct the interview protocol for this research. There are several formats that could be used to conduct interviews consistent with descriptive case study methodology. For the purpose of this study and in order to align the interview protocol with the epistemological requirements of Grounded Theory methodology, open-ended interview protocol was used. Tellis (1997) described these open-ended interviews as engaging respondents who have been identified as critical cases to comment about key events—possibly providing solutions or insight into events. They may also corroborate evidence gathered from other sources if applicable. It is essential that multiple sources be consulted to avoid becoming dependent on a single informant, and seek the same data from these sources to verify its authenticity. To this end, the guiding question that opened each of the nine interviews conducted for this research was, "Could you please tell me about when you decided to pursue postsecondary education?"

Selection and Recruitment of Subjects

Subjects were selected who were women who earned a GED in lieu of a traditional high school diploma and then enrolled in a postsecondary institution with the intent to obtain a postsecondary degree.

Criteria for Selection

Adult women who hold a GED rather than having completed the requirements for high school graduation are less likely to complete a 4-year degree than their male peers who hold GEDs or their female and male peers who completed high school graduation requirements. All members of the sample for this research met this criterion. Additional critical cases were then identified based on the data gathered through initial interviews. The first critical case—a female adult student who had earned a GED and then chosen to pursue a 4-year degree—was identified to be at a highest risk for not achieving the goal of completing a 4-year degree.

The first two subjects who were interviewed had both completed their goal of attaining a 4-year degree and had both completed degrees at geographically and demographically similar locations. It became clear after those interviews that the next critical case should bring a different set of experiences to the phenomena in question. Thus an attempt was made to recruit subjects who had not successfully completed their goal of attaining a degree but who had been retained beyond the first year. Additional attention was paid to interviewing women who attended a wider variety of institutions, including private postsecondary institutions as well as urban and rural locations. All of this was consistent with the protocol indicated for the ongoing identification of critical cases as data was gathered as well as the requirements of descriptive case studies to identify subjects who reflected the broad nature of the phenomena in question.

Recruitment Strategy

A recruitment message that can be found in Appendix A was sent to a number of local and national professional organizations that had large numbers of professionals who worked directly with adults who had earned their GED credential and possibly chosen to pursue postsecondary education. The message was sent to the working-class academics national e-mail list, directors of learning centers, and colleagues at the University of Minnesota who work with first generation students, with the request that they forward it to possible participants.

I was then contacted via email by interested women participants who were willing to share their experiences. I responded to their emails clarifying their qualification for participation. I confirmed that they had completed the GED exam in lieu of completing high school and that they had made their decision to enter postsecondary education as adults. I then invited them to schedule a telephone interview that I indicated would take roughly 90 minutes. After a time for the telephone interview was scheduled, I called participants and conducted the interviews via telephone. In keeping with Grounded Theory methodology and not antithetical to critical case study protocol, extensive field notes were taken during the conversation rather than relying on taping and transcribing the conversations.

Description of Interview Subjects

A total of seven women were interviewed for this research. One had successfully completed a 4-year degree, one had completed a terminal degree in addition to her 4-year degree, two had stopped out of their postsecondary institutions without immediate plans to return, and three were still making progress toward their degree goals but had not yet completed. The interview subjects ranged in age from 34 to 67 years old and had attended or were attending 7 different institutions in four different states in the Southeast, Pacific Northwest, and Midwest. Four of the subjects had begun their postsecondary careers at public 2-year institutions and two of these students then matriculated in 4-year schools. Two of the subjects began their postsecondary education at 4-year schools. One participant had attended a 4-year private school. All seven of the women interviewed were GED holders and they had all taken and passed the GED exam in their late teens or early twenties and entered a postsecondary institution with the intent to secure a postsecondary degree as adults. All of the women interviewed for this study were mothers. For three of the women interviewed, motherhood was the motivating factor for leaving high school and attaining their GED credentials rather than graduating with a traditional high school diploma.

This section contains a brief description of each of the critical cases used in this dissertation that provide the circumstances under with the participants received their GEDs and the context in which they chose to pursue postsecondary education. Names and identifying details were changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Alice

Alice is a woman in her late thirties from the southeastern region of the United States. She became pregnant during high school and quit school at age

17 to get married and raise her son who is now a teenager. After quitting school, she took the GED and passed. She had always done well in school and found the test to be easy. She had always enjoyed school and done well in her classes. However, her husband did not want her to attend school after they were married. She began to work full time in a factory. Her son graduated from high school and went to college. Within months she was divorced and laid off from her job. She learned that through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) she could receive financial aid to go to school. She enrolled in a program that will enable her to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) while also completing the credits to receive a BS in nursing in the future. Because she was laid off, she is able to draw on unemployment while in school and is enrolled full time. She relocated from a rural area to a location closer to the community college that she is attending. She has completed the first year of the program and remains enrolled.

Micki

Micki is a woman from the Northwest in her early thirties who left high school at the same time that she left her home due to a pregnancy. She took and passed her GED exams immediately after dropping out of school. She worked as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and had two children and lives with her boyfriend who is the father of her younger child. She began to have physical problems related to the demands of her CNA work and learned that the hospital where she worked would cover her tuition to pursue a health-related postsecondary degree. She enrolled in a postsecondary institution with the intent to get a BS in nutrition. She successfully completed three semesters but withdrew when she became overwhelmed by the demands of her family, school, and work. She has been out of school for a year but would like to go back sometime, maybe when her children are older.

Aurora

Aurora is a woman in her early forties who grew up in the Midwest. She was a self-identified substance abuser in high school who left school to move to a different state (NV) with her boyfriend during her third year of high school. She became sober at age 19 and passed the GED test two years later after taking a short preparation course through a community education program. She worked in a variety of social service positions, married, had a daughter, and returned to the Midwest. She was working part time in a coffee shop and surrounded by others who were going to college. She was encouraged by friends and colleagues to go to college and enrolled at a private 4-year college. She successfully completed 2 years before withdrawing because she could not choose a major. Her last enrollment was over 10 years ago and she has no immediate plans to return to postsecondary education.

Colleen

Colleen is a woman from the Pacific Northwest who is in her early sixties and decided to pursue postsecondary education at age 58. As a child she lived in Europe with her grandparents and when she returned to the United States she was young for the class that she was placed in. She did not like feeling like “a misfit” and decided to move to San Francisco rather than graduate from high school. Years later she took the GED exam in order to get a job with the state highway department. She had two children and sent them to college and after 20 years of marriage, her husband left the home. After a period of depression, a friend encouraged her to do everything that she had always wanted to do. She decided to attend a community college and enrolled in a certificate program, which she enjoyed so much that she continued to the Associates Degree program and then transferred to a 4-year college. She has felt successful and happy since beginning college and looks forward to studying abroad in South Africa during her senior year as a Woman's Studies major.

Lee

Lee is a woman in her early thirties living in the Midwest who immigrated to the United States as a teenager from Southeast Asia. She was discouraged by her family from attending high school and described it as a negative experience. She had limited academic preparation and did not believe that she fit in at her school. She left school at age 16 and married and became pregnant. She did not work outside of the home but was attended community education classes on workplace literacy skills with other women. She enjoyed these classes and being away from her home, where she had three small children. Her husband did not encourage her participation. Her husband left the home and she moved in with her sister's family, working part time in a store that they owned while she continued to raise her children. After moving in with her sister, she enrolled in free community education GED preparation courses and later passed all of the exams. She was encouraged by one of her GED teachers to enroll at a local community college and has now successfully completed three semesters and continues to be enrolled working toward a degree in business.

Nichole

Nichole is a woman in her late forties from the South who left high school during her junior year after becoming pregnant. Her boyfriend joined the military and she moved with him to a different southern state. She took the GED exam about a year later after studying at home for the exams. She was encouraged by her family to get her GED credentials. She did not work outside of the home and raised three children. When her oldest child graduated from high school, her husband left the home and she enrolled in school full time with the intent to get a nursing degree. She successfully completed the two-year program and went to school part time after getting a job in a hospital to earn her credits for a BS in nursing. She achieved that goal in five years of part time enrollment.

Ann

Ann is a woman from the southeastern United States in her late fifties who left high school after having conflict with her mother that led her to move in with her boyfriend, whom she soon married. She enrolled in a secretarial course at a community college at the suggestion of a high school teacher who saw her working at a store some time later. While she was enrolled in the secretarial course, she began to work as a tutor in the school’s GED program. After her supervisor discovered that she did not have a high school diploma and had not passed the GED exams, she was encouraged to take the GED exams and passed all of them. Some years later, she relocated to a different city so that her husband could pursue postsecondary education. That institution hired her as a clerical worker. She divorced her husband but continued to work at the postsecondary institution and because they allowed employees to enroll tuition free, she successfully pursued an AA, then a BA, followed by an MA, and finally an EdD.

Interviews

All interviews were conducted via telephone and the individual interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. Using Cresswell's (1990) suggestion to use an interview protocol consisting of at least five open-ended questions, I developed the following questions to use during the interviews:

1. Could you please tell me about when you decided to pursue postsecondary education?
2. What else was going on in your life during that time?
3. What impacted your decision to go to college?
4. How did you feel about the decision?
5. What did you think would happen in college?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Because many of the interview subjects answered or addressed multiple questions in their response to the first question, not every question was asked as long as the topic had been addressed. Extensive notes were taken during each interview and were then entered into a master document that was used as the basis for data analysis and coding.

Data Collection and Analysis

Although descriptive case study methodology was used for the interviews, Grounded Theory methodology as pioneered by Glaser (1978, 1992, 1995) guided the data organization and analysis. Grounded Theory was chosen because it is a research method that was developed to analyze how individuals understand and experience their own world and how their actions are related to this understanding (Glaser, 1978). Grounded Theory offers a systematic process for analyzing the data collected in the building of a theory that is grounded in that data rather than through hypothesis building based on existing research. Perhaps the most distinct feature of Glaserian Grounded Theory is the focus on allowing the theory to emerge from the data as it is collected rather than entering into the data collection with a hypothesis or even preconceived notions about the case under study. To this end, Glaser (2002) cautioned against an extensive literature review on the phenomenon under question, suggesting instead that relevant research literature be consulted during the coding and memoing stages of research.

The entire Grounded Theory research process has been described in great detail by Glaser (2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and is reflected in the process used for this research. After the first critical case was identified, the initial interview was conducted. Throughout the interview, notes on the process of choosing to pursue higher education were taken. From these notes, broad categories emerged that were considered in constant comparison with the emerging theory in a process called coding. Subsequent interview subjects were identified based on the data collected from the first critical case. This data was in turn coded—meaning compared with and held up against all other data that had been gathered—through both interviews and consultation with relevant literature. As theoretical propositions, salient themes, and interactions between themes emerged, codes were noted and constantly compared with the ongoing data collection. As these codes accumulated from interviews and ongoing consultation with research literature, they were sorted into broad categories that formed the emergent theory. Thus, data collection, note taking, coding, and memoing overlapped and were nearly simultaneous followed by sorting and finally writing (Dick, 2000).

Figure 5. Data collection and analysis in Grounded Theory.

Data collection
Note taking
Coding
Memoing
Sorting
Writing
Research process →→→→→→→→→→→→

In Grounded Theory research, as the codes accumulate, theoretical propositions emerge. These may include links between categories or a core category. A core category is one that appears central to the study due to its recurrence in multiple notes and its centrality to the experience. As the categories and properties emerge, they and their links to the core category provide the emergent theory. Notes taken about these are referred to in grounded theory research as memos. Thus, memoing is the process of taking these memos. So as the research process continues, and data is collected, the codes and the memos accumulate. If the core category and its linked categories saturate; they are no longer added to the memos. This is a sign that it is time to move to sorting. Memos are grouped—like with like—and sequenced in whatever order will make the theory most clear. The order of the sorted memos provides the skeleton, and many of the words, of the product of the grounded theory. Fundamental to the building of a sound theory using Grounded Theory methodology is the sample selection as this sample provides the building blocks of the theory. Through the use of critical cases for my interview subjects, constant comparative analysis, the triangulation of these findings with an ongoing review of relevant literature and clarifying questions asked during subsequent interviews, I was able to draw from the experiences of the interview subjects to build a grounded theory of choosing to participate in postsecondary education for adult women who held GED credentials.

The research question that guided the organization and analysis of the data collected was: What was experience of adult women GED holders as they were choosing to pursue postsecondary education? Data were analyzed within 24 hours of completing the interviews Glaser, 2002). Along with entering the notes from the interviews into a master data file, I also included observations and insights that occurred as I was reflecting on the interviews and beginning to read about the themes that were emerging from the interviews.

As the interviews progressed, I organized these notes into emergent categories and wrote descriptions of the themes that were reflected in each category. A unique code was developed to identify recurring themes. A separate file was created to describe each of these unique codes. As new data emerged and was entered into the master file, the appropriate codes could be assigned to the themes. This helped to organize the data into manageable categories in order to easily find recurring themes across the experiences of the subjects. As research literature was consulted and compared to these emergent themes, data from this research were also added to the same categories and coded along with the data gathered from the interviews.

Glaser (1978) cautioned against entering into the research setting with a preconceived idea as to the experience or the finding. He wrote, “Enter the research setting with as few predetermined ideas as possible” (p. 3). It is only after conducting the initial interviews and identifying emergent themes that the literature was consulted. The danger of consulting the literature before entering into the Grounded Theory process is that it pushes the research into forcing the data in the wrong direction to fit within the findings from previous studies (Glaser, 1978). In Grounded Theory, the data is collected first and analyzed while the theory is being generated. It is only when the Grounded Theory has begun to emerge that the literature is reviewed and related to the theory through the integration of the concepts and findings of the related research literature. It is additionally suggested by Glaser that research from fields related but not directly connected to the experience be consulted to look for relevance and fit without forcing the data early in the analytic process.

Reliability

Glaser and Strauss (1967) established criteria reliability in Grounded Theor in their first publication. Grounded Theory is reliability measured against four criteria: Fit, work, relevance and modifiability. Each of these criteria is described in the following figure.

Figure 6. Criteria for Reliability in Grounded Theory Adapted From Glaser & Strauss, 1967.

Grounded Theory Reliability Criteria	
Fit	How closely the concepts fit with the incidents that they are representing. This is measured against how thoroughly the constant comparison of incidents of concepts is done
Work	This is also described by Glaser (1998) as “workability” and describes the ability of the theory to work in explaining the theory across varying situations
Relevance	A relevant study presents the real concerns of participants and evokes a response from readers beyond academic interest. This is also described by Glaser (1998) as “grab”
Modifiability	This describes the degree to which the theory can be modified and still maintain the other categories when new relevant data is compared to existing data

Each of these criteria was used during the grounding of the theory in data. In an article that explored the issue of quality in Grounded Theory publications, Elliott and Lazenbatt (2004) argued that in addition to the four criteria previously described,

> The value of Grounded Theory methods of constant comparative methods and theoretical sampling is that they provide an integrated research approach to data collection, analysis, and checking of quality of research findings. (51)

The methods of Grounded Theory were used throughout the research process in an effort to ensure reliability against each of the four criteria established by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Human Subjects Protection

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before the initiation of this research and all human subjects protection protocols were observed. Three important considerations were included in this research project to ensure the protection of participants. Participation was voluntary, responses will be held confidential and no identifying information will be provided to any third parties and informed consent was obtained and documented prior to all interviews. The researcher has taken responsibility for keeping all records and data secure in password protected computer files for any interview notes. All identifying information was removed from interviews and surveys in the first analysis. Any original recordings of interviews are kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed 5 years after the dissertation has been published.

Chapter 4

Results

The results presented in this chapter were drawn from seven descriptive critical case study interviews with women who earned their GED credential, decided to pursue postsecondary education, and then went on to enroll successfully in a postsecondary institution for at least one academic year. This chapter describes a Grounded Theory model for presenting findings, presents the emergent themes from these interviews, and situates the women's experiences within the proposed Grounded Theory model of women deciding to pursue postsecondary education. Throughout the chapter, core themes that emerged from the descriptive case study interviews will be illustrated using the words of the women who experienced the phenomena pulled from detailed notes taken during the interviews. Finally, the data will be organized into a proposed Grounded Theory model that depicts the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education for women who have earned their GED credentials.

The Process

During the descriptive critical case study interview process, detailed notes were taken, including meaningful quotes from the women who shared their stories. After the interviews, these notes were analyzed using Glaser's (1978) constant comparative methodology as described in the methodology chapter. This analysis resulted in the generation of themes from the words and experiences of the women who were interviewed. Themes that were consistent across interviews and consistent with the concept of emergent fit (Glaser, 1978) were maintained as salient (Glaser; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Those that were inconsistent were modified or eliminated. An index was created from these notes and themes with cross-references between the salient themes and the interview notes including those quotes that were taken during the interviews; generating those themes that were identified as salient. The goal of this process was to arrive at salient themes that would ground the final theory in the data collected during the interviews.

Throughout this iterative process—from the note taking through the comparing and memoing of the notes—salient themes were linked together or eliminated resulting in the identification of core themes. This process continued until the point at which no further themes emerged and saturation was reached. During the sixth interview it was clear that the core themes were repeating and that no novel themes were emerging. One additional interview was conducted to ensure saturation. There was a surprisingly high level of concordance among interviewees even though their situations and experiences were very different.

Emergent Themes and Subthemes

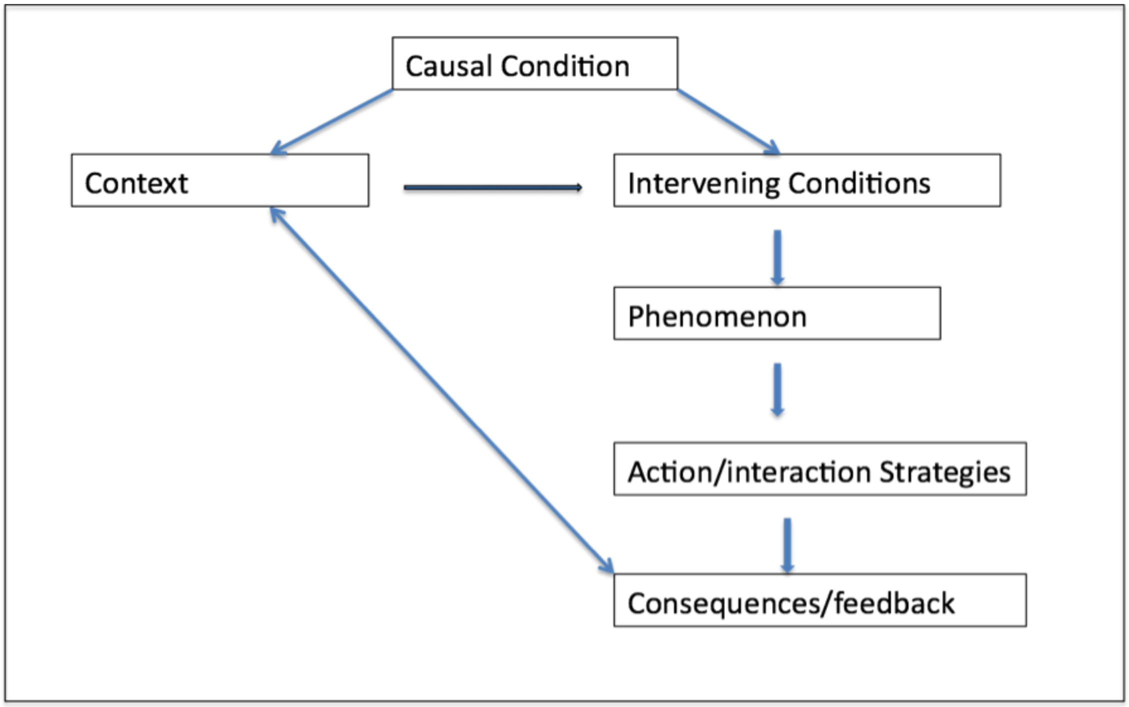
From this constant comparative process, three core contextual themes were suggested by the data: (a) life change, (b) external personal support, and (c) a self-belief in the women's academic abilities. Each of these themes informs the contextual element of the model created to describe a Grounded Theory of women who hold GED credentials deciding to pursue postsecondary education. Each of these contextual themes will be explored and illustrated using the words of the women interviewed.

In addition to the core contextual themes, other factors emerged that impacted both the decision to enroll and subsequent enrollment. These themes were: (a) aspiration and opportunity to enroll in postsecondary education, (b) goal setting, (c) seeking information regarding postsecondary enrollment, (d) enrollment.

Although Glaserian (1978) Grounded Theory methodology was used throughout the data gathering and analysis, Strauss and Corbin (1990) have offered a helpful structure for organizing data into a Grounded Theory model, which was borrowed to structure the reporting of the results of this research. The Strauss and Corbin model links (a) causal conditions, (b) phenomena, (c) context, (d) intervening conditions, (e) action or interaction strategies, and (f) consequences. The causal condition is the event or incidents that lead to the development of the phenomenon in question. The phenomenon is the central event under study. The intervening conditions act to facilitate or not the action and interaction strategies. Context represents the set of conditions within which the action and interaction strategies are implemented to manage the phenomenon. The consequences and feedback are what results from the action and interaction strategies. This model was used to structure and show the relationship between the salient themes that emerged from the data. This model, its elements, and their connections will be described in detail.

The proposed Grounded Theory model captures the complex interrelationships between elements of the experience of choosing to attend postsecondary education for women who successfully persisted beyond the first 2 semesters and allows each of these elements to be explored using the words of those women who shared their experiences. This model illustrates the ways in which (a) the context of their experience, (b) their perception of the experience, and (c) the life events that impacted the experience of choosing to attend postsecondary education worked in concert to result in a successful decision to participate in postsecondary education.

Figure 7. Visualization of Strauss and Corbin (1990) Grounded Theory Model.


Causal Condition
Context
Intervening Conditions
Phenomenon
Action/interaction Strategies
Consequences/feedback

Every element in this model interacts with another or others to impact the actions of participants. Each of the model's sections will be populated and described using quotes from participants where they are appropriate to illustrate the experience. Variation in the experience of choosing to attend postsecondary education can be explained by variation in the model's characteristics. This chapter will provide an overview of each element uncovered during the constant comparative process and situate it in the overall Grounded Theory model. Quotes taken from the interview notes are used to illustrate each of the specific themes identified as essential elements in the model.

Causal Condition

The causal condition is the event or incidents that lead to the development of the phenomenon in question (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order for this research to focus on the experience of women who hold GED credentials, the causal condition that qualified them for participation in this study was the fact that they earned GED credentials rather than graduating from high school with a diploma. Although the causal condition was shared by all seven of the critical cases, it was experienced in different ways. In order to capture the complexity of the causal condition on the experiences of these critical cases this element is broken into three parts: (a) the experience of leaving high school, (b) taking and passing the GED exams, and (c) holding GED credentials versus a traditional high school diploma. The women whom I interviewed varied considerably in their perception of these experiences. The variety of experiences across the critical cases is presented in figure 8.

Figure 8. Core Themes and Participants' Experiences.

	Main Reason for Leaving High School		Passing the GED Exams		Holding GED Credentials	
Participant	Pregnancy	Social Problems	Within 2 Years of Leaving High School	After 2 Years of Leaving High School	Not a Stigmatizing Experience	Stigmatized Experience
1. Micki	X		X			X
2. Alice	X	X	X			X
3. Colleen		X		X		X
4. Lee	X	X		X	X	
5. Nichole		X	X			X
6. Ann		X	X			X
7. Aurora		X	X			X

Leaving High School

Every woman that I interviewed shared specific reasons for why completing high school was not a possibility for her. Three experienced unplanned pregnancies and 6 cited social problems with their peers; these were the most common reasons for leaving high school. None of the women whom I interviewed indicated that they had left high school due to academic difficulties. Four of the seven women specifically said that they had been good students before they left high school.

One participant shared how much leaving high school had been a positive experience for her. She talked about how her family was poorer than others in her community and she had been treated badly by her peers although she was a good student. She said, “Let’s just say that some of my behavior presented an opportunity to leave. . . and I was happy to take it.” For another participant it was the restrictive environment of high school, a lack of parental involvement, and the perception of greater opportunities outside of school that influenced her decision to leave high school:

> My boyfriend was already graduated and he wanted to move out East. I was happy to get out of school. . . I hated it there so I just went. . . my parents didn’t have anything to say about it—or I didn’t hear it because I was just excited about having a new life. (Aurora)

All of the women who left high school for social reasons expressed a feeling of relief after leaving. None of them indicated a regret over having left their high schools. One woman described her aspiration to leave high school for social reasons simply, “I was sick of being a misfit.” None of these women indicated that the academic demands of high school factored into their decision to leave high school and pursue their GED credentials.

Three of the women left high school due to an unplanned pregnancy. All three of these women expressed regret over having left school. They did not express the same relief at the end of their high school careers that was expressed by those women who left school for social reasons. Their pregnancies and the lack of resources to support their multiple identities as parents and students made them feel that leaving high school was their only option. One woman described her experience at that time, “I was 17 and pregnant. . . this was a lot of years ago. . . I had to leave, I didn’t have a choice.” For another participant leaving school was a negative consequence of having gotten pregnant and married. She said, “If I could have chosen to stay, I would have. I liked school OK and I didn’t know what else I would do. But I got pregnant so I got married so I left school.” This woman indicated that the idea of being a wife and mother while in high school was not something that seemed possible at that time. Again, these women did not indicate that their departure from high school was related to academic performance.

Taking and Passing the GED Exams

None of the participants expressed having had a negative experience with the taking and passing of the GED exams. In fact, all of the women who participated in this research passed the exams on their first attempt. It is important to note that all of the women who were interested also expressed confidence in their academic abilities. One participant mentioned that she felt very confident in herself as a high school student, which gave her confidence when she took the GED exams, “I guess I was a little arrogant when I took the [GED exam]. I just knew it would be easy and I’d pass. It didn’t even occur to me that I might not pass.” Five of the women took the GED exams within 2 years of leaving high school.

For another woman, many years had passed since she had left high school. This woman took the exams after spending over a year preparing for them through a community-based adult education program. She shared that "[taking the GED exam(s)] was hard but not too hard." Neither this woman nor any of the other's who took their exams closer to their departure from high school expressed any difficulty in taking and passing the exams.

Holding a GED Credential Instead of a High School Diploma

Although taking and passing the GED exams was similar across the experiences of the women who were interviewed, holding GED credentials instead of a high school diploma was experienced very differently across their stories. For four of them, it was a stigmatizing experience that they were hesitant to share with others. They believed that others viewed the fact that they held GED credentials as somehow deficient compared to graduating from high school. Two of the women interviewed did not express a perceived value to the GED credentials. For one participant, holding GED credentials was a source of pride rather than stigma.

For the four women who expressed a feeling of stigma associated with the GED credentials, this stigma reflected the perception that others (coworkers, family, or friends) have a negative perception of people who did not graduate from high school. One of the women currently worked in an administrative role at a university and was able to articulate feelings of stigma related to the GED credentials that were shared by the other women who shared similar stories. She said that she observed that others at her university judged her as inferior when they found out that she held a GED. She mentioned that she was concerned that the GED reflected “a history of bad choices.” This led her to be hesitant to share that part of her identity with others. “I don’t share the fact that I have a GED just like I don’t share my shoe size. . . I just think, what does it matter to you how I got my diploma?” Another woman shared,

> I was already in the community college [in a secretarial program] and I really got the GED in spite of myself because of the open access that I had to the test. I only got it because one of my high school teachers kept asking me about it and it was right there. I couldn’t avoid it. (Ann)

Four of the women who felt stigmatized by the GED credentials earned them within 2 years of leaving high school. It could be that the fact that these women had little experience with having neither high school diploma nor GED credentials had an impact on their negative perception of the credentials in relation to the traditional diploma.

The experience of stigma associated with GED credentials was not universal. For one woman—who earned her credentials after participating in adult education classes to prepare her for the exam—passing the GED exam was a source of great pride and was celebrated by her friends and family. She said, “When I passed the last one [the GED exam] I couldn’t even believe it! My family [was] so proud. . . My kids were proud of me.” Perhaps the impact of living for many years with neither a high school diploma nor GED credentials led her to value the GED credentials more than the women who did not share this experience. The considerable investment of time in Adult

Education programming in preparation for the exam could have situated the GED as a more valued credential for this woman.

Summary

The causal condition that will be used in this Grounded Theory model was being a woman with GED credentials. This was central to the question of the experience of these women in deciding to pursue postsecondary education. Each of the critical cases shared different reasons for leaving high school, some of them expensed as positive experiences and others as negative. However, it is important to reiterate that none of the expressed reasons for leaving high school were academic. All of the women interviewed for this research reported that they had left high school in good academic standing.

The women who were interviewed for this research experienced taking and passing the GED exams, and holding GED credentials differently. Some of them felt a social stigma to the GED credentials while others felt pride at the accomplishment represented by the credentials. All of the women whose stories formed the basis for this Grounded Theory shared the experience of holding a GED instead of high school diploma; this is the root of understanding their subsequent decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Context

The next element of the Grounded Theory model that I will describe is context. These are the framing events that shape the experience at the center of the proposed theory. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that context is “the specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon. . . the set of conditions within which the action/interaction strategies are taken to manage, handle. . . and respond to a specific phenomenon" (p. 104).

The salient contextual themes that emerged from the data for this model were a self-belief in academic abilities, life change, and external support. Each woman expressed a belief that her academic abilities were sufficient for success in postsecondary education. This belief emerged in all seven interviews and was expressed in similar ways. Life change was experienced differently by each woman. For some of the women the life change was a job loss or geographic relocation. For others, a child in transition or divorce was the life change that they associated with their decision to pursue postsecondary education. For some of the women, there was a combination of these life-changing events at the same time. The third contextual theme was external support. All of the women shared the experience of being supported or encouraged in their decision to pursue postsecondary education by mentors, children, or others.

The Belief That Their Academic Abilities Were Sufficient

This aspect of the context in which women chose to pursue postsecondary education was present in each of the women's experiences. However, it was expressed in very different and deeply personal ways for each of them. It is important to note that five of the seven women interviewed cited concerns about their "fit" within the postsecondary environment when asked about their academic concerns. However, these were social and not academic concerns. The fact that none of the women who participated in this study had left high school for academic reasons perhaps accounts for the absence of negative feelings about their academic abilities..

When asked if they had any concerns about their academic preparation for postsecondary education, five of the women responded by describing the social concerns that they felt in lieu of academic concerns. These concerns came in many shapes and sizes. For one of the women, the main concern was the fact that her only other experience had been in a small high school and she was attending a campus with multiple buildings. “I was so worried about finding my classes, I didn’t even think about how hard they’d be. I just wanted to know where they were.” She related that she was losing sleep before her first semester started and decided to go to campus a week before classes started to make sure that she knew where everything was.

Another woman said that her decision to attend postsecondary education came directly from her self-perception as a “good student.” She said that after her divorce and her son leaving home, “I wanted to go and do something that I’d always been good at. I knew I could be good at school again like I was before I got pregnant [and left high school].” Attending postsecondary education was perceived as an activity that would make her feel better about herself. Another of the women had a similar sense of herself as a confident student. She said, “I always knew I could [pursue postsecondary education] if I was at all interested. I had done well as a child and was confident. I wasn’t confident about who I was, but I was confident as a student.”

Another woman shared a similar feeling of confidence in her abilities as a learner even if her learning had happened less at school and more in informal situations, “I was always learning but it was informal. . . Just learning from books but it was still learning and I wanted to [go to college] to have more formal education. . . I was going to learn, formally or not!” For her, the opportunity to learn in a formal setting was seen as an extension of the informal learning that she had been doing all of her life.

Age as a Factor: Will I Be Too Old?

Age was cited as a social concern by four of the women when they were asked about academic concerns. One shared some of the things that she was thinking when weighing the decision to pursue postsecondary education. She said, “When I signed up for classes, there was no fear but I was uncomfortable about what I was getting into. Was I too old?” When I asked her if she was worried at all about not being academically prepared for her classes—having spent so much time away from school—her answer was emphatic, “I *knew* that I could handle the subjects. I could learn. I was good at learning.” Another woman shared a similar story, “I was good at school so I knew that would be OK. I thought that I’d be way older than everyone, which I wasn’t excited about.” Although some women expressed social concerns about their enrollment in postsecondary institutions that they perceived as being focused on younger more affluent learners, they all believed that they were academically and intellectually capable of being successful in their efforts.

Life Change as a Trigger to Get Something Done

Across all seven cases used to construct this Grounded Theory, something—or more frequently more than one thing—changed in the lives of these women that made the decision to pursue postsecondary education a perceived possibility that had not been there before. The life changes identified were job change, divorce, relocation, and children transitioning out of the home. For many of these women, it was not one life change, such as relocation or divorce, but a series or bundle of changes at the same time that led them to pursue postsecondary education. Each of the following segments presents the life changing experiences described in my interviews using quotes taken from the women to illustrate the experience.

Job change. For the four women who indicated that a job change had impacted their decision to attend postsecondary education, this change took different forms. One lost a job because of a layoff and two others because the physical demands of a job had become too taxing. For another woman, it was the acquisition of a job at a local college—which provided tuition benefits to employees—that impacted her choice. In every case, these women noted that a job change was influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary education.

The woman impacted by a layoff lost a job that she had held but not enjoyed for over a decade. This happened in the same year that she left her husband and her son left the home after graduating from high school. Although she was concerned about the financial impact of the job loss, she was not unhappy to have been laid off in part because she had been considering going to school for some time and was dissatisfied with her job on a factory assembly line. She described the feeling that she had when she was laid off as realizing that she was possibly ". . . getting to live. . . not just working and sleeping. . . spinning my wheels." Losing the job provided an opportunity to do something different that would not have been considered while this woman was working day after day in an unfulfilling position. Job loss was the positive factor that opened up the opportunity to postsecondary education that she perceived as a key to a more rewarding job.

For two of the women, the heavy physical demands of their jobs had become too much. They saw pursuing postsecondary education as a way to gain skills and credentials that would lead to a less physically demanding job. Leaving these jobs also freed them to attend school full time, which they both cited as a factor in their decision to pursue postsecondary education. One participant shared, "When I couldn't do my job anymore, I thought for the first time about going back to school."

For another participant, losing her job meant that she would be able to collect unemployment insurance while in school, which influenced her decision to go to school rather than attempting to find another job. She said, "once I realized that I could get unemployment while I was at school, it was easy to make up my mind." Receiving unemployment assistance allowed her to take the time to enroll in a postsecondary institution and become qualified for a more meaningful and less physically demanding career.

For another woman, it was the acquisition of a job rather than job loss that impacted her decision to enroll in postsecondary education. This woman was hired as a clerical worker at the college that her husband was attending. They had moved to the town in which this institution was located in order for her husband to enroll in school. Although she acknowledged that many people who enter into clerical positions at a college or university do so in order to receive tuition benefits and attend school, she said that she had no intention of enrolling in college when the institution originally hired her. She had taken the job only because she and her husband only had one car and this allowed them to drive together while he was attending school. After working at the college for over a year, she was approached by her supervisor, who suggested that she take advantage of the free tuition offered to employees. However, the financial incentives were not enough on their own to motivate the decision to pursue postsecondary education. This job also put her into contact with other students and she quickly realized, "there were other students with more resources than I had who weren't prepared." The exposure to the real expectations and requirements of postsecondary education—along with the tuition break offered through campus employment—was cited by this woman as a profoundly influential life change that impacted her decision to enroll in college. She reflected on the impact of this job on her life and said, "I could just as easily have ended up anywhere else and things would be so different [had I taken another job]."

Divorce. The end of a marriage was identified as a powerful life change that impacted the decision to return to school for three of the women. For two of them the divorce represented the removal of a barrier to their pursuit of postsecondary education; their husbands had been very unsupportive of any educational ambitions. For another woman, divorce was a disorienting experience that led her to reevaluate many aspects of her life, including her lack of formal education.

One woman described her husband’s negative influence on her educational ambitions. She said that her husband resented her participation in a local community education program, even though she was required to attend it to receive government benefits. She remembered her husband as having a “terrible attitude” about education. She remembered, “. . . maybe that is the reason he hated to see me study. He hated to study.” In addition to being unsupportive of her educational pursuits, she described him as a disruptive and controlling influence in her life. She said also that she felt nervous in the house with her husband and their children. When her husband left the home and the marriage ended, she moved in with her sister’s family. This change in environment was an important factor. She said, “. . . once [he] was gone, I could breathe. . . breathe and study.”

For another woman, the decision to leave the marriage came from her. She left her husband almost immediately after her son went to college. She had been in an unhappy marriage for some years and her husband had not been supportive of her going to school because he believed that it was a “waste of money.” Leaving her husband was the first and most important step on her road toward pursuing postsecondary education. She said that her husband was a barrier to her accomplishing her educational goals. She explained, “Divorce was the biggest influence on my choice [to go to school]. It would not have happened if I was still married."

For another woman, divorce was neither the woman's choice nor preference. When her husband left after 20 years of marriage she felt that her life had "fallen apart." She remembered spending a year processing the loss, reevaluating her life, and in her words, "feeling sorry for myself." For years they had run a successful business together and led a very intertwined life. The end of her marriage was a significant and traumatic life change. She reflected on that difficult period in her life, "He came home and told me that he loved another woman. . . what do you say to that? I just went through the year in a fog. . . I knew that I needed to change everything." One of her friends told her that she should look at it in a more positive light and see the divorce as an opportunity. She explained the influence that a conversation with a friend had at the time,

> You know, I remember my friend saying, 'Do everything that you have always wanted to do.' And I did! I thought that what I really wanted to do was get a formal education. . . go to college finally and get a real degree. (Colleen)

Across the women for whom divorce was a factor, it was experienced differently. In each case it was cited as a major life change. It was also mentioned in every cases as impactful on their decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Relocation. For two women, relocation influenced the decision to pursue postsecondary education. The relocation put them in close proximity to opportunities that they had not seen before and removed them from situations that were perceived as barriers to enrollment because of either isolation or lack of community support.

One of the women moved from a rural environment to a smaller town after her divorce. This relocation removed her from an environment in which there was no school to attend and the community was generally perceived as unsupportive of education, to a community with an active community college. She said that in the rural community where she had been living, “People there didn’t really *like* school and there weren’t any jobs you were going to get from going to school so there was no point seen to it.” She moved to a small town where there was a community college. In addition, she was interested in meeting people. She saw the community college as a place where she might meet people like her, “There was not a lot to do here but [redacted] college always had flyers and signs around about the programs. People were having fun in the pictures! I thought, you know? I could do that.”

For another woman, the relocation happened within the same city when she moved into her sister’s home. This relocation to an environment so different than her former home with her husband was cited a number of times during the interview as the biggest factor in attending school. She said, “living with my sister is terrible and good. . . everybody is busy and loud. . . me, too.” Moving in with her sister had opened up opportunities for both work and study that she had not had when living with her husband. She now had a flexible schedule working in the grocery store owned by her brother-in-law and was encouraged by her sister and brother-in-law to attend school in addition to working when her children were also in school. “Now it is normal to be out all day doing stuff [work and school] but before I had to be home just to be home.” Her sister’s home made pursuing postsecondary education a possibility.

Children in Transition to School or College. For two of the women whom I interviewed the transition of a child into kindergarten or out of the home was a powerful factor in the decision to pursue postsecondary education. In both cases the women perceived their child’s transition as a personal loss. This loss left them with an empty space that they decided to fill with the pursuit of education. Although this was expressed differently for each of these women, they shared the sense that their children’s transition was a major life change that influenced their decision to go to school.

One participant described the impact that her son attending school for the first time had on her decision. She explained that she had been “dreading the day that he would start kindergarten” because she had hated school so much. She chose not to enroll him in preschool and was home with him most of the time except when her husband was home and she worked part-time in a coffee shop. Since her son was going to attend full-day kindergarten, she was worried that she would have a lot of time to fill, “the days were just so long.” She spoke with her friends at work—many of whom were college students—about this. After receiving encouragement from them, she decided to look into attending college. She said that she saw the alternative to going to school as, “just sitting around her house, cleaning or something.”

For another participant, it was her son leaving the house to attend college that played a part in her decision to return to college. “I felt so jealous and bad about feeling jealous. . . so after [my husband] was gone. . . I decided that I really wanted to go to school, too.” For this woman, her son leaving the home provided an example of someone close to her choosing to pursue postsecondary education. She also expressed a greater feeling of liberty to pursue her own ambitions and interests with her son out of the home.

External Support

External support was identified in all of the interviews and came in many forms. Former teachers, GED course instructors, parents, coworkers, children, and neighbors were all identified as sources of this support. This support was categorized into three different sources—mentors, children, and others. This support was perceived in the form of specific and concrete offers of help in filling out financial aid forms or navigating a confusing campus. It was also felt in words of support and encouragement from others that influenced the decision to pursue postsecondary education. There was no indication that one form of support was more impactful on the decision to pursue postsecondary education than the others.

For three of the women external support came from someone who served in an informal mentorship role. Former high school teachers, ABE instructors, and employers were cited as important sources of support from mentors that influenced the decision to pursue postsecondary education.

One of the women was enrolled in an ABE program preparing her to take the GED exams. She formed a close bond with one of her instructors, a younger female ELL teacher. This instructor encouraged her to make plans beyond the GED exams. This women described one important conversation that she remembered,

> She said that I should look at the [Web site of a local community college] to find out where I wanted to go to school [after the GED]. That was the first time that somebody kind of said I could go to college. (Lee)

She also remembered getting concrete offers of support from this instructor that impacted her decision to enroll. She said, “She was also helping me with the financial aid forms before I signed up for classes.” Because these forms were confusing, it could have been a barrier to participation. However, this woman said that both the logistical help in completing the forms and the knowledge that there was help available removed this barrier.

For three of the women, their external support came from their children. Sometimes this support came in the form of setting an example of successful college enrollment. One woman, whose son was enrolled at a local college said, “My kid was at school [college] and doing well. He said that I could do it, too. . . I was as smart as him.” The participation of their children in postsecondary education also exposed them to different pathways and possibilities with which these women were not necessarily familiar.

For one woman who sent both a son and daughter through college, the support came less from words of support than it did from the example that her children set by successfully completing their undergraduate degrees. She remembers her son saying, “We saw the way that you did it and we are going to do it differently.” This woman said that just watching her kids go through college allowed her to understand the process in a way that made it seem less intimidating.

For another woman, her daughter was identified as a source of external support as a high school student. She remembered,

> My daughter was always telling me to go back to school. . . she dared me to go to college before she did. . . I ended up doing that. . . not because she dared me. It was fun to hear her tell me how much she wanted me to do it. (Micki)

After she enrolled, her daughter said, “You’re doing it backwards but you are doing it!” This woman mentioned her daughter’s support throughout the interview as a constant theme that she felt influenced both her decision to pursue postsecondary education and her successful enrollment. For these women, children were a source of support both through their words of encouragement and through their positive examples of success in postsecondary education.

All of the women interviewed cited other sources of external support that influenced their decision, support that came from people who were neither in informal mentorship roles nor were they children. Some of the women found external support in family members, some from colleagues, and some from friends. All seven of the critical cases emphasized the impact that the support of others had on their successful decision to pursue postsecondary education.

One woman shared the impact that her mother had had in supporting her decision to pursue postsecondary education. Her mother had graduated from high school and was disappointed that her daughter had left school before graduation. She frequently expressed ambitions for her daughter to get more education. This woman remembered a conversation with her mother during the time that she was considering going to school. Her mother said, “Don’t do it the way that I did it. Go to school. You’ll have a better life.”

Another woman described her mother as “controlling and difficult.” However, as the woman reflected on the period in her life when she was deciding to go to school, she remembered, “My mother just kept asking if I had done this or that. . . maybe I got [enrolling in community college] done just to make her stop.” After the fact, her mother’s pressure on this subject was identified as a helpful support for this woman’s decision to pursue postsecondary education.

For another woman, her coworkers were the source of external support that she repeatedly identified as influential in her decision. When talking about her decision to pursue postsecondary education she remembered that all of her coworkers were either enrolled in college or had already graduated. The example set by her coworkers empowered her. Before working in the coffee shop, she had few friends who had pursued postsecondary education. Having colleagues who were experiencing success at colleges and universities was a positive influence on her decision. She also received external support from her coworkers through words of encouragement. She remembered that she felt surprised that they believed that she would be a good fit for college even though she had not graduated from high school, “They were always telling me how smart I was. . . I don’t think that they knew anyone else with a GED. . . but it really meant something that they wanted me to go to school.” She remembered a conversation with a female coworker, “You are going to love college. That’s what she said and it really stuck with me. . . could I love college?”

In addition to support from family and coworkers, four of the participants expressed the importance of support from additional community members. One of the women described the influence of a casual acquaintance in her decision to attend college. For this woman, it was a neighbor who provided important external support. This woman believed that her husband and family were indifferent about her pursing postsecondary education. However, one of her neighbors worked at a community college and encouraged and supported her. She remembered, “All of the time she was asking me. . . what was I waiting for? After a while I stopped waiting and decided to do it.” For this same woman, a friend’s decision to enroll also served as support. She said,

> I shouldn’t even say this because this sounds mean but my friend [who she had known since childhood] was not really good at school. I was the

> good student. She was in school and doing well so I knew I could do it. (Micki)

For two of the women whom I interviewed, external support came from all three sources, mentors, children, and acquaintances. For five of the women, support came from more than one source. There was no indication that specific or structural support, such as helping with applications or forms, was perceived as more influential than supportive words and conversations or examples. All of the women indicated gratitude for the external support that they had received. Three of them indicated that they proactively provide that same support to others who are thinking about going to school.

Summary

The experiences that make up the context element for the Grounded Theory model of choosing to pursue postsecondary education for women who hold GED credentials are (a) life change, (b) a self-belief in academic abilities, and (c) external support for returning to school. These themes emerged from all seven interviews. Life change took many forms across the interviews that informed this study and five of the participants experienced multiple life-changing events. In every case, participants expressed the opinion that changes in their lives had made pursuing postsecondary education a possibility. All of the women interviewed believed that they were academically capable of succeeding in postsecondary education although they expressed concern over their social compatibility with postsecondary institutions when discussing their academic preparedness. External support was the last contextual element in this

Grounded Theory model and was experienced from mentors, children, and coworkers and friends. Much like life-changing events, external support was perceived to come from multiple sources for five of the women who were interviewed for this research. Figure 9 presents the core themes of each interview participant.

Figure 9. Core Themes and Participants' Experiences.

Participant	Life change				External Support			Belief in Abilities	
	Job Change	Divorce	Children in need of less care	Relocation	Mentors	Children	Coworkers and friends	Supported by smaller goals	Unsupported by smaller goals
Micki	X		X				X		X
Alice	X	X	X			X	X	X	
Colleen		X	X		X	X	X	X	
Lee	X	X	X				X	X	
Nichole			X	X	X	X	X	X	
Ann	X			X	X		X	X	
Aurora			X				X		X

Intervening Conditions

The next element of the Grounded Theory model contains those experiences defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as intervening conditions. Intervening conditions are those factors produced by the contextual elements that act to support or hinder the action and interaction strategies. The intervening conditions that emerged from the interview data were (a) the aspiration and opportunity to pursue postsecondary education and (b) the creation—or not—of short-term goals. In each of the critical cases there was both the aspiration to enroll in postsecondary education and an opportunity to do so. Five of the women interviewed had set short-term goals for their enrollment in postsecondary education. The two women who did not set any short-term goals other then the completion of an undergraduate degree were also the two women who had withdrawn from their postsecondary institutions with no immediate plans to return. This will be explored in greater detail in the discussion of these results.

Aspiration and Opportunity to Enroll in Postsecondary Education

Across all of the experiences represented in this study, the life events, mentorship, and belief in academic abilities represented a situation in which the decision to pursue postsecondary education happened in a much different context from that in which they chose to leave high school and instead earn their GED credentials. This different context resulted from the intervening conditions that led to the decision to enroll. The first is the aspiration to enroll in postsecondary education and the opportunity to do so.

Aspiration: "My Time". The women whom I interviewed came from a variety of geographic regions, cultural backgrounds, and ages; they all expressed a similar sentiment with regard to their aspiration to pursue postsecondary education. They all described the feeling of wanting to enroll in postsecondary education in a positive light. As the interviews progressed, I began to look forward to the moment when the women would emphatically declare that they were doing something for themselves by deciding to pursue postsecondary education.

The changes that had taken place in their contexts led them to want to pursue postsecondary education and many of them expressed this feeling in a similar way, using similar words, and with similar emphasis. When describing her feelings leading up to her enrollment in postsecondary education, one woman said, "I decided this was *my time*." Another woman expressed a similar sentiment when sharing her feelings about her decision to pursue postsecondary education. She said, ". . . this was *my* time to do what I wanted to do." Another woman, whose contextual changes included both divorce and children leaving the home reflected, "For so long, I did for others. Now I was going to do for *me*." All seven critical cases reflected the experience of wanting—or having aspirations—to enroll in postsecondary education. For all of the cases, changes had taken place in the context in which this decision was being made and pursuing postsecondary education was identified as a desirable activity.

Change-Producing Opportunity. It is not enough to want to do something if you do not have the opportunity to do it. In addition to producing a aspiration to pursue postsecondary education, the contextual changes led to the realization of opportunities or real increased opportunities to pursue postsecondary education. These opportunities resulted from social, economic, and geographic changes. For the women whose husbands had not been supportive of their pursuit of education, divorce removed an important social and sometimes economic barrier. Without their husband's disapproval, they were free to explore their postsecondary options and sometimes qualify for financial aid that would not previously have been available. One woman remembered the impact that financial aid had on her decision to enroll. She said, "I guess I knew that I would get some financial aid but I didn't know that it would cover the whole thing. I could do it because I could afford it." For this woman, the loss of her husband's income allowed her to qualify for an aid package that completely covered her expenses. This made her decision to attend school both affordable and possible.

For two of the women whom I interviewed relocation put them in proximity to postsecondary institutions that they would not have been able to attend in their previous locations. For one, it was the relocation to a town with a community college that provided the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. She had been in a rural community without any physical proximity to a postsecondary institution and moved to a town with a large community college. She shared, "If I couldn't get to the school so easily, I don't see how I'd keep going." In this case, the life change of a move created a context in which the physical proximity to a school presented the intervening condition in which there was the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education.

One of the women experienced opportunity in the fact that her son would be attending kindergarten during the day, freeing up time during the week during which she could attend classes. She now had the opportunity to study while he was in school and would not have to pay for daycare, which would have made her choice impossible before. She said, “With [her son] going to school all day, I didn’t have an excuse to be at home.”

In the case of every woman who was interviewed, the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education presented itself in ways that would not have occurred before the contextual changes provided an environment in which the intervening conditions removed barriers to participation along with stimulating the aspiration to pursue postsecondary education.

Goal Setting

One of the more surprising elements of the model that emerged from the interview data was the role of short-term goals in the decision to pursue postsecondary education. Short-term goal setting was a difficult to understand theme and one that did not appear universally. When I was initially looking across the interview notes using the constant comparative method, I was confused by the absence of short-term goal setting for two of the participants. However, further analysis revealed that this was an element that appeared in the interviews of all of the women who had successfully completed or were still enrolled. The two women who made no mention of establishing short-term goals on their journey through postsecondary education were the two women who had stopped out of school with no immediate plans to return. So, although this theme is not universal, its impact on the model will be presented and discussed in detail in the subsequent chapter.

Five of the women indicated that they had structured their postsecondary experience in a way that would allow them to accomplish certificates or other milestones along the way to their ultimate goals. For one woman who would eventually like to get a 4–year nursing degree,

> I realized that it would take forever and I felt terrible. But then I realized that I could do the LPN program first, which is only months instead of years, and then be an LPN while I was slowly working on the nursing degree. . . then I could see the finish line. (Nichole)

Another woman said that she had put a number of short-terms steps in place because she knew that she would finish everything that she started and didn't want to, "start something I don't know I'll finish." She said, "I knew that once I set my mind to it, it would get done so I just started to do the certificate." After enrolling in the certificate program and enjoying it, she revisited her decision, "I started out to do a certificate but said, 'to hell with it!' I'll do an associates, and then an undergrad, then a masters!"

All five of the women who discussed their use of short-term goals or milestones were very intentional about creating them early in their academic careers. They indicated that although they were confident in their own academic abilities, the road to a 4-year degree seemed too long. One woman expressed the importance of short-term goals in her decision,

> When I started to think about it and think about all of those years. . . it was impossible. But when I thought about just doing this one thing [certificate] that would take 9 months. . . then another year and a half [associates degree]. . . well, then I'd be almost done. . . I could do that even though it is the same thing, I guess. (Colleen)

The two women interviewed who had stopped out of postsecondary education with no immediate plans to return were also the two who did not cite any short-term goals along their postsecondary pathways and did not make any reference to any participation milestones prior to a completed 4-year undergraduate degree. In every other respect, their experiences paralleled those of the other women whom I interviewed who had achieved their postsecondary goals or were still enrolled. The two women who shared a lack of short-term goals shared a similar undergraduate experience. They both entered their postsecondary experiences with the goal of a 4-year undergraduate degree. Both of them indicated that they felt a little lost after their first two semesters. Both of them expressed a feeling of uncertainty and felt unsure of exactly what they were doing with their time in school. One woman shared her decision to take some time off from school,

> I didn't stop going because it was too hard. I had good grades. . . I just didn't know what to major in. There were too many choices and I didn't

> want to take out any more student loans until I was sure about what I wanted to do. (Aurora)

Given the experiences of the other women who were interviewed and the self-reported importance of short-term goals on their successful enrollment, it is significant that those women who had stopped enrollment before reaching their long-term goals had not set intermediate or short-term goals. The impact of short term goal setting on the enrollment decisions of women once they have decided to pursue postsecondary education will be explored in the next chapter.

Summary

The intervening conditions that were identified through interview data as impacting a woman's decision to pursue postsecondary education were the aspiration and opportunity to pursue postsecondary education and short-term goal setting. The importance of the aspiration and opportunity to enroll in postsecondary education is self-evident. However, this Grounded Theory model illustrates the role of a changed context on aspiration and opportunity along with the impact of these intervening conditions on the decision to pursue postsecondary education in the words of the women who informed the seven critical cases as the basis for this model. Although it was experienced differently by participants who had either met their goals or were still working toward them and those who had stopped out, goal setting was a identified as an intervening condition that—along with the aspiration and opportunity to pursue postsecondary education—led to the decision to pursue postsecondary education along with the subsequent action and interaction strategies stemming from this decision.

Action and Interaction Strategies

The next element used to construct this model is called “action and interaction.” After the decision to pursue postsecondary education is made—within a specific context and under the influence of the intervening conditions—action and interaction strategies follow. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define action and interaction strategies as, “purposeful or deliberate acts, which are taken to resolve a problem and which shaped the phenomenon in some way.” (p. 133)

Seeking Information About Opportunities

There is an ongoing need to seek information during various stages of the decision to pursue postsecondary education. However, after the decision to pursue postsecondary education was made, these women had to take many actions to turn that decision into enrollment. The information that these women needed included how to finance their pursuit. One woman remembered,

> I was glad that I had [my former teacher] to help show me where to look for all the stuff I needed to know before I could think about going to [the local community college]. I found all about financial aid and the jobs I could get [after graduation]. (Lee)

This quote illustrates the importance of both the changed context (mentorship) and the intervening condition (opportunity to attend postsecondary institution) on the action steps taken by this woman of finding out the steps needed to get an aid package and opportunities that might stem from her decision. This case reflects the experience of all of the women who needed to answer many questions before their decision resulted in enrollment.

Enrolling in School

Armed with the aspiration and opportunity to enroll in postsecondary education and information about how and where to enroll and how to finance this enrollment, the women in the study all enrolled in a postsecondary institution with the intent to fulfill a specific long- or short-term goal. This enrollment represented the second action and interaction step in the model. The changing context resulting from feedback or consequences of this enrollment then changes the context that will impact the intervening conditions that will influence future decisions about pursuing—or deciding instead not to pursue—postsecondary education.

The Grounded Theory Model: Choosing to Pursue Postsecondary Education for Women Who Hold GED Credentials

This model allows each of the core themes that demonstrated emergent fit under the criteria established for quality Grounded Theory analysis to be shown in relation to both the experience in question along with all of the other core themes. The elements in the decision process related to pursuit of postsecondary education for women who hold GED credentials rather than a high school diploma consisted of a series of interrelated experiences. These are represented in this model as context, intervening conditions, phenomenon, and action or interaction strategies. The interaction of the contextual elements (life change, belief in academic abilities, and external support) produced the intervening conditions (aspiration and opportunity to enroll along with short-term goal setting), which led to the decision to pursue postsecondary education and the action and interaction strategies that followed. Gathering information and enrolling in a postsecondary institution are the two action and interaction strategies that emerged from the data. The consequences from the actions that were brought about by the decision to enroll in postsecondary education—along with those emerging from intervening conditions and actions or interaction strategies—result in a changing context that contributes to future input about the desirability of continued enrollment and completion of postsecondary goals.

Figure 10. Grounded Theory Model of Deciding to Pursue Postsecondary Education for Women Who Hold GED Credentials.

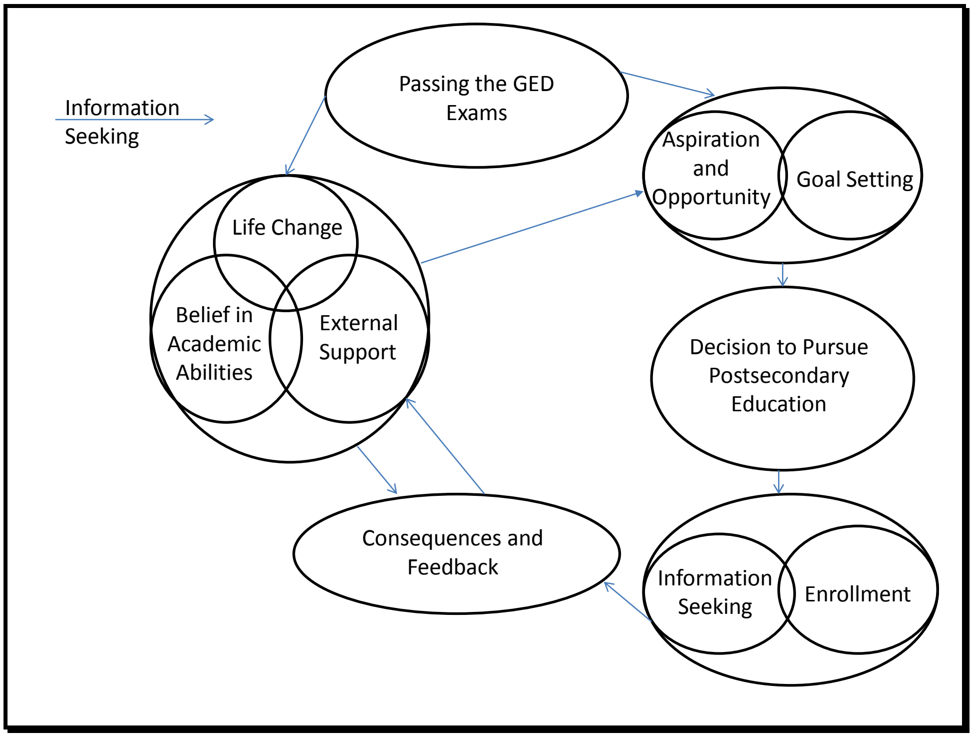

Information Seeking
Passing the GED Exams
Aspiration and Opportunity
Goal Setting
Life Change
Belief in Academic Abilities
External Support
Decision to Pursue Postsecondary Education
Consequences and Feedback
Information Seeking
Enrollment

Figure 10 provides a visual representation of this Grounded Theory model. The Grounded Theory model of the decision to pursue postsecondary education for women who hold GED credentials was created using the salient themes that emerged from the critical case study interviews. This model captures the complexities of deciding to pursue postsecondary education for women who hold GED credentials. It also reflects the need for cyclical and ongoing decision making that is impacted by the myriad life factors that influenced the initial decision and continue to influence the choice to remain enrolled. Creating this visual model is only the first step in developing a Grounded Theory. The findings generated from critical case study interviews and visually represented in this model must also demonstrate fit with existing findings on related experiences.

The next chapter will situate this model and its elements in the existing theories and findings on decision making and adult development. The ability of this model and its elements to fit within existing findings is an important test of it soundness as a Grounded Theory.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter will provide a synthesis of the findings from seven descriptive critical case studies with existing research literature on decision making in adulthood and adult development. I will begin with an overview of my findings from the critical case study interviews. I will go on to situate these findings in the larger body of research on decision making and adult development. The four criteria established for Grounded Theory reliability will be reviewed in the context of the findings to ensure a quality Grounded Theory model has been developed. This will be done through a direct comparison of the model against the criteria as well as in an ongoing way from the comparison of the findings from the critical case study data and the existing research literature. This chapter will end with a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for both application to practice and further research.

The model of decision making that emerged from this research reflected contextual similarities and parallel intervening conditions across all seven critical cases. All seven women shared the experience of earning their GED credentials. This was the causal condition necessary for inclusion in the study but was not the end of their shared experiences. All seven cases also shared three important contextual factors. They had all experienced life change, received external support, and shared a belief in their own academic abilities. It was from this context that the shared intervening conditions of aspiration and opportunity emerged for all seven women along with setting short-term goals for five of the participants. This model demonstrates that any changes to the contextual elements result in an impact on the subsequent intervening conditions. The decision to pursue postsecondary education is likewise impacted by any changes to the intervening conditions. Without aspiration or opportunity to pursue postsecondary education it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which an individual would be successful in making that decision.

In addition to the precursor steps to the decision, this Grounded Theory model demonstrates the importance of the action steps that follow the decision—information gathering and enrollment—that were seen across all seven critical cases. The model then shows that the feedback from those action steps influences the context that will impact future decisions.

Both Glaser (1978, 2002) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) cautioned against delving deeply into theoretical literature before a category has emerged from the data in order to prevent data from being forced into the final theory under the influence of existing research. However, it is central to Grounded Theory research to “go back into the technical literature to determine if this category is there and if so what other researcher have said about it.” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 50). After the themes that emerged from my interview data were incorporated into the Grounded Theory model proposed in this research I investigated other adult development models that have been used to predict participation in order to ground my theory in existing research in addition to interview data. It is important to note that many of these models were built on the experiences of White men. Subsequent research (Labouvie-Vief, 2003) has shown that gender in addition to socioeconomics and ethnicity could impact ability of these models to accurately reflect the adult experience. One obvious strength of this Grounded Theory model of the successful decision of women with GED credentials to pursue postsecondary education is that it is grounded in the experiences of a multi-ethnic, multi-generational group of females who hold GED credentials. This represents a very different population from the White males used to develop and norm many of the existing theories of adult development.

Situating the Model

The model will be analyzed against the reliability criteria for Grounded Theory as well as seminal models and research on adult decision making and development.

Within Grounded Theory Reliability Criteria

In order for this model to merit consideration it must first be held up against the reliability criteria established by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which apply explicitly to Grounded Theory research and are not to be confused with statistical reliability as used in empirical research studies. The first criterion is fit. Does the model fit with the incidents that it is representing? The measure of fit is found in the adherence of the constant comparison model. In this case, core themes were only included in the model if they were truly shared across the seven critical cases and expressed explicitly by women when describing their experiences.

The next criterion is work, which measures the ability of the theory to work in explaining the theory across varying situations. The model developed to represent the theory of successful decision making for women who held GED credentials is applicable across all seven cases. It would be beyond the scope of this research to test it against the experiences of other adult basic education populations.

The next criterion is relevance, which is measured against the response from both readers and participants to the concerns of this study. The relevance of this study is that its implications could extend far beyond the boundaries of academic interest in a way that seeks to demonstrate relevance to policy makers and other women who are facing similar struggles in continuing their education.

The last criterion established by Glaser and Strauss is modifiability. Modifiability refers to measuring the extent to which the findings can be adapted to new data and situations and still remain intact and relevant. This discussion will show that the theory that has emerged from these data is robust enough to encompass additional relevant data—such as that which will be explored from relevant related research that will be explored in depth in this chapter.

Within Adult Decision Making and Development Models

Myriad models exist to describe adult decision making. At its core, decision making involves a series of defined overlapping steps by which information is assimilated, integrated, weighed, and valued to arrive at the selection of a course of action from possible alternatives (Janis & Mann 1977).

Many of these models follow a phase or stage process in which adults are moving through distinct phases in a linear progression toward desired outcomes. This reflects the psychological tradition of normative decision making (Swets, 1991), which has served as the theoretical bedrock of adult development research for many years. Normative decision theorists assumed that rational decisions are the most desirable and that decision makers always want to use logical methods to reach rational decisions. Normative decision making focuses on research on “good” decision making, generally in controlled laboratory environments. Normative decision models are tested using hypotheses and controls to minimize confounding variables. Within this framework the research is able to prescribe the appropriate decision process in a given controlled situation (Baron, 2004).

As years of research have demonstrated (Baron, 1996; Kaplow & Shavell, 2002; Stanovich, 1999) decisions are not made exclusively in controlled laboratory environments and it is difficult for laboratory models to identify and correctly weigh all of the variables that might influence a complicated real-world decision (Carrol, 1993). Although there is a growing push for research that goes beyond laboratory hypotheticals, this has done little to lessen their influence and theimportance of normative decision theory on adult development research, which now favors qualitative and descriptive research (Merriam, 2009) .

Each of the models that will be described and compared in this section presents a different perspective on adult development each of which share many characteristics. These models have been included in this discussion because they share characteristics with the model that emerged from this Grounded Theory research. They all represent development and decision making in adulthood as a process of moving through distinct phases or steps toward a normative developmental stage or decision. Most significantly, each of these models stipulates certain circumstances under which a person can move from one phase to another, a process that shares many characteristics with decision models. The findings from my interviews confirmed and aligned with many of the requisites for phase change identified across these models. Life change, belief in abilities, and external support are three important themes in seminal models of adult development and in the experiences of the women whose experiences informed this Grounded Theory model. The models are discussed below.

Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs has been adapted to predict participation in adult education programs (Miller, 1967). In this model participation depends how much a person has been able to meet a range of primary and secondary needs. As basic primary needs are met higher needs are activated, and as a result people are more prepared to take part in educational activities (Miller, 1967). Maslow believed that the reason that people would not move through the needs to self-actualization is because of the hindrances placed in their way by others or by society. In Maslow’s model, to move from one level of educational attainment to the next an individual must transcend cultural coding that is perceived as a barrier to educational pursuits and must also have access to a broad range of choices that could potentially meet their needs. This model offers a vision of adult development that is not inconsistent with the findings from the Grounded Theory that emerged from this research. The women who shared their stories all felt that there had been significant changes in the period surrounding their decisions. These changes were identified as having a profound effect on their perceptions of the feasibility of pursuing postsecondary education. In a more elementary sense, it was only after they had moved beyond fulfilling their basic needs—and in many cases those of their spouses and children as well—that they considered postsecondary education as a viable opportunity.

The notion of transition has assumed a much larger role in thinking about the pursuit of education for adults. This was foreshadowed by populist accounts of the impact of life-changes (e.g. Sheehy 1976) that have had a significant impact on thinking with regard to decisions that adults make with related to education. The basic hypothesis is that participation in education projects is frequently linked to changes in life circumstances such as changes in job, the break-up of relationships, having children, bereavement or retirement (Balan, 2005; Gerson, 1986). This was certainly reflected in the findings from my research.

The Stages of Change (SOC) model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992) was developed by two clinical psychologists in order to create a model for explanation for cessation of smoking and other addiction behaviors. Much like other models of adult development stemming from the psychological tradition, this model presents a linear progression toward the normative state of sobriety. Figure 11 demonstrates the stages of change along with the unique characteristics of each.

Figure 11. Stages of Change Model Adapted From Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992.

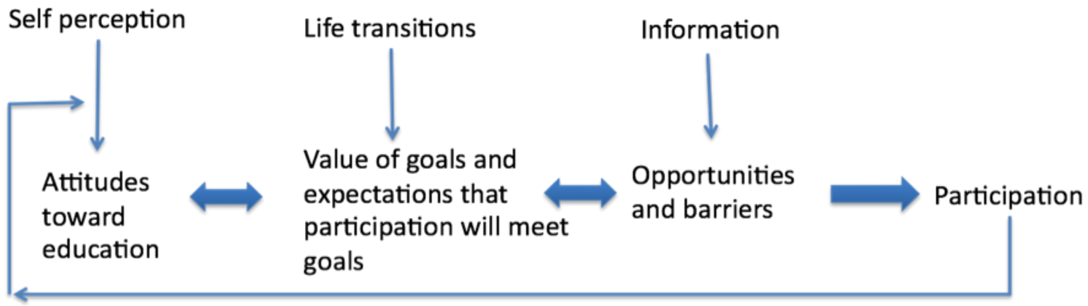
Stage	**Characteristics**
Pre-Contemplation	Not considering change
Contemplation	Ambivalent about change
Preparation	Attempts to change and planning to act
Action	Practicing the new behavior for some time
Maintenance	Continued commitment to new behavior extending beyond 6 months
Relapse	Resumption of old behaviors

The relevance of this model to decision making theory is once again in the movement from one stage to the next. This model outlines a clear process for through the stages in a linear fashion. This movement from one stage to another is predicated on: (a) growing awareness that the advantages to movement outweigh the disadvantages; (b) confidence that the change can be made and maintained through tempting situations; and (c) strategies that can help to make and maintain this change.

The SOC model represents the consequences of many of the contextual elements of my proposed model. A direct parallel can be found between the second requirement of the SOC model and the belief in abilities core theme identified in my model. For many of the women who shared their stories, it was a life experience that changed the balance of advantage to make the pursuit of postsecondary education more advantageous than it had been before. Again there is tremendous fit and relevance reflected in these parallel findings.

One of the most relevant models for predicting adult decision making was created over 30 years ago by K. Patricia Cross (1981), whose model predicting participation in adult learning programs is cited in over 3 decades of literature and is still used as the basis for much research on adult participation decisions today (Rogers, 1985; Upcraft et al., 1993; Upcraft Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005) . Her model explains participation as the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evolution of the position of the individual in his or her environment. This model was built using a meta analysis of previous studies and consists of seven steps (a) self-evaluation, (b) attitudes about education, (c) the importance of goals and the expectations that these will be met, (d) life transitions, (e) opportunities and barriers, (f) information on educational opportunities, and (g) the decision to participate that leads to participation in education opportunities (Cross, 1981). Cross argued that this is a linear process in which the steps interact and build on each other in a cumulative way. The more positive the adult's experience at each stage, the more likely he or she is to reach the last stage, the decision to participate This is an important model in that it illustrates the many forces that are interacting and influencing adults' decision making and ability to participate in education (Cross, 1981).

Figure 12. Chain of Response Model Adapted From Cross, 1981, p. 124.


Self perception
Life transitions
Information
Attitudes toward education
Value of goals and expectations that participation will meet goals
Opportunities and barriers
Participation

Cross' (1981) model reflects the findings from this research in a number of ways. Her model is both visually and conceptually the most similar to the Grounded Theory model that emerged from this research. It is also the model that reflects the most similar process—adults choosing to participate in ABE programs. Some of the criticism of Cross' model is that it is overly linear (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) or does not demonstrate the complexity of interactions that can impact process or throw things out of order. For example, in Cross' model, there is no representation of how facing a barrier to participation might impact an adult's self-perception in a way that could go on to impact participation over the long term.

Cross' model does not include the action steps required between the decision and participation nor does it show the interplay of life transitions on both self-perception and attitudes. The Grounded Theory proposed by this research is not quite as linear as the Cross model but reflects many of the same ideas and adds the steps that follow the decision before successful enrollment occurs. There are stong parallels between Corss' model and the model developed from this study. For example, it is interesting to look at parallels between Cross' top layer of influencing variables (self-perception, life transitions, and information) and the contextual factors identified in my model (belief in academic abilities, life change, and external support). All of these factors will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Economic Decision Models

Economic decision-making theory tends to be focused on real world situations and the predictors of human behavior within those situations. It is rooted in the concept that all decisions are made with the goal of choosing those alternatives that that maximize utility. Lewin's (1947) Force-field theory uses this modeling to explain adult development as a series of stages that are completed depending on the forces pushing and pulling on the situation. Rubenson (1977) suggested that motivation to participate in education emerges from the interaction of two factors: expectancy and variance. Expectancy is the expectation of personal success in the educational activity and the expectation that being successful in the activity will have positive consequences. Variance is the sum of positive or negative values that people assign to learning activities. For example, participation in education can lead to higher pay, but it can also mean seeing less of the family or spending less time having fun with friends (Cross, 1981).

The Lewin model provides insight into the complicated processes that adults use to assign value to different aspects of their lives and how those weights then impact their choices. However, it lacks a discussion of all of the life events and personal development opportunities that emerged in the experiences of the critical cases that informed this research to push and pull on those weights. Although these concepts are not explored individually in my proposed model, it is easy to see how the factors of expectancy and variance can and are impacted by both the contextual themes and the intervening conditions that led to the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education. For example, the relative weight of participation was changed drastically when one woman's child entered school. She would no longer have to pay for both daycare and school. The same thing is true for those whose husbands discouraged their participation. Women who would previously have had to weigh their husband's disapproval when considering the relative value of participation had the equation shifted in favor of participation when their marriages ended.

Summary

In order to create the Grounded Theory model, the core themes that emerged from the critical cases were organized into the template suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) without relying on previously established models in the adult development canon. It is both reassuring and an alignment with the reliability criteria of fit and modifiability that the model that emerged from my interview data is consistent with models developed from different data and under different conditions using different research methodology. It is especially interesting to note that the model is consistent with others that were both developed and normed on the experiences of more dominant cultural groups.

Situating Context

With the Grounded Theory model structure firmly situated in relevant research literature, the focus will now shift to the elements within the model and their relationship to previously identified and researched phenomena. This section will situate the core contextual themes within theoretical and applied research. The experiences shared across the critical cases that informed this research are organized in different ways to demonstrate different relationships in other models described in the previous section of this chapter. However, the themes of life change, external support, and belief in abilities can be found in many of them, although sometimes described using different language.

Life Change

The research literature is unequivocal on the importance of life change on decision making in adulthood, especially the centrality of life change in learning and development. It is found in Mezirow (1978), Knowles (1975), Merriam and Cafferella (1991), as well as Merriam and Clark (1993).

Life change is at the core of transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1978). A disorienting dilemma is the first requisite step in the transformational learning process. Mezirow first proposed transformational learning over 30 years ago as a 10-step process leading to a changed understanding of the world. The ten steps are (a) experiencing a disorienting dilemma, (b) self-examination, (c) critical assessment of assumptions, (d) recognizing that others have gone through a similar process, (e) exploring options, (f) formulating a plan of action, and (g) reintegration. In Mezirow's process, transformational learning only occurs when supported through these steps; it is not enough to have a life-changing experience. In the critical cases that informed this research, life change was only one of the contextual factors that were present across the women's experiences. The transformation that came from these experiences was reported by my interviewees to have been supported through their personal beliefs in their abilities as well as through the support and guidance of others who helped in some cases to shepherd the women through their life changes.

Transformational learning recognized how paradigmatic shifts can occur as a result of a major life change. For many of the critical cases examined for this research the disorientating dilemmas of job loss, divorce, or children leaving the home were periods of painful loss. The emergence of transformational learning from painful experiences was analyzed by Merriam and Clark (1993), who found that painful experiences, such as the death of a loved one or divorce, were linked with sudden accounts of personal transformation. These findings reiterate the centrality of life change—even painful life change—on the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education. For the woman who had dreaded her son entering school the painful change opened up the possibility of participation in postsecondary programming that had not been there previously. For the women who experienced painful divorces, it was an opportunity for self-reinvention that included the pursuit of postsecondary education.

The importance of life change in adult learning and development is found outside of transformational learning. Malcolm Knowles (1984) also argued that they key to using adults natural motivation to learn is to capitalize on their most teachable moments. In a summary of the literature on this topic, Zemke and Zemke (1984) found, “The more life-changing events adults face, the more likely they are to seek out related learning experiences. . . adults are generally willing to engage in learning experiences before, after, or even during the life-changing event, Once convinced the change is a certainty, they will engage in any learning that promises to help them through the situation.” (p. 41). This willingness to engage in learning experiences is reflected in the words of the women who shared their stories. It was expressed by Micki who talked about her movement from a community in which, “People there didn’t really *like* school and there weren’t any jobs you were going to get from going to school so there was no point seen to it.” She moved to a town with a vibrant community college community in which, when considering participation she said, “You know, I could do that!”

At the same time that it is clear that life change was a part of the experience of deciding to pursue postsecondary education, there is also a solid research foundation for placing life change within the context element of this Grounded Theory model. In a review of over 30 years of research on transformational learning, Taylor (2000) argued, “The transformational process is formed and circumscribed by a frame of reference. These are structures, assumptions, and expectations that form an individual perspective” (p. 5). It is within the context of life change that the intervening variables led to the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Belief in Abilities

The women who earned their GED credentials and went on to pursue postsecondary education who shared their stories to inform this study all expressed a belief in their ability to be successful in postsecondary education. Belief in academic abilities was shared an important factor in successful decision-making models throughout research literature on academic success. The core theme called “belief in abilities” in the results could also be called self-efficacy. Alfred Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as the belief in one’s ability to succeed in certain situations. Bandura further explained that self-efficacy “is not a measure of the skills a person possesses but concerns the beliefs that they have about what they can do under different sets of conditions with whatever skills they possess (1997, p. 37). This refined definition is particularly relevant to the experiences described in this study. When women discussed their postsecondary aspirations they often talked about the differences that they found between the high school environment and the postsecondary environment. Ann said, “I always knew I could [pursue postsecondary education] if I was at all interested. I had done well as a child and was confident. I wasn’t confident about who I was but I was confident as a student.” The decision to leave high school had been based on social and not academic issues and there was an understanding among all of the women interviewed that the social mores of college were different and less oppressive than high school. In every one of the critical cases, the women who had decided to pursue postsecondary education expressed high levels of self-efficacy in regards to their education pursuits. As it was the high school environment that was perceived to have impeded their success and not their own abilities, they shared a sense of confidence in their ability to be successful in the postsecondary environment.

There is a large body of research on the importance of self-efficacy on academic achievement. In summary, research indicates that higher achieving and better adjusted individuals attribute their successes to internal causes and failures to external causes while lower achieving and poorly adjusted individuals attribute their failures to internal causes and successes to external causes (Rotter, 1954, 1966, 1975). This phenomenon is certainly reflected in the experiences described by the critical cases. Again, the perception that high school had not worked for them because of social (external) factors rather than (internal) factors such as academic ability or intelligence is important in understanding the role that self-efficacy played in the context of these women. Their self-reported sense of ability was an important contextual factor that enabled the critical cases studied for this research to decide successfully to pursue postsecondary education.

In addition to being an important contextual factor in the experiences of the women interviewed in this study, self-efficacy has been shown to support matriculation and persistence specifically in adult learners—further reinforcing the validity of self-efficacy as a contextual factor in this Grounded Theory model. Zeigler *et al.* (2006) demonstrated that adult women who scored higher on a self-efficacy self assessment were more likely to persist to completion in a GED program. Long (2001) also found that higher levels of self-efficacy were predictive of initial enrollment decisions. This finding is a strong validation of the inclusion of this core theme in the model.

None of the women interviewed for this research reported leaving high school and earning their GED credentials for academic reasons. They all reported leaving high school for social or personal reasons. This certainly has an impact on the high measures of self-efficacy found throughout the cases. However, even with this sample bias self-efficacy was so central to the experiences of the women who informed this study and also central to other models of adult development. Also important is the interaction of self-efficacy with the other contextual factors of this model to reinforce and augment the contextual forces that shaped the intervening conditions leading to the decision to pursue postsecondary education.

External Support

The women who shared their stories all received support from other people throughout their decision to pursue postsecondary education. This external support came in the form of moral support and practical guidance through the bureaucracy of the enrollment process. The role of external support in adult development and decision making can be seen in other models and in research on adult decision making and development. In career development literature, external support is positively correlated with career advancement and increased compensation (Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (2000) found similar positive impact from external support for adult learners. In an analysis of the NCSALL Adult Persistence

Study support from teachers, family, and other community members reinforced self-efficacy for adult learners in a way that was positively correlated with enrollment and retention (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 2007) .

One important source of support was from mentors. Mentors are defined as those who “accept personal responsibility as competent and trustworthy nonparental figures for the significant growth of other individuals” (Galbraith & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2000, p. 137). These mentors provided words of encouragement and practical advice. Throughout the critical cases, women remembered hearing that their mentors believed that they could be successful in postsecondary education. This type of encouragement has also been shown to have a positive impact on self-efficacy (Poon, 2006; Saffold, 2005). When talking about their experience in deciding to pursue postsecondary education, the women who reported receiving external support from mentors shared that this support was perceived to be highly influential in their decision.

The woman who informed this research also received support from their children. One commonly-expressed form of this support was in the example that their children set by successfully pursuing postsecondary education. There are many studies that have documented the unique struggles that first-generation college students face (Pike & Kuh, 2005a, 2005b). As these women saw their children successfully navigate the postsecondary environment, they found that they were no longer the first in their families to go through that process. The external support of children in increasing self-efficacy through words of encouragement and their modeling of successful postsecondary enrollment all support the decision to pursue postsecondary education in ways consistent with previous findings on the impact of external support on adult decision making and development (Fine, 1999; Pretty & Ward, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

External support interacted with the other contextual elements in ways that impacted the subsequent intervening conditions. For example, the provision of external support was identified through the research literature (Cross, 1981) as an important source of information on postsecondary opportunities. This was found as well in the experiences of the critical cases as an aid in identifying opportunities for postsecondary education—a direct connection to the intervening conditions identified in my Grounded Theory model. It was also a source of facilitation for the transformational learning that was put into motion through the disorienting dilemma of life change. External support has also been identified as a resource for exploring new sets of assumptions important in the aspiration to pursue postsecondary education (Alemprese, 2005). In these cases, many of the women shared the feeling of discovering that they could be successful students. The research literature reflects the findings from the critical cases. External support can come from a variety of sources and can have wide ranging impacts on decision making. External support also reinforces the other contextual factors in ways that provide more favorable intervening conditions that led to the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education for the critical cases that informed this study.

The similarities between the contextual elements in the proposed Grounded Theory model and phase changes in adult development models are consistent. One interpretation of this new model is that there is a unique combination of interacting factors in the contextual element that are reflecting something similar to Mezrow's transformation change requirements. It is certainly significant that, as described in the previous section, these themes have been shown to interact in powerful ways in previous models and studies. When looking at the core themes in the context element of this proposed model, the whole of the three factors might be greater than the sum of its parts. It is clear that the contextual factors interacted to create the circumstances in which the intervening conditions occurred that led to the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education.

Situating Intervening Conditions

The intervening conditions identified in the critical case studies resulted from the interaction of the contextual factors. The core themes that were organized into the contextual element tended to relate to theories of adult development as well as decision making. The intervening conditions were more often seen in theories that explore enrollment and activities specific to education. Aspiration and opportunity to pursue postsecondary education were the conditions that led directly to decision. Goal setting was another intervening condition that was identified across the cases. Some of the participants used short term goals to mark their progress through postsecondary education while others had only longer term more diffuse goals. The role of goal setting in the decision to pursue postsecondary education was one of the most difficult to understand elements of my Grounded Theory model.

Aspiration and Opportunity

In seems disingenuous to argue fiercely that these critical cases demonstrated that a person must want to do something before they do it. However, this is indeed the case. Aspiration as a precursor to action can be found throughout the psychological and economic literatures. The Grounded Theory model proposed in this dissertation demonstrates a role for aspiration in decision making that is consistent with existing models of participation for adults in education programs (Cross, 1981, 1999). The Grounded Theory model proposed by this research provides two important new additions to the idea of aspiration as a precursor to the decision to pursue postsecondary education. First, it is an explicit element in the model. Other models that have been used to describe adult's participation in educational activities have discussed the impact that contextual factors have had on aspiration without situating aspiration in the model. Additionally, placing aspiration in the intervening conditions that come between the contextual factors and the decision illustrate the important impact that contextual factors have on the intervening variables that must be in place for a successful decision. This represents a more holistic and comprehensive model than has previously been available.

Much like aspiration, opportunity to pursue an activity seems like an obvious precursor to pursuit. There are multiple models of decision making that demonstrate the importance of opportunity in decision making. This is particularly well illustrated in Maslow's model as the opportunities open as the hierarchy of needs is met. Again, the strength of this proposed model is that it demonstrates the explicit position of opportunity in the experience of women who successfully decided to pursue postsecondary education.

The impact that the contextual factors had on the intervening condition of opportunity becomes clear when looking across the critical cases. For example, had Alice not had the life changing events of divorce and relocation, she would not have had the opportunity to attend a community college because she did not have physical access to a school where she had been living and would not have qualified for financial aid. The changed context created the opportunity that allowed her successful decision to be made. For Colleen, the example of her child successfully navigating postsecondary education along with her divorce provided her with both the external support in the form of her child’s example and the life change of the divorce, which made pursuing postsecondary education a possibility. Without these contextual factors, she would not have had the same opportunity to make the decision to pursue her education.

Goal setting

All of the women whose experiences informed this research engaged in some form of goal setting before deciding to pursue postsecondary education. The difference found across the cases was the type of goal setting that took place. Some of the woman only had long-term goals such as the completion of a four-year undergraduate degree. Others had a series of short-term goals that they wanted to accomplish along the way.

The use of short-term goals for the critical cases that constructed this Grounded Theory was a factor in continued successful enrollment toward the completion of both long- and short-term goals. There has been much discussion of goal setting and adult learning (Alemprese, 2005; Commings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999; Goto & Martin, 2009;) with results that point in many different and sometimes conflicting directions. Some of the research indicates that difficult goals are positively related to achievement. For example, goal setting theory was developed by Locke and Latham (1990) using data from over 400 laboratory and field studies. It was further refined to include subsequent research (Locke & Latham 2002, 2006). Lock and Latham's goal setting theory states that,

> So long as a person is committed to the goal, has the requisite ability to attain it, and does not have conflicting goals, there is a positive, linear relationship between goal difficulty and task performance. (2006, p. 265)

Four moderators have been found to impact goal setting (a) goal commitment, which if further enhanced by self-efficacy and viewing the goal as important; (b) the complexity of the task in which it is harder to fully comprehend the steps needed to complete complex tasks; (c) situational constraints with goals that require unavailable resources weighing against goal realization; (d) feedback that allows individuals to track progress (Lock & Latham, 2006). Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (2000) also noted the importance of measurable progress in goal setting for adult learners. Tey founs, "Since goals are important supports to persistence, adult students must make progress toward reaching their goals. They must also be able to measure that progress. (p. 3) In that same study, Comings, Parrella and Soricone found that short term persisters had clearly defined short term goals that motivated the learners until the goal was reached. Long-term persisters in community based programs tended to lack these specific goals focusing instead on broader transformational goals. These same longer-range goals were found to be predictors of completion in traditional college students (Sedlacek, 2004).

There are a number of possible interpretations of the findings of this Grounded Theory study in relation to goal setting. Short term goal setting was cited as an important part of the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education for those who persisted to completion ore were still enrolled. Those women who did not mention short term goals had also neither persisted to completion nor were they still enrolled. It could be that the postsecondary environment is different than other adult education settings. The first difference that comes to mind is that participation in postsecondary education often has more of a financial cost than other adult education programs. It could be that the cost of participation toward the long-term goals was simply too great to be sustained. Adults in postsecondary programs are often having to take on debt to finance their participation in ways that do not occur in community settings. It is possible that the weight of the cost was too great to be sustained without significant feedback along the way that the pursuit was successful. Alternatively, it could be that the postsecondary environment does not offer enough feedback as to successful progress toward long-term goals. The lack of measurable progress through a 4-year degree program might have left the women without short term goals without a feeling of measurable progress that has been identified as essential to harnessing the power of goal setting for adult learners.

Situating the Decision and Subsequent Steps

The decision to pursue postsecondary education for women who earned GED credentials grew directly out of the intervening conditions of aspiration and opportunity and was also influenced by goal setting. This decision was the result of the interaction of complex contextual factors along with the intervening conditions that made the decision possible. Although the women who informed my critical cases all had a different experience deciding to pursue postsecondary education, differences were reflected in their different contexts and intervening conditions. In every case, the decision to pursue postsecondary education was described as positive and it resulted in concrete steps toward enrollment. These steps resulted in successful matriculation that took the women who participated in this research beyond the postsecondary achievements of many of their peers who pursue postsecondary education. The women who described their decisions all successfully completed more than one full year of postsecondary coursework, which is more that 75% of GED holders who do not enroll beyond their first year (Murnane, Willitt, and Boudett, 1997). The unique combination of factors and elements that made up the decisions that informed this model represent decisions that were considered successful across all of the critical cases.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

The core themes that populate this model are entirely consistent with previous findings on adult development and decision making. This model also adds a few new perspectives to the process of deciding to pursue postsecondary education for one specific group of students. This model is grounded in critical cases that were provided by the experiences of a multicultural, multigenerational group of women—a far cry from the population of White males that formed the basis of many of the decision models cited in this chapter. Additionally, this model demonstrates not only the importance of contextual factors on the successful decision but also the reinforcing and interacting nature of these contextual factors in creating the conditions under which a successful decision can be made. The last thing that this model adds to the conversation on adult development and decision making is the inclusion of the action steps that come directly from the decision but precede successful enrollment. These elements complete the experience of the women who shared their stories and informed this model. The visual representation of these interacting elements in the proposed model captures the Grounded Theory of the decision to pursue postsecondary education for women with GED credentials.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this research. Every effort was made to mitigate the limitations described. However, every research method and project has a set of unavoidable limitations inherent in both methodology and context. Although Grounded Theory research is predicated on an approach to data collection that requires that the researcher enter into data collection without preconceived notions about the nature of the phenomenon in question, it is possible that there are undiscovered biases that could skew the perspective of the researcher and bias data collection in favor of these preconceived ideas. Every effort was made to eliminate this bias through the rigorous process of coding, memoing and comparing any emergent theories to the actual data being collected. The sample used for this research was biased in an unexpected way. All of the critical cases were woman who had left high school and taken the GED exams for nonacademic reasons. They had also been somewhat confident students, most of whom had left high school for social reasons. Since thousands of women leave high school and take their GED exams, the unique nature of this sample must be considered when discussing their subsequent success in postsecondary pursuits. The interaction between the interviewees and researcher could also have produced a unique environment in which certain aspects of the phenomenon in question become more salient than others due to the dynamics of the interviewing process and not necessarily because of their importance. Again, the importance of rigorously applying Grounded Theory methodology including a careful review of relevant literature and the comparison of findings to the existent body of knowledge on the experience is an important.

Implications for Practice

Grounded Theory of women with GED credentials deciding to pursue postsecondary education model illuminates a number of possible interventions that could provide support to women who might be in an ideal position to pursue postsecondary education. For each of the contextual elements and intervening conditions that lead up to a successful decision to pursue postsecondary education there are possible implications for practitioners. Support and informed encouragement from ABE program personnel was in one case crucial in the decision-making process.

Context Interventions

Given the centrality of life change in both the experiences of the seven critical cases and the research literature, it is possible that effective outreach could be made to women who are in periods of life transition. Many communities have low-cost legal services for women going through divorces. This might be a good location for outreach from local community colleges that offer postsecondary programming to adults. Providing information about the opportunity to participate in postsecondary education during a woman’s life change period could result in successful matriculation for some women who are not currently aware of the opportunities.

The women who shared their stories all expressed the important of external support in their successful decision to pursue postsecondary education.

In order to make this available to more women who have their GED credentials, community organizations could offer mentorship programs that pair women who have been successful in their postsecondary pursuits with those who might be considering their options. Because of the role that mentorship can play in reinforcing self-efficacy, this could be particularly effective intervention in reinforcing the contextual factors needed for a successful decision.

Intervening Conditions Interventions

In order to ensure that women with GED credentials are able to aspire to postsecondary enrollment, it is important that they know what their options are. Providing professional development of the process of applying for financial aid and enrollment to ABE instructors, social workers and even community-based law professionals would be one way to ensure that women would know what to aspire to and what those opportunities might be.

In order to have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary programs, some women might benefit from distance education programs that allow them to take classes while working and balancing family demands. Programs that financially support adult learners are another way that postsecondary institutions can help individuals to be able to enroll successfully in postsecondary programming.

Stackable credentials are another intervention that could impact the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education. “The [stackable credential] framework enables low-wage and educationally under-prepared [adults] to access a continuum of education and job training opportunities that lead to the attainment of in-demand occupational credentials.” (Leland, 2009, p.

1) Stackable credentials could provide the short-term goal feedback that lets adults know that they are making progress toward their goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research proposed a model of the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education for women with earned GED credentials. This is a group that has been underserved by research on postsecondary enrollment and there are many possibilities for future research on the topic.

1. A quantitative test should be developed to measure the ability of this model to predict the successful decision to pursue postsecondary education. The model proposed in this research could also be tested against the experiences of other populations to measure its ability to describe the successful decision making process for a wider variety of learners.
2. It would also be interesting to see if this decision model looks different for women who hold GED credentials but who did not complete at least one year of postsecondary enrollment. Identifying the salient differences in these two groups could help to support continued enrollment for all.
3. The last recommendation is to look at the role of short-term goal setting for adult students and its effect on persistence. Are there specific and easily executed activities that advisers or instructors could work on with students to impact persistence? How can short-term goals be built into longer programs in meaningful ways for adult learners?

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Apendix A

Language Used to Recruit Participants

"I would like to invite you to participate in a research study being conducted by Emily Goff a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. This study is titled: Toward a Theory of Commitment for Adult Women Making Their Initial Decision to Pursue Postsecondary Education, looking at the experiences of women who hold GEDs in choosing to return to postsecondary education

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of adult women as they choose to enter postsecondary education after having received a GED. Understanding this experience will allow postsecondary institutions to better understand and, hopefully, better serve these students.

When this research is published all identifying information and names will be changed your individual responses will NOT identify you. I hope that you will consider giving your consent to participate by contacting Emily Goff”

Apendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval

University of Minnesota Mail - 1006E84459 - PI Goff - IRB - Exempt Study Notification
Page 1 of 1

Emily Goff <goff0009@umn.edu>
1006E84459 - PI Goff - IRB - Exempt Study Notification
1 message
irb@umn.edu <irb@umn.edu> Tue, Jun 29, 2010 at 9:46 AM To: goff0009@umn.edu
TO : parkx002@umn.edu, goff0009@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1006E84459

Principal Investigator: Emily Goff

Title(s): Toward a Theory of Engagement for Adult Women Making Their Initial Decision to Pursue Postsecondary Education

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This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota RSPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter. This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study?s expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at http://eresearch.umn.edu/ to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic, but will give us guidance on what areas are showing improvement and what areas we need to focus on:

https://umsurvey.umn.edu/index.php?sid=36122&lang=um

10/12/2011
https://mail.google.com/mail/?tf=1&ui=2&ik=21aa67578a&view=pt&q=IRB&search=qu . . .