ABSTRACT

Tony Dustin Walston, TRANSITION FROM ADULT EDUCATION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION (Under the direction of Dr. Crystal Chambers). Department of Educational Leadership, March 2019.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) that was signed into law in July 2014 by President Barack Obama gave a new identity to adult education programs across the United States. The legislation propelled adult education programs into the college arena like never before. No longer were programs allowed to simply just focus on a high school credential. Instruction that exposed students to career development and real-life application became important. Helping students think about their futures in terms of education and employment also became an important framework for adult education programs.

With all of these new considerations, programs across the state of North Carolina began to restructure, redesign, and revisit their mission and vision statements. From these growing pains, programs have continually been searching for the right methods and practices that will position them to be compliant with WIOA. One of the biggest challenges is transitioning students that earn their high school credential into college programs. The Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program at Lenoir Community College (LCC) produces high school equivalency (HSE/GED) graduates each year, but most never enroll into college programs and take that next step to further their education.

The purpose of this study was to determine strategies and best practices that encourage students in the TCS program at LCC to transition into postsecondary education opportunities upon completing their HSE/GED. This action research study design involved implementing a 12-week pilot program that included three classrooms and 23 participants. The participants in the pilot program received contextualized instruction, participated in weekly goal-setting and

advising appointments, and had an opportunity for co-enrollment into short-term training programs while working towards their HSE/GED. The findings of this study show an association between the interventions and the participants' educational outcomes.

TRANSITION FROM ADULT EDUCATION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Tony Dustin Walston

March, 2019

TRANSITION FROM ADULT EDUCATION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

by

Tony Dustin Walston

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF DISSERTATION:_____
Crystal Chambers, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
David Siegel, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
Marjorie Ringler, EdD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
Jay Carraway, EdD

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

_____
Marjorie Ringler, EdD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL:

_____
Paul Gemperline, PhD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

On July 22, 2014, President Barack Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) into law with strong support from Congress. This law reauthorized the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), which was federal legislation created to align the needs of employers with job seekers (Campbell & Love, 2016). WIA created one-stop employment centers, some of which were housed at local community colleges. These one-stop centers offered an avenue where job seekers could gather information and resources on job training, employment services, postsecondary education, and much more. The idea was to create a one-stop shop where individuals could be better informed of what the local workforce needs were in the communities where they lived.

Even though WIOA primarily comprises workforce policy, education providers are essential to developing the skilled workforce that employers need. Community colleges have a large role to play in creating pathways of learning that will enable employers to continually receive a pipeline of trained and skilled employees. Community colleges provide an open-door enrollment policy, low cost tuition, and flexible local governance that allow these institutions to be one of the most adaptable agencies to their surrounding workforce (Campbell & Love, 2016). Although community colleges have offered workforce training opportunities for decades under WIA, WIOA emphasizes the importance of industry-recognized postsecondary credentials and key partnerships between several local and federal agencies to enhance services and resources to individuals and employers.

Community colleges play an important role in the alignment of educational services to workforce needs. Local Workforce Development Boards, regional boards that oversee

workforce needs in specific regions, are required to have a representative from a nearby educational institution. These representatives, which are usually from local community colleges, provide information on the institution's valuable network of employer resources, which include adult education programs (Campbell & Love, 2016).

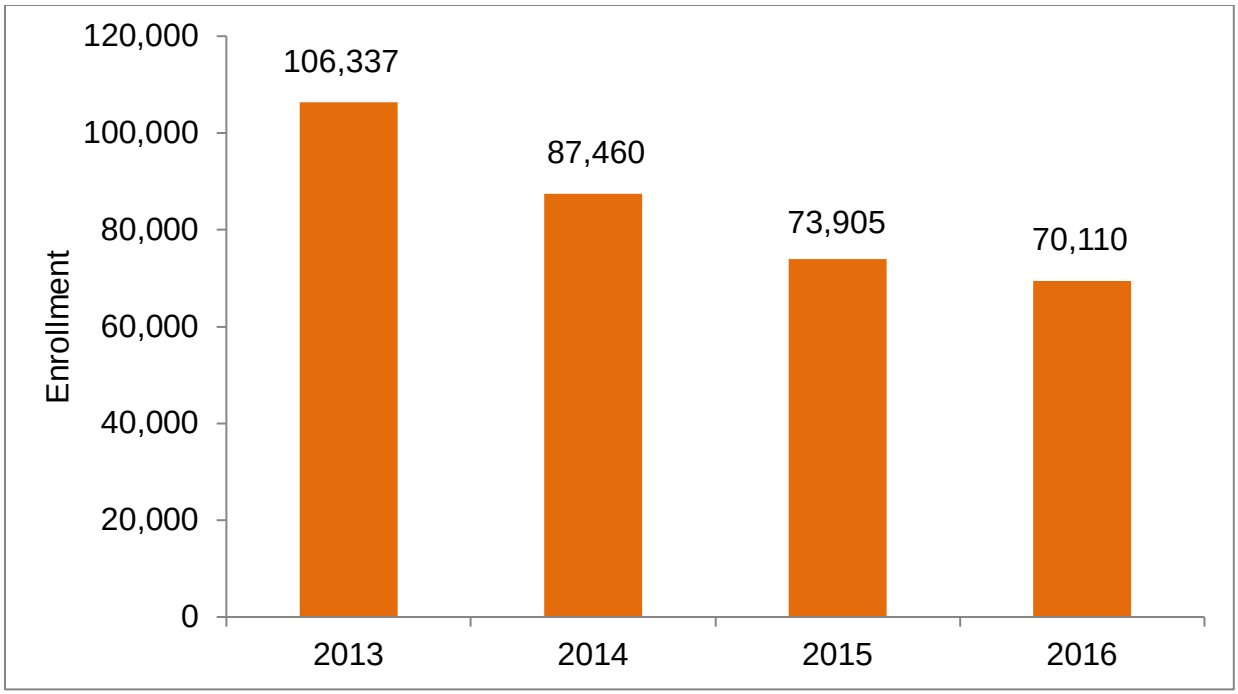
The main source of federal funding for adult education programs is the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) that was enacted in 1998. Adult education programs provide educational services to students who lack high school credentials or lack basic reading, math, and language skills that are necessary for employment and independent living (McCann, 2017). WIOA reauthorizes and expands the services provided under AEFLA. One of the key provisions in the reauthorization of AEFLA is to "provide support services to promote persistence in and completion of adult education and transitions to postsecondary education and training or employment" (CLASP, 2013, p. 32). This means placing intentional emphasis on not just high school credential attainment, but advanced education and training that will lead to employment with a sustainable wage. This provision has considerable impacts on adult education programs in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) where there are consistently only a small number of students that ever transition beyond adult education programs into postsecondary education or other training.

The NCCCS is the third largest network of community colleges in the entire country. The system is comprised of 58 community colleges and any citizen in North Carolina is within a thirty-minute drive from one of these institutions. This interwoven network of colleges has a large adult education program that includes students who are attempting to complete their high school credential, students with disabilities, and students desiring to learn the English language. An issue that is continually pressing upon community colleges is how to move this population of

students into postsecondary education or training so that they have the skills and credentials necessary to seek gainful employment (CLASP, 2013, p. 32). The enrollment trends of adult education programs in the NCCCS for the past four years are displayed in Figure 1. Although enrollment has been on a steady decline in recent years, there is still a significant number of students who enroll in adult education programs across the state of North Carolina from year to year.

The NCCCS uses the National Reporting System (NRS) to determine how many students transition from adult education programs into postsecondary education and/or training programs. To enter this transition cohort, a student must have a high school diploma at entry, receive a high school credential while enrolled, or be enrolled in a career pathway program. A student must also exit the adult education program within the program year (July 1 – June 30). After students separate from the program, data is collected to determine if any of the students enrolled in a curriculum course or program. As displayed in Table 1, there is a relatively small number of students who met the criteria to enter the transition cohort for 2015 and for 2016. For 2015, only 5,058 enrolled into postsecondary education or continuing education (training) courses. Thus, out of 73,905 total students enrolled in adult education programs in the NCCCS for 2015, only 5,058 or 14.6% successfully transitioned. The numbers are only slightly better for 2016. In 2016, 3,464 students enrolled into postsecondary education or continuing education programs (training) courses. Therefore, out of 70,710 students enrolled in adult education programs in the NCCCS for 2016, only 3,464 or 20.4% successfully transitioned.

The adult education program at LCC is referred to as the Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program. In Figure 2, enrollment trends for TCS over the past four years are displayed. Overall, the TCS program has seen a decrease in enrollment in recent years.



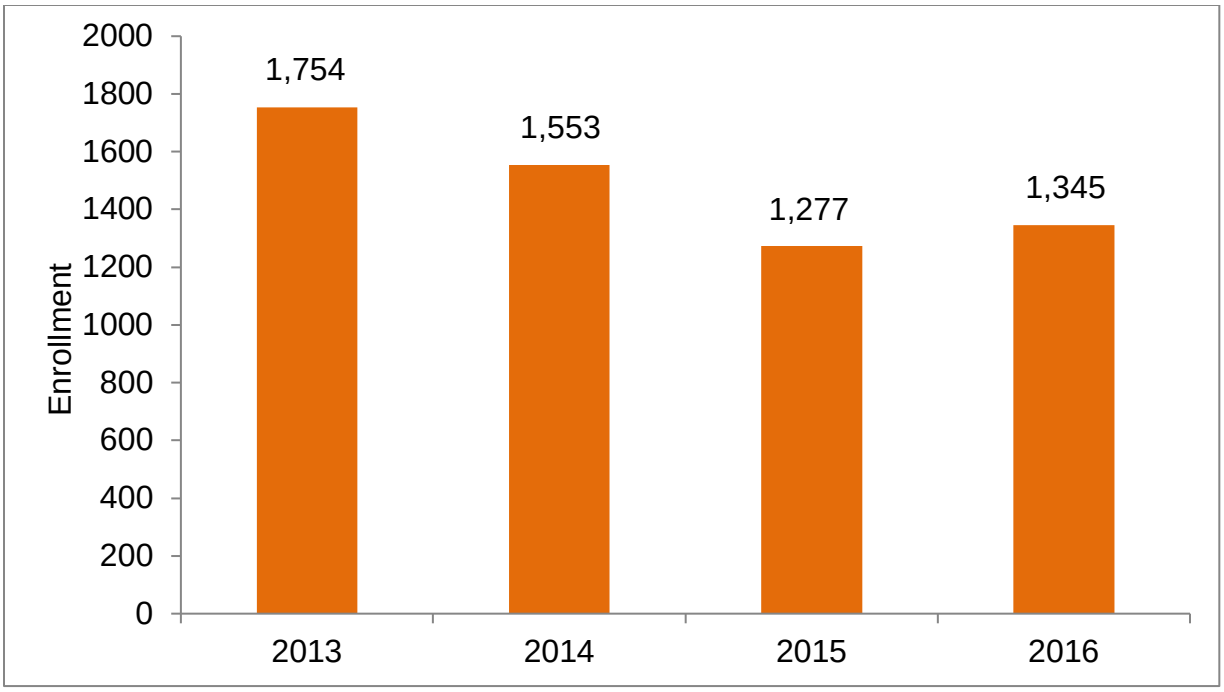
Note. This figure illustrates enrollment trends in adult education programs in the North Carolina Community College System.

Figure 1. North Carolina Community College System adult education enrollment trends 2013-2016.

Table 1

North Carolina Adult Education Transition Cohort Data (2015-2016)

Core Follow-up Outcome Measure	Number of Students with Goal	Number of Students Achieving Goal
Entered Postsecondary Education or Training (2016)	13,334	3,464
Entered Postsecondary Education or Training (2015)	14,244	5,058



Note. This figure illustrates enrollment trends in the Transitional and Career Studies program at Lenoir Community College.

Figure 2. Transitional and career studies adult education enrollment trends 2013-2016.

Table 2 displays the number of students in TCS successfully transitioned in 2015 and 2016. In 2015, 35 students transitioned into postsecondary education or continuing education (training) programs. Thus, out of 1,277 total students enrolled, only 35 or 2.7% successfully transitioned. In 2016, 42 students transitioned into postsecondary education or continuing education (training) programs. Thus, out of 1,345 total students enrolled, only 42 or 3.1% successfully transitioned.

Problem Statement

LCC serves a tri-county service area that includes Lenoir, Greene, and Jones counties. The main campus of the institution is in Lenoir County, where most of the students are served. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), 22.7% of individuals in Lenoir County live below the poverty level as of 2016. This is a significant percentage in a county where approximately 57,307 people live. In a 2017 American Community Survey, sponsored by the U.S. Census Bureau, 31.5% of individuals 25 years of age or older held a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of educational attainment. The survey also found that 35.1% of Lenoir County residents have some college, or an associate's degree and 13.7% have a bachelor's degree or higher. Lastly, the survey found that 17.1% have less than a high school education (Towncharts, 2018).

The extensive amount of poverty in the college's service area, particularly Lenoir County, and the resulting low college enrollment and degree attainment rates, lend extensive evidence to Bronfenbrenner's ecological-system theory (Reynolds & Ou, 2014). The framework of this theory states that college attendance is a sociopsychological phenomenon rather than an intellectual achievement. Thus, individual behaviors and decisions are influenced by the presence of others and by the environments of the communities in which they reside.

Table 2

Transitional and Career Studies Program Transition Cohort Data (2015-2016)

Core Follow-up Outcome Measure	Number of Students with Goal	Number of Students Achieving Goal
Entered Postsecondary Education or Training (2016)	126	42 (33.3%)
Entered Postsecondary Education or Training (2015)	90	35 (38.8%)

Environmental factors emerge as the more dominant influence of whether an individual attends college over academic aptitude. According to a U.S. Department of Education study completed in 2003, low socioeconomic status Americans are less likely to complete high school, enroll in college, and obtain a postsecondary credential than their middle or high socioeconomic status peers. Therefore, poverty has a significant influence on the decisions individuals make regarding completing high school and transition into college. This theory supports LCC's and the state's data regarding the low percentage of students completing their GED and enrolling into postsecondary education.

Educational attainment beyond the high school level is imperative in helping individuals lift their families out of poverty. Bauer, Kramer, Myhra, and Zuiker (2016) suggests that human capital theory, with an emphasis on personal investment in postsecondary education and training, is a direct link to bringing an individual or family out of poverty. The study showed that postsecondary education significantly improved the economic status of families in poverty, particularly families of one-parent households. Education give an opportunity for individuals to change their socioeconomic status and to rise above and out of their poverty-stricken communities. Thus, elevating the possibility that their succeeding generations will not experience the same hardships and will be perpetuated into an environment that embraces and values high school completion and college enrollment.

Not only does Lenoir County have a high poverty rate, it is also considered to be a rural community. Rural communities have their own distinguishing characteristics, including a substantial disconnection between middle class residents and low socioeconomic status residents. Jackson and Schafft (2010) note that middle class residents tend to view low-income groups with distrust, even doubting their competence. Although they may value supporting the children of

low-income groups to help improve their current circumstances, the lack of support given by the community at large does not improve the circumstances of poverty communities within the larger rural community. Thus, rural communities have a connection with poverty.

Guiding theories and research supports the need of a strategic intervention to counter the problem of poverty in the Lenoir County area. As the guiding principles suggest, one way combat this overarching problem is to concentrate on the area of education. The goal of this study is to address programmatically why there is too little transition to postsecondary education within the TCS program at LCC and to create a program that will improve the number of students transitioning over time.

Significance of the Study

Poverty in rural communities are debilitating factors that hinder students from transitioning to postsecondary education once they earn their high school credential. As a response to this problem, at an institutional level, LCC developed a new strategic plan that was unveiled to the faculty and staff at LCC in June 2017. Priority 3.3 B of LCC's Strategic Plan states that the college should "identify and implement strategies to improve the matriculation and success of TCS students into workforce development courses and curriculum programs" (LCC, 2017, p. 11). This priority initiative falls under goal three of the strategic plan, which focuses on creating a quality student experience. Goal three includes a commitment to "introducing the full college experience with an inclusive and well-rounded support system…to reduce barriers to success by expanding our support for students from diverse backgrounds, from interest through completion to transfer or employment" (LCC, 2017, p. 11). The leadership of LCC recognizes the value and need of investing into the students of the TCS program. Earning a high school credential is the foundation for postsecondary education and training programs. If the institution

intervenes and strategically supports the students in the TCS program and aligns efforts to inform and assist students with transition, 3.3 B priority initiative may be able to be achieved, which has the possibility of not only improving the transition rate of students that is reported to the state and federal government, but also impacting poverty within the community.

The college's strategic plan addresses a current problem at LCC. There are not enough students that earn their HSE/GED in the TCS program at LCC that transition into postsecondary education or short-term training programs. The purpose of this study was to determine strategies and best practices that encourage students in the TCS program at LCC to transition into postsecondary education opportunities upon completing their HSE/GED. This action research study design involved implementing a 12-week pilot program that included three classrooms and 23 participants. The participants in the pilot program received contextualized instruction, participated in weekly goal-setting and advising appointments, and had an opportunity for co-enrollment into short-term training programs while working towards their HSE/GED. These interventions addressed four research questions: (1) How does contextualized learning experiences and contextualized instructional strategies motivate a student to pursue postsecondary education or training programs? (2) How does goal-setting help a student to earn a high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education? (3) How does on-going advising help to mitigate barriers and guide students on a pathway to transition once they earn their high school credential? (4) How do co-enrollment opportunities motivate students to complete their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education opportunities?

Overview of the Methodology

Although research describes a correlation between poverty, rural areas, and low rates of transition from high school credential attainment to postsecondary education, it is important to

gauge and analyze specific reasons why students are not transitioning at Lenoir Community College (LCC). Specifically, this study will help to gain an understanding of students in the Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program are not transitioning once they complete their high school credential and will make recommendations from the findings of this study that will hopefully increase the number of students that transition into postsecondary education. The study involved a collaborative action research approach within the communities of Lenoir County with students who have earned their high school credential in the TCS program. Sagor describes collaborative action research as a process that allows teachers: (1) to improve student learning, (2) to improve their own practice, (3) to contribute to the development of their own profession, and (4) to overcome the isolation commonly experiences by classroom teachers (1992, p. 1). Collaborative action research is an authentic type of research that allowed the TCS program to focus on a specific problem and to work as a team to improve student outcomes.

The first phase of the study included organizing a focus group to include students that did not transition to postsecondary education or training and an additional focus group to include students that did transition to postsecondary education. Morgan (2010) acknowledges the importance of conducting focus groups instead of one-on-one interviews when completing research. Students with similar cultural backgrounds and common experiences can draw and pull information from each other in a way that may not happen when they are alone. The commonality everyone has in terms of their experiences in the TCS program makes the interactions between the students important. For example, if one survey question consistently generates lengthy dialogue between the group and another question produces brief responses with few connections within the group, there is every reason to analyze why those questions lead to such different responses. When a group of students all show similar responses when

simultaneously being posed with the same questions, there is value in looking at why the responses were so unanimous or divergent. Also, group interactions may cause students to think about their own experiences that were triggered by other responses in a way that would not happen alone. Students will be posed with questions to specifically determine what barriers prevented students from transitioning and what types of programmatic support systems could be put in place to facilitate more transition. After this data is analyzed, phase two will include developing a pilot program in conjunction with research-based strategies to assist students in the TCS program with earning their high school credential and to seamlessly transition into postsecondary education. One may ask why focus groups are being conducted if strategies have already been framed for the pilot program. All the students in the focus groups were students in the TCS program. Many of these students have received instruction from the instructors that will be part of the pilot program. Thus, the value of the data collected in the focus groups may offer authentic interventions that can be implemented alongside the research-based strategies to make the pilot program even more effective and successful in terms of student success. Lastly, phase three will include generating recommendations that can be implemented program-wide to increase the number of students in the transition cohort that enroll into postsecondary education or training programs once they earn their high school credential.

Based on data that includes the number of students that have entered the transition cohort at LCC within the previous two program years, an average of 36% of students are transitioning into postsecondary education. The overall improvement goal is that the findings from this study will generate recommendations that can be implemented program-wide that would yield an increase of approximately 14% over the next two years, to bring the number of students in the transition cohort that are transitioning to 50%.

Limitations and Assumptions of the Study

Based on theory and studies, a correlation exists between poverty in rural areas and whether students enroll into postsecondary. Based on data at the local level (i.e. LCC) and at the state level (i.e. NCCCS), it is also apparent that there is a significant gap between students enrolled in adult education and the number of students who complete and transition into postsecondary education or training programs. However, there is very little data on the reasons why students are not enrolling into higher education programs. A goal of this study is to glean a better understanding of the barriers are. I am Director of the TCS program at LCC, so there is an opportunity for bias based on my own assumptions and interpretations of the effectiveness of the program I lead, as well as the success of adult education programs in general within the state of North Carolina.

The students that will be participating in this study were selected by using a purposive sampling method. This homogenous sample of TCS students will all be pursuing their high school credential and will be selected for the purpose of determining if specific interventions improve their likelihood of completing their high school credential and then transitioning to postsecondary education. Because the students in this study were only selected from one program area at one college, the results cannot be exclusively applied to all adult education students across all 58 community colleges in North Carolina. However, all adult education programs follow similar guidelines set forth by the NCCCS and the state and federal government. Thus, all students must qualify for adult education under the same conditions. Therefore, there is a level of consistency and uniformity in the type of student that can be enrolled in an adult education program in North Carolina. For example, to qualify for enrollment in any adult education program, a student must be 16 years old, lack a high school credential, or

show a deficiency in math and/or reading on a standardized placement test. Although it is difficult to make generalizations from a purposive sampling method to all 58 community colleges due to the relatively small number of participants, the goal of this student was to improve the TCS program at LCC (Huberman, Miles, & Saldana, 2014).

Although LCC is in a rural community with a significant poverty rate, other community colleges are in thriving, urbanized areas. Thus, the strategies implemented in the TCS program at LCC cannot necessarily be generalized to be used where student demographics and economic development are varied and unique across the service areas of different college community colleges.

Finally, this study was conducted over a period of three months through the implementation of a specific pilot program. Time can always be a significant factor in terms of limitations to a study. The time it takes a student to complete their high school credential varies from one student to another student. The type of students served in an adult education program changes over time as well. For example, recent high school dropouts typically enroll in late summer or fall because of high school graduation in June. Students that realize they will not be graduating on time will drop out and enroll in adult education programs shortly after high school graduation. Typically, younger students at the high school age do not enroll as frequently at other times during the year. However, the goal of an adult education program in serving any student is relatively consistent and does not vary. Adult education programs serve students to help them improve their academic skills, to help them earn their high school credential, and to help transition to other advanced educational opportunities. Due to multiple factors being used to chart student progress toward transition in this study and the consistent goals of the TCS program for any student, time did not significantly affect the outcomes of this study.

Organization of the Study

The study began by looking at graduation records of students from the TCS program at LCC from 2017 to present to identify potential participants for the study. Potential participants were identified in two separate categories. One category represented individuals that earned their high school credential and did not pursue postsecondary education. The second category included students that earned their high school credential that did enroll in postsecondary education. The goal was to identify 15 to 20 volunteers for each category. Focus groups were scheduled for each category of students were asked a prescribed list of questions to identify the reasons they either did or did not pursue postsecondary education. The data from these interviews were analyzed to develop a pilot program to implement with current students in the TCS program that will guide them in completing their high school credential and seamlessly transition into postsecondary education.

The goal of this stud was to develop a succinct program of strategies for approximately 25 students that can be replicated throughout the TCS program to improve the percentage of students that enter postsecondary education in the transition cohort at LCC annually from approximately 36% to 50%. This study included creating a successful pilot program that will later be implemented throughout the entire TCS program to improve this percentage over the next two years.

In order to work toward this goal, it is important to understand the student population within the TCS program. Many students in this program live in rural locations surrounded by poverty. These influences have an impact on their educational progress and success. However, there are a multitude of other barriers that derails their motivations, goals, and aspirations. An overarching theme that continues to surface within many frameworks and theories is the premise

that a student's development is highly influenced by their immediate environment. Socioeconomic status, race, and family experiences all play a part in determining the way a student prioritizes their education, persists in their education, and how much they value enrolling into college. This study attempted to prove that research-based interventions implemented within the TCS program has the potential to counter these challenges and cultivate a new environment that will spur student success.

Definitions

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) – Federal legislation signed into law by President Barack Obama that is designed to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market

Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) – Legislation signed into law in 1998 that serves as the main source of federal support for adult basic and literacy education programs for adults that lack basic academic skills, a high school diploma, or an understanding of the English language.

Adult Basic Education – A program that serves students ages 16 and over who are not enrolled in school that want to improve their academic skills and work towards earning a high school credential (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018).

Postsecondary Education – A reference to any education or training beyond high school credential attainment (YourDictionary, 2018).

Socioeconomic Status – The social standing or class of an individual or group that can be measured in terms of income level or occupation (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Poverty – The state of one that lacks an acceptable amount of money or possessions based on defined social criteria (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Earning a high school credential in adult education programs is not an easy task for many students. Many of these students find it even more challenging to transition to postsecondary education or training programs after they earn their high school credential. Most employment that offers a sustainable wage and opportunities for advancement require some postsecondary education or advanced training beyond high school completion. Advanced education has the potential to lift individuals and families out of poverty and on to a more productive and successful life. However, a high prevalence of poverty in rural communities tend to work against students desiring to achieve these goals. The social and cultural influences that impact the lives of students each and every day tend to only present additional challenges and barriers that impact the matriculation rate of adult education students into postsecondary education. However, there are promising best practices that some programs have established and implemented to help students transition in a systematic way while simultaneously mitigating the barriers that impede their academic progress. In this chapter I will explore how the WIOA federal legislation has placed a demand on adult education programs across the country to transform their current practices so that students are positioned to earn their high school credential and to transition into postsecondary education. This transformation includes strategic supports that can potentially counter the negative influences of a student's home environment.

State Context

North Carolina currently offers adult education programs in all 58 community colleges. The state also recognizes two pathways for earning a high school equivalency diploma to individuals that are 16 years of age or older, which are the Adult High School (AHS) Diploma and the GED.

High School Credential Pathways

The AHS Diploma is earned by completing course credits in an adult education program that was not earned in a traditional high school or homeschool setting. AHS Diploma programs in North Carolina require at least the minimum requirements set for graduation set by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), which are 22 credits. Each community college, in conjunction with their respective local education agencies, can require additional credits. The AHS Diploma is issued by a community college and is signed by the K-12 public school system superintendent. The AHS Diploma program has essentially remained unchanged over the last several years. However, there have been significant changes with GED in the last four years.

In 2014, the GED underwent one of the biggest changes since its inception in 1942. The change was spurred on by the overwhelming realization that an adult's future depends on more than a high school education (Gewertz, 2011). Several forces were at work that brought about these changes. One of the most compelling factors is a labor market that is increasingly looking for individuals that have postsecondary training and the dismal outlook of success with college remediation. President Barack Obama urged policymakers to focus on the estimated 40 million Americans what had not finished high school to ensure that many of them were able to earn their high school credential to further their education.

The new 2014 GED assessment includes a complete revamping of content that reflect the rigor of current high school standards. All the subject-matter tests were transferred from a pencil-and paper option to now include a computer-based option, which reflects a push toward the realization that all individuals need 21st century skills to be successful in the digital age that surrounds nearly every avenue of an individual's life (Gewertz, 2011). One of the most significant changes was a repositioning of the GED from a terminal credential to one that

logically leads to a step toward postsecondary training. The new assessment now includes two passing thresholds. There is a traditional passing score that denotes high school equivalency and a higher passing score that designates college and career readiness. Community colleges were also encouraged to use a student's college and career readiness scores in lieu of having to take the college placement test, which is a requirement for entrance into curriculum programs. With a national push for dropouts to enter postsecondary education and training programs, it is only logical that adult basic education (ABE) programs across the country would also embrace this challenge.

The Legal Context

The new direction for GED testing was a direct influence of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) that was passed by the United States Congress in 2014. This act reauthorized federal funding for ABE programs, which includes workforce training and postsecondary education opportunities for adult literacy, high school equivalency (GED) programs, and programs for students learning the English language (Jacobson, 2017). One of the key changes in the WIOA legislation is a focus on transition from ABE to postsecondary education, with an integrated approach of services and support. The reason for the focus on transitions is a realization by the Department of Education that completion of high school is not an end to itself, but simply a means to further opportunities for economic self-sufficiency.

Tyler (2003) in his assessment of the economic benefits of obtaining a GED ascertains that the main positive impact is that it increases access to postsecondary education or training, which in turn increases earnings. Earning a GED allows for high school dropouts to pursue advanced educational opportunities when they otherwise would not meet the requirements for entrance into higher education programs of study. Tyler also affirms the focus of transitions in

the WIOA legislation several years before its existence. Tyler notes that the focus of the GED as an *end product* is misplaced and that the credential should be viewed as a milestone along a journey of acquiring useful skills and education. However, data over the last several years indicate that many students who earn a GED credential do not make the connection to postsecondary education.

Ewert (2012) compiled a U.S. Census report that indicated staggering data on the differences between students who received a high school diploma verses students who earned a GED certificate. The report notes that in 2008-2009,

> While 73% of those who received a high school diploma went on to complete at least some postsecondary education, less than half (43%) of GED certificate recipients did so. Furthermore, only 5% earned a bachelor's degree or higher. In contrast, of high school diploma holders, 33% earned this level of education. (Ewert, 2012, p. 13)

There are several factors that could explain this large spread in data. One of the factors could be the rising cost of college (Jacobson, 2017). However, with the availability of financial aid and other loan opportunities, this does not appear to be a significant reason. Many scholars have become critical of ABE programs in recent years and contribute program structure and focus as a reason for the disparity between GED completion and transition into postsecondary education. Jacobson notes that historically, ABE programs did not encourage rigorous, intensive programming designed to help students transition to higher levels of education. However, it is explicit in WIOA that helping students move into postsecondary education is a priority and that ABE programs are now expected to ensure that students gain the necessary skills to make that transition successfully.

The WIOA legislation has a particular emphasis on supporting low-income adults and youth, particularly those who live in poverty. Research supports the fact that education and training can lift families out of poverty. However, for disadvantaged youth and adults, improved economic opportunity depends on their ability to access training and services that prepares them for college transition (Bird, Foster, & Ganzglass, 2014). Evaluations from various job training providers find that "a postsecondary education, particularly a degree or industry-recognized credential related to jobs in demand, is the most important determinant of differences in workers' lifetime earnings and incomes" (Bird et al., 2014, p. 6). Bird et al. (2014) also note education and training increases a family's finances and even helps parents stay employed so that they can maximize their wage earnings. What is perhaps the highest tradeoff of a rigorous ABE program under WIOA is that the success of today's students in transitioning to higher education will not only impact their lives but succeeding generations to come. In a well-documented study, researchers found that 40% of children whose mothers did not complete high school do not graduate on time themselves, compared to only two percent of children whose mothers hold a bachelor's degree.

WIOA calls for various Title I and Title II agencies to braid, bridge, and align their services to meet the overwhelming needs that many individuals of poverty face on a day-to-day basis that become barriers to their education. These barriers affect a student's ability to not only earn their high school credential, but to transition to postsecondary education or training programs. Individuals of poverty need assistance with child care, transportation, and finances to be able to come to school and to persist in school until they have met their educational goals. Comprehensive approaches to help students overcome these barriers include collaboration between ABE programs, workforce development agencies (community colleges), human

services agencies, and employment services agencies (Bird et al., 2014). WIOA holds each of these agencies accountable to partner together to help the students and other individuals who need and use their services. With many individuals living in poverty, agencies must work together to meet their challenging needs.

The Local Context

In a survey conducted by the American Community (2016) for the U.S. Census Bureau, the poverty rate for North Carolina was roughly 15.4%. With a total population of 10,146,788, North Carolina has approximately 1,562,605 individuals that are currently living in poverty. Lenoir County, which housed the main campus for Lenoir Community College has a higher rate of poverty. According to the 2016 U.S. Census, Lenoir County has a total population of approximately 57,307. The poverty rate for Lenoir County is roughly 22.7%, or roughly 13,009 people. Thus, almost one fourth of population in Lenoir County lives below poverty. The educational data for the Lenoir County area is below the state average. The percentage of high school graduates or higher (percent of persons age 25 years or older) is 79.5%, while the state average is 86.7%. People who fall into the High School Graduate or Higher category include individuals whose highest degree was a high school diploma or its equivalent, people who attended college but did not receive a degree, and people who received an associate's degree, bachelor's, master's, or professional or doctorate degree. Although this number is not significantly below the state average, the percentage of residents who hold a bachelor's degree or higher is much lower. The percentage of Lenoir County residents who hold a bachelor's degree or higher (percent of persons age 25 years or older) is approximately 12.7%, while the state average is 29.8%. Individuals who are included in the Bachelor's Degree or Higher category are those who have received a bachelor's degree from a college or university, or a master's,

professional, or doctorate degree. There is a wealth of research that show a correlation between poverty and educational attainment, including a particular challenge for students enrolled in ABE programs.

Challenges to ABE Students: An Ecological Perspective

Students enrolled in ABE programs are faced with multiple barriers and difficulties associated with student individual socioeconomic status (SES), family/community SES, and is also interconnected with racial considerations. Some GED students come from single parent and low-income homes. Many GED students come from homes where their parents never finished high school or enrolled into postsecondary education (Stephens, 2010). Many students enrolled in ABE programs have complex family structures that require a wealth of time, energy, and resources. Some of these obligations include parenting and balancing family, work, and school. Literature also points to the fact that many GED students fall within or below the poverty line.

In a 2010 study, 30 GED students enrolled in two adult education programs in southern Illinois were voluntarily asked to complete a questionnaire where students were given questions concerning their SES, their plans to transition to college, and other factors that impact the ability of GED students to transition into college (Stephens, 2010). Out of the 30 students who were given the questionnaire, 28 were returned. Twenty-one (75%) students reported that their yearly income was less than $10,000. Six (21%) students indicated that they received an annual income between $10,000 and $19,999. Sixteen (57%) students reported that their total household income was less than $10,000. Twenty-one (75%) of the students indicated that they were currently unemployed. All students show a disparity in income with limited resources and various financial needs.

When students were asked about the factors that hinder their ability to effectively transition to college, respondents gave a variety of answers. Thirteen of the students believed that there were possible barriers that would prevent them from enrolling into college programs. Seventeen students believed that their current annual income would prevent them from enrolling into higher education. Students noted a variety of other factors as well. Some of their responses included time to study and complete course assignments, family commitments, daycare expenses, work, and money would be factors that could affect their transition (Stephens, 2010). Many students also expressed concerns with not knowing how to complete college applications, uncertainty with their career goals, transportation, childcare, and low self-esteem. It is evident from this study that students in ABE programs have multiple perceived or actual barriers that hinder their progress and transition to postsecondary education.

Ecological System Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory consists of a four- element model, involving the synergistic interconnections among proximal processes, person characteristics, context, and time (Cao, Li, Liang, Mercon-Vargas, O'Brien, Payir, & Tudge, 2016). Bronfenbrenner believes that human development takes place when an individual interacts with all aspects of his immediate environment. In 2010, Farrant and Zubrick used an ecological system approach to study early vocabulary development in young children based on family background and their surrounding environments. Based on the theory, the two researchers came to the following conclusion:

> This model predicts that being a girl, having a sociable temperament, an older, more educated or warmer mother, or higher socio-economic status is associated with greater

> vocabulary development because these characteristics facilitate joint attention and parent-child book reading. (Farrant & Zubrick, 2010, p. 439)

It is a reasonable assumption to presume that educated, engaging, and high SES parents create an environment where children are supported and able to thrive academically. By contrast, the parents of low SES students tend to create an environment where academic rigor is unsupported or unengaged. Thus, in terms of educational outcomes, the ecological system theory gleans heavily on the immediate environment of individuals as a determining factor in a student's educational success and outcomes.

In a 2014 study conducted in China, Po Yang completed a longitudinal study to determine how a student's high school experience and socioeconomic status affects success in college. Yang particularly studied the life cycle formation hypothesis, which implies a high correlation between a student's k-12 and postsecondary performance. Literature within the context of student engagement support the argument that well prepared and academically engaged high school graduates achieve a higher level of college development that students who are not prepared. Not only does student engagement impact college readiness, but socioeconomic status of a family appears to be significant as well. Literature reveals that low socioeconomic status college students have a much lower level of academic competency than more financially advantaged college students due to lack of academic preparation, learning engagement, and parental and family support in high school. The study also references the importance of human capital investment, which is involvement and support in an individual's education early in life. A deficit in investment can have negative impacts on a student's academic and social development later in life.

For this study, Yang worked with college students from 28 colleges and universities in Beijing and over 5,000 freshmen were surveyed with an 85% response rate. Early results confirm the argument that high school performance and experience influences college development. The well prepared high school students were more successful their freshman year in college because they were engaged in their high school learning, which helped them make a smooth academic transition into the demands of college coursework. The argument that socioeconomic status impacts a student's college success was also validated from this study. Students from a financially advantaged background proved to be better prepared in high school due to their learning engagement and significant amount of parental support. This competitive edge over students from a disadvantaged household spilled over into their college success as well. Students also performed higher in their freshman college courses and had a higher level of civic participation in college, which means positive community involvement within their college environment. High SES students showed a high level of academic content knowledge and had a significant amount of critical thinking behaviors that led to well-developed problem-solving skills. With this advanced level of training, they were able to perform at a level expected and needed in college courses.

Parents from low SES households had little college experience and were unable to provide a satisfactory support system for their children. The opposite was found from students surveyed from a more affluent and wealthy background. The study also determined that rural and low-income students had less support from parents when completing college applications and preparing for transition into college. Thus, rural students from low-income families appear to be less motivated and supported to enroll into postsecondary education (Yang, 2014, p. 46). Once

again, a lack of human capital investment does not appear to produce dividends in student achievement and success later in life.

Yang's study included traditional high school graduates that enrolled into postsecondary education. ABE students did not even make it to the point to complete high school and earn their high school diploma. It appears there would be an even more significant correlation between SES, family support, and life cycle formation hypothesis for students that dropped out of high school before completion. Students that enroll in ABE programs are attempting to recover from the fallout of their k-12 experience in the hope of achieving high school success. Their lack of support and successful performance in the k-12 sector is the reason students end up in an ABE program.

Over the years many theories and frameworks have been developed concerning SES and transition to postsecondary education. Blau and Duncan developed the status attainment model recognizes that college students from low-SES backgrounds have an opportunity to improve their social class. Essentially, education can change their class status into which they were born (Walpole, 2007). Their model was developed on several variables that included the father's occupational status, father's education, and the status of the individual's first job. Sewell and Hauser, two other theorists in the field, repudiated the variables that Blau and Duncan mentioned in their model. Although educational attainment is a significant predictor of status attainment, there are additional factors that come to play. They noted that the influence of family members, friends, mentors, and the individual's goals worked in tandem with educational attainment to lead to an individual's success and upward mobility in social class.

Status Attainment Model

Carter (2005) used the status attainment models as her framework for examining degree expectations of White and African American students. She focused on SES and academic ability as variables that affect the amount of support a student receives. She believes this shapes the dreams and expectations a student develops over time (Walpole, 2007). She found that lower SES status had a negative impact on the amount of support students receive from within the home environment.

More recently, Damian, Roberts, Shanahan, Su, and Trutwein (2015) recently completed a study that investigated the effects of personality traits and intelligence in predicting educational attainment and annual income. Parental SES was also researched and factored into the study to predict status attainment of succeeding generations and individuals within the current study. Data was used from a previous longitudinal study referred to as Project Talent where over 440,000 high school students were tracked and followed during their first, fifth, and eleventh years after high school. Damian et al. (2015) applied the variables of personality traits, intelligence, and parental SES to the original study to determine the correlation of these factors in determining status attainment of the individuals in the years that followed their high school graduation. The study found that those students who had outgoing personalities (i.e. extraversion) had better educational outcomes than those individuals who were more reserved. Although low parental SES had a negative impact on the educational attainment of individuals within the study, individuals with an outgoing personality had a higher likelihood of completing more postsecondary education than their introverted counterparts. Perhaps this is because these individuals were willing to broaden their social networks to seek out support from others to a greater degree. However, despite the personality traits of individuals within the study, low

parental SES was positively correlated with the amount of postsecondary education individuals completed.

The parental and family structures of many low SES families view educational experiences differently than high SES families do. Several researchers in recent years have conducted studies on how different social classes define success. The research revealed that low SES parents are more likely to view a high school diploma as a more realistic educational goal than high SES parents, where a bachelor's degree or higher is considered a realistic expectation. If low SES students attend college, they often attend at the community college or technical school level (Walpole, 2007). McDonough (1997) found that low SES students more often than not attend high schools that do not focus on preparing students for college and that do not provide advising and mentoring resources to support students in making the transition from high school to college. Karabel and Jaquez (2005) found that low-SES students and lower-income students choose less rigorous high school coursework and that schools track these students away from honors and advanced placement courses toward less rigorous vocational programs.

If low SES students do complete high school and not drop out, they typically have problems with persistence and retention in college. This pattern usually resonates with the experiences from parents and other family members. Many low-SES students are first-generation college students and lack the experiences of students who come from multiple generations who have previously attended college. Ishitani (2006) found that first-generation students persist at lower levels than non-first-generation peers (Walpole, 2007). Ishitani also noted that persistence increased with each increment of parental education and found that parents who both had a college education were the most likely to persist in college until degree or program completion. Ishitani also found that first-generation students left college in high numbers during their first

year, but even more left college during their second year. The students included in this data were from parents who only had a high school education. Perhaps this is an indication of why low SES students in ABE programs have a high attrition rate as well.

Thus, the status attainment model provides evidence that the support systems students receive in school are necessary in countering the impacts of low SES. Therefore, the support students receive in ABE programs could significantly impact high school credential completion and the decisions students make to transition and success in postsecondary education.

Financial Nexus Model

The financial nexus model considers how financial need influences students' decisions, including the initial college enrollment decision and persistence to degree attainment (Walpole, 2007). This model, developed by St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000), specifically explores the decisions low SES students make in terms of their education. Bourdieu's (1994) framework, an extension of the financial nexus model, defines various types of capital. Bourdieu believes that all social classes possess social and cultural capital. Parents pass on this capital to their children as attitudes and behaviors that are invested for social profits. An understanding of the college admissions process and activities that increase a student's opportunity of being accepted to a particular institution are examples of cultural capital. The more cultural capital a student gains, the higher potential they have to convert this capital to educational success. All social classes have different and distinct cultural capital. Even though Bourdieu believes that cultural capital comes from the home, educators value this capital, giving more attention to high SES students who generally have acquired more. This can leave students from low SES backgrounds at risk of being unsuccessful and unsupported in school. Eventually, this could lead to students not completing high school and being unmotivated to pursue higher education.

St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) completed a study that examined the role of the costs of college and student financial aid in determining postsecondary opportunity for diverse groups. St. John et al. used the financial nexus model to assess the effects of student financial aid on the educational opportunities of different racial groups. The study compiled data that showed that students and parents have a lack of understanding of financial aid and did not understand the differences between public and private institutions or two and four-year colleges. In one survey conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE), 71% of people surveyed believed that college is not affordable, including 83% of African Americans surveyed. St. John et al. (2005) found that the influence of parents' education, age, prior educational attainment, and prior education experience did not have a relationship with finances for African American students. Financial aid does make college more affordable for all racial groups. The problem that hinders students from ever taking the step to enroll into postsecondary education is more of a misperception of affordability of college and financial aid than any other factor. However, because lower SES individuals have less experience with postsecondary educational attainment, it could be a factor in the misperceptions that many individuals and families have.

Critical Race Theory

An additional sociological construct that complicates considerations of socioeconomic status is that of race. Towards this end, the theoretical framework(s) of critical race theory (CRT) is helpful in capturing race as a defining characteristic of in equality and recognizes the hegemony that White culture, particularly that of the middle and upper-middle class, educational environments generally, higher education specifically, and in society writ large. Hughey (2007) has reviewed the work of Dixson and Rousseau and describes their extensive research on CRT and its implications in higher education. They insist that White culture and higher education

must recognize that race is a pervasive part of society and that being *color-blind* to the issue of race is not going to help minoritized groups be successful in college. They believe that the success of minoritized groups from entrance to degree completion in college is one of the most effective ways to begin eliminating various forms of oppression. Bensimon and Bishop (2012) draw even more attention to racial inequality in higher education by finding that there has been a sharp decline in the enrollment of male college students of color and an overrepresentation of male students of color in community colleges. These students also have a considerably low rate of transfer to four-year colleges and universities. They also found that there is a greater likelihood that minoritized students will be tracked into noncredit remedial programs that eventually push them out of college because they are unable to track into their degree programs. Perhaps this is an indication of why many minoritized groups are overrepresented in ABE programs and never complete their high school credential to be able to enroll in postsecondary education.

Given the demographic composition of students in the TCS program, CRT perspectives should be considered as the program is made up of a majority of minoritized students. Currently, for the 2017-2018 program year, 946 students have registered in the program. The percentage of White students account for 30.6% of the population. Non-whites account for 69.4% and includes the following ethnicities: 46.3% (Black), 19.4% (Hispanic), and 3.4% (American Indian and Asian). The dismal success rates of students in the TCS program that earn their high school credential and enroll into postsecondary education offers more support for CRT and the importance of supporting minoritized groups so that they can overcome the stereotypes that society has placed on them and follow through with their educational endeavors.

Howard and Navarro (2016) recently wrote an article where they examined the framework of CRT and its impacts on education in U.S. schools over the past 20 years. The greatest impact of critical race theory on today's student population in K-12 schools is referred to as the *demographic divide*. According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2012, more than 80% of classroom teachers are White, middle class, and monolingual. Thus, the likelihood that most teachers in today's schools are unaware of the racial experiences, cultural knowledge, and practices that their students bring from their homes and communities is high. The critical race analysis conducted by Howard and Navarro also suggest that racial consciousness development cannot be taught in a superficial way but requires an analysis and self-reflection of racial realities from the past and present. Their critical race analysis suggests that teachers in K-12 schools make race and race history a continual part of the curriculum. They also suggest teaching race as a sociohistorical construct through which all individuals are unequally produced. Perhaps building these foundations into K-12 curriculum would impact the number of students from minority racial groups that matriculate into postsecondary education programs after earning their high school credential. As related to the present study, this demographic divide could be significant with a student population that is approximately 69.4% non-white and a staff population (instructors and support staff) that is 50% non-white, in terms of the staff that will relate to the student population related to this study. Staff must make an effort to connect with a population that is not the same in terms of racial and cultural experiences.

Significance of Rural Influences

When considering educational aspirations, goals, and outcomes of low SES students, the type of communities in which these individuals live must be considered as well. Lenoir Community College (LCC) resides in eastern North Carolina in what is considered a rural area.

The Rural Center of North Carolina (2016) defines a rural area as a county that has an average population density of 250 per square mile or less. A suburban county is defined as one where the average population density is between 250 and 750 per square mile and an urban county is defined as one where the population density is greater than 750 people per square mile. LCC resides in Lenoir County, which is one of 80 counties in North Carolina that is considered a rural community. There are 14 counties that are considered suburban counties and six counties that are considered urban counties. Thus, 80% of the counties in North Carolina (100 counties in total) are considered rural areas. This population densities reported from the Rural Center of North Carolina is according to the 2014 U.S. Census population estimates.

Distinguishing Characteristics

Rural communities have their own distinguishing characteristics that are different than other types of communities. It is first helpful to understand the differences between community and society. Schafft and Jackson (2010) define community as a geographical area where humans remain together despite their differences. In society, humans remain separate despite their likenesses. The social priority in community is one where people depend on each other and the social priority in society is one where individuals live relatively independent from one another. Many theorists view this difference as a critical problem in today's world. Too many people live independent from one another and do not provide the mutual support that a community should afford to its residents.

Martin Buber (1949) notes that "A real community … must consist of people, who precisely because they are comrades, have mutual access to one another and are ready for one another" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 36). People who live in a community tolerate each other's differences and work toward the common good of all. Schafft and Youngblood argue that there

are specific types of rural communities and each one has a bearing on the construction of rich and poor and what the school's role is in defining each social class.

Lenoir County is centrally located in eastern North Carolina and includes some manufacturing and an extensive amount of agriculturally related economic development. According to Schafft and Jackson (2010), Lenoir County does have influences of a durable agrarian community. Although there have been many changes in agricultural production and dependency on farming in terms of economic development over the last few decades, it still remains a sustainable and important aspect of the community. Population shifts in this type of community are relatively stable, with little change. Because population shifts are minimal in these types of communities, income inequality is low as well. Due to a relatively stable population pool, durable agrarian communities tend to foster an environment of support with the local educational system. The support system tends to transcend cultural, ethnic, and racial barriers in the hope that everyone has an opportunity to succeed. Many people who live in this type of community have been long-time residents or lived in similar communities. They have been socialized to look for helping the common good and to rally around those who need help. Although there is a dominant agricultural influence in the Lenoir County area, there is also a growing influence of manufacturing and some indications of suburbanization with expanding business and industries.

Although Lenoir County is far from a suburbanized community, the subtle influences of manufacturing are beginning to have an influence. Some of the typical influences of an agrarian community are converging with a more materialistic orientation of this new community influence (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). As rural communities become influenced by changes in the economy, perceptions and values have a tendency to shift and change as well. One of the

changes that can occur is that low-income residents whose cultural values and practices are not well understood by the community are even more misunderstood by newcomers to the community that are not aware of the cultural environment. Middle-class residents of the community tend to view this low-income group with distrust, even doubting the competence of the adults in this misunderstood group. Although they may value the children of this group in the hope of improving their present circumstances, the lack of support given to the low-income parents does not help to improve the circumstances of this smaller community (low-income population) within the larger community. Schools take on the role of working with the low-income students, but they return to the same inner communities where they left, with minimal outside support. Some of the children who live in poverty may find success in completing high school, but the level of support tends to have a minimal influence on their matriculation to college. Schafft and Jackson attribute this misunderstanding of low-income communities as one of the reasons why rural communities may have a relatively significant high school completion rate, but an insignificant or low matriculation rate into college.

The misunderstood low SES population in rural communities is reflective in the studies of other researchers as well. Angelis, Baker, Lawson, and Wilcox (2014) note that in 2008, only 20 percent of public school students in the United States were enrolled in rural schools. However, this percentage represents nearly 10 million students that are faced with challenges daily to rise above the tide of poverty to be successful. Angelis et al. (2014) write that globalization in the 21st century has had a significant impact on rural communities. Many manufacturing companies have relocated overseas, which has significantly decreased jobs and the wealth of rural communities. Agriculture has been consolidated by corporations and taken out of the hands of many residents in rural communities, which have decreased the labor force.

Other scholars note that the resulting weak economies in rural communities have been further eroded away by low-paying service and seasonal employment that has replaced traditional living-wage jobs. The fragile economies in these areas are not attractive in bringing new businesses so the highly skilled workforce leave in search of better paying jobs. Rural communities become a breeding ground for low-income individuals and poverty.

The current trend across the country is an outmigration of youth from rural areas (Angelis et al., 2014). In many rural communities, the outmigration of youth is being replaced by more transient populations that are living in extreme poverty. In looking deeper at rural life, one finds situations that are not healthy. The traditional two-parent household where one parent provides financial support and the other stays at home to properly raise the children is no longer a normal occurrence in rural communities. Rural households headed by single females have increased dramatically in recent years and is quickly replacing the traditional household that was commonplace in years past. Single mothers are now working and leaving many youth unattended and neglected. Gang and drug activity now plague low-income areas in rural communities and occupy the time of many youth. Although rural areas tend to pull together to support youth and education, many educators in these areas are faced with the overwhelming challenges of trying to meet the emotional and social needs of students with limited resources and experience. All these competing factors have an influence on the long-term plans of students to complete their high school education and to transition into postsecondary education.

In a recent study, Sherman and Sage (2011) found that it is not just the low-SES of families in rural areas that determine if students pursue postsecondary education (Angelis et al., 2014). The perceptions of teachers and school administration of a family's low SES has an influence as well. Some educators and schools in rural communities view low SES and poverty-

stricken families as having negative influences on the community as a whole. For example, drug use, alcohol use, and the reliance on public welfare programs cause some educators and other school personnel to perceive the low SES population in a negative light. This perception transcends the individual characteristics and academic qualities of the students. These misperceptions cause families that live in poverty to have mistrust for educators and schools because they do not believe their children are being provided with an education that adequately prepares them for their future. Thus, many low SES families do not take advantage of the necessary resources and support that schools can provide to their children. This may include afterschool programs, tutoring, mentoring programs, social service resources, and much more.

Best Practices for Education in Rural Communities

Many researchers have examined strategies where schools in rural communities connect students to their communities. Some researchers argue that connections with schools and local communities are one of the most successful ways to help students stay in school and to acquire relevant knowledge and skills that will help them build and expand their futures (Angelis et al., 2014). Bartsch (2008) developed a community-based program in Maine that improved students' literacy, auditory, and analytical skills. The improvement in the students' skills were so remarkable that the high school's performance on standardized, state assessments moved from 99 out of 127 high schools in the state to the number 12 position. Hardre (2009) and other researchers found similar results concerning student motivation. When students saw the relevant connection to what they were learning in school and could see that it helping them reach their future goals, they were much more likely to be interested in their academic work and motivated delve deeper into the curriculum. This intrinsic motivation caused students to be more interested in their high school courses and helped students to move toward their intent to graduate. Hardre

(2009) and his colleagues also noted that the findings were not just specific to high achievers, but to a population of students that were unmotivated and previously disinterested with high school. Not only do outside connections with the community impact student achievement in rural areas, but the school climate and surrounding environment also has an impact on rural students' high school success and outcomes.

Literature suggests that positive school climates and support systems has a strong influence on whether or not students attend school on a regular basis, engage in school activities, and persist in school until graduation (Angelis et al., 2014). However, in rural communities, where shrinking economies cause lower tax bases and less funding for public schools and supplemental services, school environments can have a negative impact on student outcomes (Angelis et al., 2014, p. 4). This can cause students to disengage in school and drop out of school before graduation. Although rural school districts have many competing forces that impact school resources, funding for extracurricular programs and activities, the recruitment of quality teachers, and much more, there are research-based practices that can mitigate these negative factors. These research-based practices could influence the outcomes of students in ABE programs that withdraw from high school early with the hope and goal of completing their high school credential in an alternate setting.

Angelis et al. (2014) completed a multiple case study of six rural school districts in New York to compare the distinguishing features of each school with the differences in their graduation rates. The six schools that became the focus of the study were in durable agrarian communities that have been agricultural but are experiencing some economic change with new businesses and industries. Teachers and administrators from all schools were interview as graduation rates from each school were disaggregated and compared. The four schools that had a

higher than average graduation rate differed from the two schools that were low performing. One of the stark differences between the more successful schools was the practice of setting goals and high expectations. The higher performing schools set rigorous goals and high expectations for their students based on the belief that all students can achieve and obtain success so that they are prepared to graduate high school and to transition to postsecondary education. The educators in these schools emphasized the importance of not lowering standards for any student, even those with identified disabilities who were receiving special education services. The expectation in these schools is that all students would graduate high school on time and many teachers often noted that they were always thinking long term for their students and helping make relevant contextualized connections with postsecondary education and to careers. Teachers believed that all students who graduated from their high schools should have a well-developed plan that would position their students for success and transition beyond high school.

The higher performing schools also noted an extensive use of outside resources. Many teachers and administrators made an effort to attend training and professional development from school districts beyond their own and to learn about the economy and educational opportunities of areas beyond their rural communities. This helped them to improve their own instruction and to provide more extensive learning opportunities for their high school students (Angelis et al., 2014). Some of the activities that the teachers and administrators explored were the use of regional and state networks that supported school improvement planning and rigorous professional development. Some of the schools partnered with other school districts to share best practices and to work as a centralized unit to develop their own strategic plans for improvement. The schools also invested in resources that would provide distance learning and virtual learning opportunities for their students. They even went on field trips with their students to get them to

think beyond their own rural environments and to see available education and career opportunities beyond high school.

An additional focus of the higher performing schools was a hands-on approach to professional engagement and a culture of shared responsibility among all staff within a single school (Angelis et al., 2014). The teachers in these schools all worked together to provide the best instruction possible to their students. Individual teachers were not competing with each other to see who could outperform the other or who could have the highest standardized test scores. Teachers were integrated and a part of every facet of the school environment, even having representation on school and district administrative teams. Teachers were willing to collaborate and to teach more than an average load so that all students were afforded opportunities to take a wide array of courses that appealed to their academic and career interests. Teachers also worked together to create a schedule where educators would be available before school, during school, at lunch time, and after school to provide opportunities to mentor, advise, and tutor students. This shared responsibility between teachers and administrators created an environment of connectedness and fostered a culture of family and support to many students who lacked in these areas outside of school and in their own family structures.

Many of the teachers in the highest performing schools spoke of a school environment where individual and collective efficacy was acknowledged and supported (Angelis et al., 2014). Although challenges and barriers face rural school districts daily, teachers consistently noted that they always did their jobs with excellence and were willing to go above and beyond their own specific job responsibilities to provide the best education possible to their respective students. Teachers were always open to new strategies, new programming, and new tools that would help them to do their jobs more efficiently and that would improve their student outcomes. These

schools provided a top-down approach of support to their teachers, which included ongoing collaboration and evaluation of what was working and not working so that teachers were always propelled in a direction of continuous improvement. In return, teachers were encouraged to communicate their successes and concerns so that the school was aware of potential challenges and barriers. This allowed for necessary changes throughout the year so that problems were identified early and could be mitigated in a timely manner.

In terms of adapting instruction and student interventions, the high performing schools excelled in this area as well. Teachers often noted that they were always observing and watching students for signs of academic problems because they did not want any student to get left behind in the shuffle and constant movement of education (Angelis et al., 2014). These schools even moved beyond just day-to-day observations of students. They used databases to monitor attendance, behavior, and academic performance. All teachers, administration, and support staff could have access to this anecdotal information at any time so that a team of individuals from within the school could intervene and support struggling students. It simply was not the sole responsibility of a student's teacher to bear the burden and responsibility of ensuring a student's success, but a collaborate effort from the school as a whole. Teachers and other support teams within the higher performing schools constantly and consistently combed over standardized test data so that they knew exactly what to do to improve student outcomes. School-based teams were developed to interpret data and to identify patterns to determine what skills needed to be taught and remediated so that at-risk students received the academic support necessary to improve their outcomes. The most successful schools also provided extra instruction to at-risk students using teachers that were certified in specific content areas and were experts in academic

areas where these students had the most learning gaps and deficits. Each of these efforts were credited to improving student persistence, retention, and academic outcomes.

All of these theories and constructs provide information in understanding low SES, low-income, first-generation students that live in rural communities. It also reveals that there are multiple factors that influence the choices and decisions students make in completing high school (in a traditional setting or ABE program) and then moving on to postsecondary education or other training opportunities. A common theme with each of these models is that they are all framed within an ecological system. An individual's immediate environment has an influence on their educational motivations and outcomes. Students that grow up in a family or community with limited influences from those that have an education and value education tend to adapt to the same belief system. They develop a stereotype where it becomes assumed that they will take on the same role as their uneducated parents and surrounding communities. Minoritized groups carry this cultural capital with them and others begin to view them as a group that cannot succeed or that will never persist in their education to completion. Thus, limited support is offered to them. Low SES students become accustomed to believing that having a high school and college education is simply not in their future. Therefore, they return back to their same communities and the cycle continues. Much of the research proves that intense and strategic interventions that support, direct, and motivate students are one of the only ways to break this cycle and position students down a path where education and academic success becomes a new normal for their lives.

ABE Transition

One of the main goals for high schools is to consistently improve their graduation rate so that students can make a successful transition to postsecondary education and to other training

programs that will lead to a career that provides a sustainable wage and opportunities for advancement. The most successful high schools from this study mainly credit their success to an environment of high expectations that are aligned with best practices and instructional approaches to help all students reach those expectations (Angelis et al., 2014). The overarching goal of ABE programs is to also provide an atmosphere where students can earn their high school credential to transition to postsecondary education and training that will lead to a career. Approaches that increase graduation rates for high school students may provide an avenue to position students for higher success and high school credential attainment in ABE programs.

Historical ABE Practices

Historical instructional practices in ABE programs across the nation have been bleak to say the least according to many researchers. Research from instructional practices in the late 1990s and early 2000s define instruction in ABE programs as mainly test preparation. This multi-decade approach to learning can be difficult to erode away from ABE programs that have been existence since the 1960s. Scholes and Lain (1997) define test preparation as "the utilization of an aid or tool by a test-taker to acquire information and techniques for the purpose of attaining the highest score possible on a test" (Marin, Martin, & Southworth, 2015, p. 28). In many ABE programs, behaviorist instructional approaches (i.e. rote learning) by teacher-directed classes and the use of workbooks and other supplemental resources have been the most used instructional approaches for preparing students for the GED test (Martin et al., 2015, p. 28). Approaching learning using this strategy often leads to gaps in student learning, unclear instruction, and disorganized learning experiences. Behaviorist instructional approaches cause students to fail to obtain the critical thinking skills and transferability of learning skills that are necessary for employment and for transition into postsecondary education. Even as far back as

1998, before recent legislation in 2014 would place a demand on ABE programs to change their instructional approaches, researchers identified the negative impacts that the teaching approaches provided by many ABE programs was having on student outcomes and transition (Martin et al., 2015, p. 28).

In a study conducted by Purcell-Gates, Degner, and Jacobson (1998), 271 ABE programs included rote learning in its examination of instructional approaches for GED preparation (Martin et al., 2015). Adult students from these ABE programs noted that they had limited time for attending class and studying, and they wanted instruction that was relevant to their lives, postsecondary education goals, and employment goals. The study found that 73% of the 271 ABE programs used activities and instructional materials that were unrelated to students' lives. The academic performance results of this study consistently showed that programs have an inability to teach students how to learn, attributing to their poor performance on GED tests and matriculation to higher education.

The behavioral approaches to learning that have been commonplace in many ABE programs have proven to be limited in several ways. One of the limitations is that these approaches do not allow for students to make generalizations to their learning outside the classroom. Students from low-SES backgrounds and from rural communities often have limited experiences, which continue to not be met when they drop out of school and enter ABE programs. The goal of behavioral approaches is to provide a reinforcement cycle where students learn correct answers from teacher feedback when incorrect answers are given (Martin et al., 2015). Any knowledge students gain from these approaches is the byproduct of memorization and the reinforcement they experience in the classroom. The main criticism is that students go through a perpetual cycle of experiences where contextualized learning is absent. If students are

unable to make relevant and frequent connections to their learning, they are unlikely to learn how to generalize their learning to multiple contexts and in multiple environments that included postsecondary education or the workplace. Even if students are successful on earning their GED, they receive little instructional benefit that will help them in their transition beyond ABE.

Social-Constructivist Theory

Perhaps the biggest concern to behavioral approaches to learning is that they do not help students acquire the knowledge and skills they need for lifetime learning (Martin et al., 2015). Researchers bend toward constructivist approaches to learning as ways to help ABE students bridge their learning and to provide a platform for lifetime learning and transition. In a 2008 study of ABE programs in correctional facilities, Muth identified social-constructivist methods to improve the quality of learning for students and to transition beyond incarceration. Social-constructivist methods to instruction include multiple opportunities where student-centered learning is a priority in the ABE classroom. This approach invites students' voices and contributions into the classroom and causes students to be involved in the learning process (Muth, 2008). Kiser and Muth (2008) interviewed 25 ABE instructors who taught in correctional facilities to gauge their efforts in social-constructivist approaches and the benefits it affords to their students. One instructor did an interview activity with students to discuss the barriers they had and continue to have in earning their high school credential. The instructor noted that students enjoyed opening up and sharing their experiences and that he learned invaluable information on how to approach their learning needs in the future (Kiser & Muth, 2008). Another instructor allowed students to watch a video based on a popular short story. When the video was over, he asked a few leading questions and just let the discussion ebb and flow from the students. The instructor noted that most of the students picked up on many of the themes across the story

with this student-centered approach that may not have happened with a more teacher-centered approach. Discussions often afford opportunities to think critically and talk through their own learning in the process.

The study involved 10 weeks of ongoing discussion with the correctional approaches as they implemented various social-constructivist approach activities that included discussions, learning logs, jig saws, role plays, personal essays and journaling, and strategies where students learn to respect each other's differences (i.e. interviews and debates) (Muth, 2008). After the 10-week period, the instructors gave input on what they had learned throughout the study. One of the instructors noted,

> What has changed for me is I have learned that I can modify great models of teaching to fit my situation one way or another. I have also learned that I am definitely a person who functions best in the realm of social learning and humanist dimensions of education (Kiser & Muth, 2008, p. 362).

Another instructor noted the benefit of student-centered instruction and discussion in small groups. The instructor responded,

> This personal experience has caused me to be introspective of how I have been teaching and managing some of my courses…I will be more attentive to using small groups especially in my math classes…This past week two students who are struggling with basic algebra have grouped to work together…By the end of the week, they have been coming in, getting started, using the blackboard to work out problems and discussing where they get confused (Kiser & Muth, 2008, p. 363).

Activities where students engage with each other give them opportunities to develop their own ways of thinking and other self-identifying strategies to troubleshoot an academic task or activity

to successfully complete it. Getting students to learn how to analyze and solve problems through their own thinking is contextualized teaching and causes students to general their learning to multiple contexts. Constructivist approaches do more than simply teach to a test, but help students develop skills for lifelong learning and transition beyond the ABE classroom.

Significance of Students with Disabilities

Engaging students with quality instruction can also help to address the diverse learning needs of students in ABE classrooms, particularly those with learning disabilities. One of the most extensive literacy studies ever conducted by the Department of Education was the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) completed in the fall of 1993. In this report, it was determined that almost 50% of adults in the United States are functionally illiterate or marginally literate (Balkam, Gillespie, & Skinner, 2000). Functionally illiterate adults lack literacy skills that are required to be successful with most jobs and many day-to-day situations. Marginally literate individuals have basic, but low, reading and writing abilities. Data from multiple sources indicate that learning disabilities affect 10% to 80% of adults across the United States that are enrolled in job training programs and higher education. This large spread in data can be attributed to how different service providers define learning disabilities and the severity of learning disabilities. There are also multiple assessments that are used to determine the percentage of adults with learning disabilities, which can cause the percentage to vary as well. Thus, there is not a single instrument or criteria to determine how many students enrolled in ABE programs have learning disabilities. However, if the NALS report is accurate in reporting that almost half of the adults across the country have low literacy skills, then at least 10% (but likely 60 to 80%) of those adults could be expected to have some form of a learning disability. This adult population is consistently underprepared to meet the demands of postsecondary education (Gregg, 2012).

According to several researchers, students with learning disabilities are two to three times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers. This same population enrolls into postsecondary education or training programs at one tenth the rate of the general population. An even more staggering statistic is the relatively low number of adults who continue their education beyond the GED. According to a National Council for Adult Learning (NCAL) study completed in 2008, only about 27% of GED graduates across the country have enrolled into postsecondary education, compared to 63% of adults that hold a traditional high school diploma. Thus, more work needs to be done in ABE programs to accommodate the needs of students that enroll with learning disabilities, as learning deficits present a major challenge and barrier for individuals that desire to transition into postsecondary education.

Often times, the challenges and barriers that individuals with learning disabilities face in ABE programs is compounded by low-SES. Research suggests a definitive link between lower SES and academic disengagement and failure. The hostile environment faced by many individuals from low-SES backgrounds and poverty places them at a higher risk of being identified with learning disabilities, which make their completion of ABE programs and transition even more difficult (Javitz, Newman, & Wagner, 2014). There are also additional characteristics beyond low-SES that researchers have identified in constructing a profile of adults with learning disabilities. They have found that adults with learning disabilities perform the lowest on measures of literacy. In a 2008 study conducted by Mellard and Patterson, adults with learning disabilities participated in a descriptive study of literacy skills and consistently scored much lower than students not identified with learning disabilities. The students' level of reading comprehension was measured, and adults with learning disabilities had an average reading score at the third-grade level, whereas adults in ABE programs with no diagnosis had an average

reading ability at the fifth-grade level (Hock, 2012). Another way that literacy skills can be measured is by assessing prose literacy ability, which are skills needed to search, comprehend, and use a variety of texts in multiple contexts. In an additional study supported by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NALS) data, 58% of adults having learning disabilities performed at Level 1 on the prose scale, which is at the lowest level of performance. This indicates that most adults with learning disabilities will have significant barriers and will need intensive basic skills instruction in ABE programs. Thus, high quality instruction is required if these students have a chance of earning their GED and transitioning to higher education programs.

Multiple researchers identify explicit instruction as a means of improving the basic skills of students with learning disabilities in ABE programs. Explicit instruction "involves teachers providing students with clear statements of process, providing students with clear statements of process, modeling target behaviors, guided practice, independent practice, corrective feedback, and posttesting" (Hock, 2012). In a study of the effects of explicit instruction on the math word-solving abilities of community college students with learning disabilities, explicit instruction was found to help students tremendously in solving math word problems. Instructors that paired explicit instruction with visual aids were the most effective in helping students understand how to dissect and solve word problems. Thus, effective instruction should couple problem-solving strategies with schema training to help students understand the factors that should be considered when determining what operations to use in solving math word problems.

Massengill (2003) studied the impact of guided reading strategies on the reading performance of several low-literate adults. Guided reading is a direct instruction method that involves strategic text selection, strategy development, and scaffolding to improved reading comprehension and fluency (Hock, 2012). This study focused on explicit instruction to help four

adult learners gain word recognition skills to increase vocabulary and comprehension. The students were provided with 32 hours of instruction and after students completed the course, all showed an increase in reading level from 1.4 grade equivalents to 3.1 grade equivalents. Gains of almost two grade levels is significant considering the duration of the instruction and the low reading levels of the students. Although the study is limited based on the number of participants, it does show how explicit instruction can improve the low literacy of adult with learning disabilities.

A 2007 study conducted by Graham and Perin investigated the effective use of a cognitive writing strategy with ABE students attending ABE classes (Hock, 2012). The students attended writing classes two to three times a week for about a month. All the students had a writing goal of passing the GED essay-writing exam. The students were given explicit instruction in planning, evaluating, and revising essays. Clear and concise writing strategies were modeled using scaffolding and instructor think-aloud approaches, which help students contextualize the writing process as they talk through their writing with their instructor and with each other. At the end of the course, the instructor saw marked improvement in the essay development of students using his own assessments and observations. There is a considerable amount of research that supports that writing strategy instruction is a beneficial intervention for students in K-12, which also shows promising benefits to GED students in ABE programs. An important factor to note in this study is that goal-setting was a factor as well. All the students had a specific goal for passing the essay portion of the GED exam, which factors into their motivation and engagement with the task at hand and the instruction offered.

Best Practices for Transition to Postsecondary Education

Bridge Program Model

LaGuardia Community College, located in the state of New York, epitomizes successful instruction and strategies for helping ABE students transition into college. It is ranked as one of the top three large community colleges in the US for high academic standards and innovative teaching practices, particularly with students in ABE programs (LaGuardia Community College, 2017). This college has developed a successful bridge program for helping GED students transition to postsecondary education. In 2013, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), the Robin Hood Foundation, and MetLife Foundation, partnered with LaGuardia Community College to conduct an extensive study of the GED Bridge to Health and Business program (Broadus & Martin, 2013). This new program at the college was developed as a new way to approach ABE instruction and aims to better prepare students for not only earning their GED, but to help them transition to college and training programs that are specific to the health and business sector. The program includes an original curriculum that integrates material and concepts from health care fields and business. The students in this bridge program attend class for more hours than students in most GED program do and each student received intensive advising from full-time staff within the college's ABE program.

Contextualized Curriculum

The GED Bridge program is grounded in a contextualized curriculum approach. Broadus and Martin (2013) write,

> The curriculum has two broad goals: first, to build the skills that are tested on the GED exam through the use of content specific to a field of interest (health care or business)

> and, second, to develop general academic habits and skills that prepare students to succeed in college or training programs (p. 2)

The instructors at LaGuardia Community College tackle the first goal by using instructional themes specific to a career track to teach academic concepts that students will be tested on when taking the GED. Thus, rather than teaching math, writing, and reading skills in isolation, students learn these skills by interacting with materials that are specific to a health care or business field that they have an interest in pursuing. The course is not intended to be an introductory health care or business course, where concepts would be taught in a more regimented, chronological, and specific way. The GED Bridge program teaches career concepts in a broad way, which gives students more engaging material to connect with while simultaneously exploring a career interest they may want to consider pursuing once they earn their GED.

Class Structure

The second goal of the curriculum was approached in a variety of ways. One way instructors help students prepare for college level expectations or responsibilities and duties faced in the workplace is by creating a structured class environment. This includes creating lessons and class expectations that mirror a college or workplace environment. For example, students receive a syllabus for the semester, get homework assignments, and are encouraged to spend an ample amount of time on out-of-class work and studying on concepts they are learning in the classroom (Broadus & Martin, 2013). Students are also encouraged to think critically by being presented with analytical reading and writing tasks to prepare them for the rigor required in college course.

Advising and Goal-Setting

One of the most important pieces to the GED Bridge program is individualized and group advisement that is done inside and outside of class. During these advising sessions, students complete career-interest and skills inventories, complete research about economic development in the local area and higher education options and develop specific goals and plans for their educational and career growth (Broadus & Martin, 2013). An advisor in the ABE program does activities with students to help them learn about setting specific and realistic goals, how to apply for financial aid, effective budgeting strategies, and how to apply to college programs. College faculty and staff visit with students to speak about their health and business programs and the type of work individuals can do with an education in one of these career areas.

To learn about the benefits of a GED Bridge program, MDRC used a random assignment design to track students in the new program with students in a more traditional GED program. The study examines if students earn their GEDs and if they transition into college or other training programs. The study also tracks students throughout their enrollment in postsecondary education and training to determine if they persist to completion or withdraw (Broadus & Martin, 2013).

Table 3 depicts the differences between a GED Bridge program and more traditional GED program that is more commonplace in most ABE programs (Broadus & Martin, 2013, p. 3). The analysis of students in the GED Bridge program and students in the GED Prep program were tracked over three cohorts that included fall 2010, spring 2011, and fall 2011. A total number of 276 participants were represented in the sample.

Table 3

Key Distinctions Between GED Bridge and GED Prep

Program Component	GED Bridge	GED Prep
Instruction	Full-time instructor, paid for class preparation time	Adjunct instructor, paid for in-class time only
In-Class time	108 hours over 12 weeks	60 hours over 9 weeks
Curriculum and Materials	Career- oriented curriculum	GED textbook curriculum
Counseling and Support	In-class and individualized transition counseling outside of class	None

Outcomes

The outcomes of the study were significant and revealed major differences in terms of student success and transition. The first goal of students in either program was to complete the course. Students in the GED Bridge course completed at a much higher rate than students in the GED Prep course (68% compared with 47%). The students in the GED Bridge course were also more likely to pass the GED exam versus the students in the GED Prep class. Within 12 months of entering the study, 53% of the GED Bridge students passed exam while only 22% of the GED Prep students. Lastly, bridge students enrolled in college at a much higher rate than students in the GED Prep course. GED Bridge students enrolled into community college programs at a rate of 24% while GED Prep students enrolled into a New York Community college at only 7%. Not only were GED Bridge students more likely to enroll in college, but they were also more likely to persist in college. Twelve percent of all Bridge students enrolled in college in the first semester also continued into second semester, while only 3% of the Prep students registered for college courses during the second semester (Broadus & Martin, 2013).

As referenced by other researchers, the advising and goal-setting piece afforded to the GED Bridge students were significant motivating factors for student success. Bridge students were frequently visited by a transition advisor to discuss transitioning to postsecondary education, assist students with gathering information on career programs they were interested in, and to remind students of upcoming events, deadlines, and progress toward meeting their individually developed short-term and long-term goals (Broadus & Martin, 2013). Bridge students had an advantage of constantly being reminded of their next steps and demonstrated a much greater knowledge of the transition process than students in the GED Prep class.

Other researchers have found similar findings in their own studies with ABE programs, the persistence of adult learners, and students' motivation for transitioning to postsecondary education. Thompson and Cuseo (2011) identify four pillars of support in helping adult learners to be successful in ABE programs. The four pillars are individual, family, institution, and community (Johnson & Reynolds, 2014). Johnson and Reynolds used the four pillars to determine how each one contributed to student success. They interviewed approximately 60 ABE students from rural Midwest ABE programs. Institutional and community factors were of particular importance to most of the students interviewed in terms of their confidence, motivation, and eventual success. Many of the students mentioned that one individual in the ABE program was responsible for their success. Some of these individuals may have included college personnel, tutors, or even ABE administrators. Several students noted that they had developed friendships with these individuals because they provided support and the necessary self-confidence they need to take the academics risks required for their success (i.e. taking a GED test, enrolling in college or another certificate program). One student even noted that it took someone from outside of her family to motivate her and to encourage her to reach her goals.

Goal-setting was also a theme in the findings from Johnson and Reynold's (2014) study. Setting goals, an explicit part of some ABE programs, begins at orientation, and continues with the development of individual learning plans. Most of the students in the study reported the value of seeing progress on a regular basis by documenting the success and attainment of meeting their own individual goals. Teachers helped the students set clear goals and provided them with multiple opportunities to meet their goals in a tangible way.

The practice of setting goals and documenting student success also helped to build classroom community and support. The sense of community that developed in the ABE

classroom was seen throughout most of the student interviews and was identified as an important contributor to student persistence (Johnson & Reynolds, 2014). When students encountered frustrations and challenges, the students relied on the encouragement and support of teachers and students to help them move above and beyond their potential barriers. Multiple students noted a sense of understanding, common goals, and shared experience as factors that helped them to build relationships with each other. Students would celebrate and rally for students when they met goals and had success. All of this contributed to persistence and retention of the students until they earned their GED.

All the students in the study identified a purpose for attending the ABE program, whether it was a short-term goal or a long-term aspiration. Many of the students identified career goals they wanted to achieve through postsecondary education and training. As students met their own individual goals in the ABE program, they described an increased sense of hope and optimism about their futures (Johnson & Reynolds, 2014). The students noted that their classroom success even encouraged them to take risks and set higher academic goals. One female student stated, "I began to think about my certificate (GED) and realized it was only a paper unless I used it. I decided I wanted that college education that I dreamed of when I was in high school" (Johnson & Reynolds, 2014, p. 47). The ABE students identified several supportive mentors and relationships throughout the interviews. These supportive relationships proved to be invaluable to the ABE students, perhaps more so than the instructors and staff realized. The institutional support that the students received gave the students confidence to set more long-term goals for continuing their education beyond receiving their GED. Many students noted that that they gained a new desire to work toward specific careers and other employment opportunities that they had never considered before enrolling in their ABE programs.

Conley (2014) identifies a conceptual model consisting of four keys that are required to determine if students are college and career ready (Conley & French, 2014). The key that is most important to students taking ownership of their learning and transitioning to college or a career is key learning skills and techniques. A student first begins to take ownership of their own learning by intrinsic or extrinsic motivation and engagement in the learning process. Self-motivation or motivation from others creates a drive to set learning goals. When specific goals have been determined, an action potential exists between the current state and the more state of being that one hopes to achieve. This action potential is the point where a student begins to take ownership of their own learning. When a student begins to set goals and strategically work toward achieving those goals, they realize that circumstances, challenges, and other barriers, no longer have to determine their success. Students realize that they have control over their own learning, which causes them to gain self-confidence and hope. Bandura, Martinez-Pons, and Zimmerman (1992) note that self-confidence propels students to set even more challenging goals and to consistently work towards those goals until they are achieved. As students begin to make progress toward achieving goals, they begin to develop self-monitoring skills where they can evaluate their own efforts toward achieving their goals. This helps students learn how to make continuous improvement toward reaching their goals, while abandoning futile efforts that are not effective. When students achieve a goal, they gain the confidence to persist with goals that may be difficult to complete and that will take a longer amount of time.

True attainment of a goal is only achieved when students learn to exercise control over their own behavior (Conley & French, 2014). Teaching students that academic goals are within their realm of control and influence is the first step in promoting student's goal orientation. Shim, Ryan, and Anderson (2008) note that goal orientation is directly correlated with academic

achievement. Academic goals cause students to be able to master new tasks and to pursue growth in knowledge. Encouraging students to have high educational aspirations help to ensure students will pursue postsecondary education and training. Educational ambitions are strongly correlated to college enrollment and retention. Cabrera and Nasa (2001) found that students who have an ambition to obtain a college degree are 28% more likely to apply and to go to college than students who never establish those goals.

Not only does learning how to set goal and master goals lead to college success, but it can have lasting impacts on lifelong learning as well. Conley and French (2014) state that goal-setting and strategies for goal attainment are 21st-century skills that will become more and more valuable in the workplace over time. The workplace of today thrives when individuals take initiative and demonstrate their effectiveness to meet goals and deadlines. Students that learn how to problem-solve to find answers to difficult situations and circumstances will more easily adapt to new situations, an added benefit in the workplace. The researchers note that the world today is rapidly changing and is one that requires individuals to be adaptable to new situations. Individuals, who understand how to set goals and know what is required to achieve those goals, will successfully live a life that is full of constant demands and the acquisition of new skills. Thus, learning how to take ownership of one's own learning, will not only be beneficial for school, but throughout an individual's life.

The emphasis for ABE programs to develop learners who are goal-oriented and who think about their future educational endeavors comes from accountability at the federal level. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the governing law for adult education. The reauthorization of this law in 2014 by Congress helped to redefine two programs, which are Title I, the adult workforce development program, and Title II, the Adult Education

and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). Each year, Congress appropriates approximately $600 million for the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (DeSchryver & Dlugoleski, 2015). AEFLA is the main funding sources for adult education services that each of the 50 states provide to over one million students each year. The federal government distributes funds to states based on Census data on the number of adults who lack a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school.

The money funneled from WIOA to adult education programs now provides improved services to ABE students. Although ABE programs continue to support a strong emphasis for high school credential completion, WIOA "recognizes that completion of high school is not end to itself but a means to further opportunities and greater economic self-sufficiency" (Employment and Training Administration, 2016, p. 4). WIOA requires that ABE programs implement and create new activities that include integrated education and training, workforce preparation activities, and career pathways. Integrated education and training provides opportunities for students to explore careers while they earn their high school credential. Workforce preparation activities include instruction that teaches students the soft skills that are required for successful employment. Career pathways programming provides opportunities to for students to be dual-enrolled in courses that lead to students short-term credentials that would make them more marketable for employment. The purpose of students taking career pathway courses is to engage students early in thinking about their careers and highlighting an emphasis to seek postsecondary education opportunities. All these new programs initiatives indicate a sustainable effort and source of funding to helping students transition.

Career Pathway Model

Career pathways are becoming more and more prevalent in ABE programs as instructors and staff work diligently to fine-tune goals for transitioning students to postsecondary education. The U.S. Department of Education (2015) writes that:

> Career Pathways systems involve employers and other stakeholders in: identifying the skills that are needed by high-demand employers; determining how students are deemed proficient in these skills; identifying the credentials that employers value in making labor market decisions; providing work-based learning opportunities for students; and identifying how to validate curricula and credentials (Pappalardo & Schaffer, 2016, p. 36)

Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania used this definition to develop career pathways that focused on hospitality, healthcare, and manufacturing. ABE classes contextualize GED curriculum to focus on these areas so that students have hands-on learning opportunities about careers they are interested in pursuing. Students are also co-enrolled in classes where they can earn short-term credentials in these pathways. Engaging students in pathways and short-term credentials help students identify their career goals and the steps they need to take to accomplish their goals. Carnevale, Rose, and Hanson (2012) conclude that community college open enrollment policies and course offering all throughout the day and evening allow any student to enroll in certificate and career pathway programs. This becomes a conduit for ABE students to access postsecondary education because they become immersed in the college environment and coursework that not only leads to their GED, but to educational opportunities that feed into higher education opportunities.

Northampton Community College invested an extensive amount of time and effort into developing the Skills, Tasks, and Results Training (START) Hospitality Program for students located in the college's service area. The partnership included two workforce development boards, two community colleges, and nine hotels and resorts. The 300-hour program includes 200 hours of hospitality instruction, 45 hours of academic support, and 55 hours of fieldwork experience. While students are enrolled in the program, they receive certificates in customer service training (Guest Service Gold), ServSafe (food handling), and Responsible Alcohol Management Program (RAMP). Students that transition to the College's hospitality management associate degree programs, this three-credit Hospitality 101 course will be waived, and students will start their postsecondary education experience with course credit (Pappalardo & Schaffer, 2016). All of this happens simultaneously while students are enrolled in an ABE class. Thus, students have the opportunity to earn multiple certifications, college credit, and their GED all at the same time. Essentially, this pathway allows students to receive intrusive advising, academic support, and goal-setting in a structured way where students are engaged in setting and completing goals around a career cluster they may be interested in pursuing when they transition to postsecondary education. The process is simple, seamless, and accelerated for students so that the gratification of accomplishing academic goals is relatively quick. This is engaging and motivating in and of itself.

Career pathways, goal-setting and intrusive academic support help students see beyond obtaining their GED credential. This bridge programming, according to many researchers, is one of the most successful ways to help students transition while at the same time meeting the demands and requirements of the WIOA legislation. Transition of ABE students to postsecondary education and training can is considered a doable task by ABE program by

overcoming five challenges, including (1) the content of instruction; (2) pedagogy; (3) students' familiarity with college expectations; (4) fragmented funding, administration, and management; and (5) program participation and engagement (Crary-Ross & Rutschow, 2014, p. 22).

Successful ABE programs include more rigorous instruction framed around academic standards, career exploration, and contextualized learning experiences that are relevant to students' lives. Programs accomplish this task by setting high academic expectations and more rigorous instruction in reading, writing, math, and critical thinking (Crary-Ross & Rutschow, 2014). Rigorous instruction means requiring students to work on assignments outside of class so that working outside of the classroom becomes a common practice for students, as homework and projects will be commonplace for students when they transition to postsecondary education. Higher expectations for class attendance and participation are included in this new ABE program model as well to help students set goals that will ensure they are successful in a college environment that requires those understood expectations.

As noted by many researchers, successful ABE program models include college transition supports. This can include individual case management and advising to students, but could also include variations of college success courses where students are immersed in the expectations of college life. This strategic and intrusive advising should also include helping students complete college applications, submit financial aid forms and documentation, prepare for college placement tests, and to choose a degree path that is clearly aligned with the career goals and objectives they have been working on in their ABE courses. Advising and support also includes helping students set goals, create a plan for accomplishing those goals, and learning how to be responsible for their own learning. All these tasks continue to surface from multiple

researchers and studies because many of the students in ABE programs are lacking these necessary skills that are needed for their success as they transition.

As students enrolled in ABE courses satisfactorily meet their goals and objectives to earn their GED and any short-term certifications, they should begin to develop direct connections with postsecondary education (Crary-Ross & Rutschow, 2014). As students explore careers, they should have the opportunity to make connections and develop relationships with faculty that teach in those program areas. This will help students build community with college and get to know instructors and other administrators that oversee specific degree programs. Successful ABE programs also begin to integrate faculty advising and tutoring within their classes as well so that students become even more familiar with postsecondary education services.

Successful ABE programs must overcome the challenges of fragmented funding to effectively meet student needs and fulfill the requirements of WIOA. This simply means working with multiple agencies to provide the necessary support services that students need (Cary-Ross & Rutschow, 2014). Title I agencies, such as the WIOA Youth program and the WIOA Adult/Dislocated Worker program receive funding from local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) to provide ABE students with services that include career advising, childcare assistance, transportation assistance, and work experience programs where students can explore careers they are interested in on a short-term basis with pay. Many of these programs are specifically for low-SES students with or without a high school diploma. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is another supportive service that works with students who have learning difficulties. They can provide transportation and tuition assistance for students who desire to transition to postsecondary education. These are just a few examples of how ABE programs can partner with other agencies

to remove or alleviate barriers from students so that they can give their full effort and attention to their education and goals.

As ABE programs make a concerted effort to meet the federal mandate of the WIOA legislation, the end goal is that the likely next step for any GED graduate will be to immediately pursue postsecondary education and training opportunities. In 2010, President Obama set a goal for higher education in the United States. His goal, which has become widely known across the nation, is that by 2020, the United States would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (Forbes, 2010). This goal has been coined as the North Star guiding national efforts to improve education. In 2010, approximately 40% of Americans earned college degrees. To reach the 2020 goal, and to regain the international lead of having the highest proportion of college graduates, 60% of Americans would need to hold a college degree. Forbes (2010) writes,

> Colleges and universities should be developing and expanding evidence-based practices to increase access to college, accelerate learning and support success in the workplace and life, even if doing so means moving past traditional methods of scheduling, structuring classes, and 20th century academic programs in need of modernization (p. 2)

Interestingly enough, just four years later, President Obama signed the WIOA legislation into law. This legislation is now becoming the vehicle for the change required to give more students access to higher education. If students of poverty and in rural areas, not only achieve their GED, but have the support and resources necessary to transition to higher education, then Obama's goal can become a reality. WIOA places some of the harshest accountability and regulations on ABE programs, which shows the importance of improving the quality of these programs to lift individuals out of poverty and place them on a path toward higher education and degree

attainment. Research emphasizes quality of instruction, community support, career advising, and most importantly, goal-setting to propel students forward. Transitioning ABE programs can be extremely challenging, based on the difficult populations that are served. However, it is at the heart of what is required to change the economic and socioeconomic outcomes of neighborhoods, communities, cities, states, and the nation.

An ongoing theme from the various researchers in adult education is that poverty and low SES can drastically influence the choices an individual makes in terms of their educational endeavors and their eventual success in education. The environment individuals are surrounded by also has an influence on educational outcomes. Being surrounded by individuals that did not complete their high school credential or did not enroll into college creates an environment where people are not encouraged to pursue their education or where they do not have clear guidance on the steps that are involved to make good choices when enrolling into college. The overrepresentation of minority groups, particularly African Americans, in adult education programs only perpetuates the need of understanding how to help this group find success in pursuing their education. This study focused on concrete and systematic ways to move students from completing their high school credential into college. Many researchers noted that postsecondary education and training was one of the best strategies for moving individuals out of poverty and into a better and brighter future.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Methods

Most students in the TCS program that earn their HSE/GED never enroll into college, an ongoing problem and challenge. The purpose of this study was to determine strategies and best practices that encourage students in the TCS program at LCC to transition into postsecondary education opportunities upon completing their HSE/GED. This action research study design involved implementing a 12-week pilot program that included three classrooms and 23 participants. The participants in the pilot program received contextualized instruction, participated in weekly goal-setting and advising appointments, and had an opportunity for co-enrollment into short-term training programs while working towards their HSE/GED. These interventions addressed four research questions: (1) How does contextualized learning experiences and contextualized instructional strategies motivate a student to pursue postsecondary education or training programs? (2) How does goal-setting help a student to earn a high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education? (3) How does on-going advising help to mitigate barriers and guide students on a pathway to transition once they earn their high school credential? (4) How do co-enrollment opportunities motivate students to complete their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education opportunities?

The research methods employed in this study was action research. Action research is "any sort of systematic inquiry conducted by those with a direct, vested interest in the teaching and learning process in a particular setting; it is truly systematic inquiry into one's own practice" (Mertler, 2013, p. 39). Action research provides a structured process for customizing research findings, which enables educators to address specific programs within their own classrooms or school programs. Mertler (2013) writes that "the best way to know if something will work with

your students or in your classroom is to try it out, collect and analyze data to assess its effectiveness, and then make a decision about your next steps based on your direct experience" (p. 39). The Mertler framework was the chosen method for this study because improving the matriculation of students from the TCS program into college cannot be an isolated effort, but one that involves teachers and the program working together as a whole.

The action research process involves four steps that consist of planning for your research, acting on the plan, developing an action for future cycles, and finally, reflecting on the process as a whole (Mertler, 2013). Action research not only involves a single teacher but is most beneficial in a collaborative approach where administration and teachers work together to solve a common problem with students across the entire program. Collaborative action research is characterized by the following process:

> (1) It consists of practitioners working together as a team. (2) The focus of the team is on a common issue, problem, or goal. (3) There should be the development of synergy that inspires one another. (4) The focus of the research should be on creating momentum toward more insight into the problem, and greater learning and growth relative to the common issue being investigated. (Mertler, 2013, p. 41)

Sagar notes that collaborative action research fosters professionalism in teaching (1992). It creates an environment where all individuals involved in the TCS program can collectively work together to solve a systemic problem in the TCS program. It takes a collaborative effort in any organization to make effective change and to chart a new course for a program.

A common problem within the TCS program is that that there are not enough students transitioning to postsecondary education after they earn their high school credential in the program. The federal government uses a transition measure as one of the indicators of an adult education's effectiveness in serving students. The federal government annually tracks the number of students in each adult education program that transitions to postsecondary education. LCC annually receives approximately $254,000 in federal funding, therefore, it is important to make continual improvement in this area so that the TCS program remains competitive to receive this funding.

In 2016, 126 students entered the transition cohort that is defined by the federal government. To be counted in the cohort, students had to enter the TCS program with a high school diploma at entry, earn their high school credential within the program year in the program, or be dual-enrolled in a career pathway (curriculum) program. Out of 126 students, only 42 (33%) students met the criteria to be considered for transitioning to postsecondary education. The goal of this study was to generate recommendations for program-wide improvement and that within two years 50% of the students that meet the criteria for the transition cohort will transition into postsecondary education.

The sample of students will be the action research study. When a student enters the TCS program, they are given a career interest inventory that begins to frame an educational goal for the student before they are placed in a classroom. A student also takes an NRS (federally approved) placement test before registering for classes that identifies a student's strengths and weaknesses in reading and math. The program has three distinct GED classes that provide contextualized instruction toward different career clusters. There is a GED class for Culinary/Horticulture, Trades (i.e. HVAC, Welding, Advanced Manufacturing), and for Health

Sciences. After a student takes a career interest inventory, they are given the option to take one of these specific classes. The goal is that students can learn more about a career they are interested in while they are working toward earning their high school credential. A student must also score at a 6.0 grade equivalency or higher in reading and math on the placement test to be given the option to immediately enter these classes. Because students that are in these classes have an educational goal and are at a higher academic level, they are ideal for being selected as part of this study. Thus, the specific program that is implemented for this study will be targeted for the students in these three classrooms. The students will be tracked, observed, and followed throughout the implementation of a specific pilot program to chart and document their progress toward transitioning to postsecondary education.

Advantages

The purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity for an educational program to solve or improve a local problem. It is evident that a low number of TCS students are transitioning to postsecondary education. Although statistics show trends in adult education and the low transition rate of students, it does not necessarily reveal what intrinsically or extrinsically motivates students to pursue higher education. This study involved students on a local level, which could yield opportunities for program improvement and enhancement to help students transition to college at a higher rate at LCC. Because transition is a priority initiative in the college's new strategic plan, the study has the potential to help the college meet an important action item that has been identified by the institution's administration and Board of Trustees. The successful strategies and outcomes that arose from this study have a higher likelihood of garnering support for implementation at the institution because of the priority given to student transition and student success in the college's new strategic plan.

Currently, adult education programs must complete an AEFLA grant every three years to guarantee state and federal funding. An update to the grant must be completed on an annual basis to ensure continued funding between the grant cycle. A crucial component of this grant is a program's ability to demonstrate past effectiveness. The more artifacts a program can provide to demonstrate past effectiveness, the more competitive it will be to gain additional federal funding. Adult education programs can demonstrate past effectiveness by gains in standardized testing, high school equivalency (GED) graduates, and by students transitioning to postsecondary education. Thus, an increase in the number of students enrolling into postsecondary education will demonstrate a higher level of effectiveness and quality. This will provide evidence for continued federal funding and an increase in federal funding in the future.

Increasing the number of students enrolling into postsecondary education will keep students at the institution longer, which will increase FTE for the college over time. An increase in FTE means more revenue for the college. If students persist in their degree programs and complete, there will be more highly qualified individuals in the area to fill needed job vacancies. If more students are credentialed to fill jobs in the area, employers will have a larger pool of applicants for jobs. Having a pipeline of potential employees will improve economic development in the area, which will strengthen workforce partnerships with the college.

Research Design

This study was divided into three phases. Phase one consisted of gathering data on why students at LCC in the TCS program have transitioned to postsecondary education and why students have not transitioned once they earned their high school credential. Approximately 15 students that have transitioned to postsecondary education from the TCS program were gathered into a focus group to be interviewed and asked specific questions about why they decided to

pursue higher education. Another focus group of approximately 15 students that did not transition once they earned their high school credential were interviewed and asked specific questions about why they decided not to pursue high education. A convenience sampling method was used in selecting the volunteers for the focus group and all students earned their HSE/GED in the TCS program within the last 12 months. Phase two consisted of developing a pilot program with approximately 25 TCS students that employed specific research-based strategies to encourage and facilitate transition of these students once they have earned their high school credential. Although the focus group data is not essential to the pre-determined interventions for the pilot program, it may yield suggestions from a student's perspective on how to guide and frame the interventions during the study. This pilot program was implemented for approximately 12 weeks. Phase three consisted of analyzing the results of the pilot program for future program development and improvement.

Data Collection

A series of interview questions will be developed for the focus groups to gather data regarding the decisions students made to pursue higher education or not to pursue high education. The research questions developed for this study and the interventions that will be implemented for the pilot program were adapted from programming and interventions that showed favorable students outcomes from LaGuardia Community College in New York and Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania. Each focus group will be asked the following questions: (1) Why were you motivated to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program? (2) Were there other sources of motivation (i.e. family, friends, employment, etc.) that encouraged you to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program? (3) When you entered the TCS program, what were your short-term and long-term goals? (4) How did the Transitional

and Career Studies program help you complete your high school equivalency diploma (GED)? (5) How did the Transitional and Career Studies program help you enroll into college (if it was your goal)? (6) How did your instructor encourage or not encourage you to enroll into college? (7) Describe the type of instruction you received in the classroom, including specific learning experiences that helped you to think beyond your high school equivalency diploma (GED). Did any learning experiences influence your decision to enroll in college? (8) How could the Transitional and Career Studies program help students to enroll into college in an easier way? Once again, the data collected from the focus group interviews will not necessarily drive the research-based strategies employed for the pilot program. However, it may yield insight on the current strengths and weaknesses of the TCS program, which could help to frame and guide the interventions used in the pilot program.

Research-based interventions that have been developed by LaGuardia Community College will be strategically packaged to develop a pilot program that will seek answers to the following research questions: (1) How does contextualized learning experiences and contextualized instructional strategies motivate a student to pursue postsecondary education or training programs? (2) How does goal-setting help a student to earn a high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education? (3) How does on-going advising help to mitigate barriers and guide students on a pathway to transition once they earn their high school credential? (4) How do co-enrollment opportunities motivate students to complete their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education opportunities?

Data and evidence for each research question will be collected in the following ways:

1. How does contextualized learning experiences and contextualized instructional strategies motivate a student to pursue postsecondary education or training programs?

The three teachers that are involved in the pilot program will take part in two professional development sessions where they will receive training on how to contextualize instruction in their classrooms. I will provide the training for these professional development sessions. The Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD) is a non-profit organization that develops research-based educational strategies to improve student success. CORD advocates a constructivist approach to teaching that incorporates the REACT strategy. The REACT strategy includes five essential learner engagement strategies: Relating, Experiencing, Applying, Cooperating, and Transferring (CORD, 2018). This strategy is designed to help students build new skills and knowledge regardless of where they start. The "R" stands for relating. Instructors must take the NC Adult Education Content Standards and relate the curriculum to a student's everyday sights, events, and conditions. The instructors must then relate these everyday situations to new information students are learning. The "E" stands for experiencing. Learning in the context of exploration, discovery, and invention is at the center of contextual learning. This means that students take ownership of their own learning and learn by making their own discoveries. This can be done through personal research and through hands-on learning experiences. The "A" stands for applying. This strategy incorporates applying concepts and information in a useful way. Applying learning in adult education usually involves occupational activities that emphasize careers and engagement with postsecondary education programs. Instructors and students will have the opportunity to engage in plant tours within the community as well as to work with curriculum programs at the college so that students are able to make connections with their current learning to their future career and educational goals. The "C" stands for cooperating. Cooperation involves opportunities where students can share, respond, and communicate their learning with each other. Employers and higher education values

individuals who can communicate effectively and work comfortable with others. Therefore, it is important to develop these skills in the adult education classroom (CORD, 2018, p. 3). Lastly, the "T" stands for transferring. This involves instructors gauging what students already know about a topic to build their current knowledge and expand it.

After instructors attend professional development, they will be given an opportunity to collaborate and create lessons plans that incorporate the REACT strategy. Instructors will be responsible for incorporating this strategy in their weekly lesson plans. Students are given the TABE assessment as their initial assessment (i.e. placement test) before entering a classroom. An alternate form of this assessment is given every 60 hours of instruction to chart student's progress in math and reading based on scale score. This assessment will be used to measure the impact of contextualization instruction on student learning. Students are scheduled for 20 hours a week of instruction in these classes. Student retention in the program as well as the number of hours they attend their respective class will also be used to measure student engagement and the effectiveness of contextualized learning.

2. How does goal-setting help a student to earn a high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education?

The three instructors that are involved in the pilot program will receive professional development training on SMART goal-setting. I will also provide this training to instructors while they are learning about the REACT strategy. The SMART acronym stands for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. When students attend orientation for the TCS program, they receive instruction on SMART goal-setting and learn how to write measurable goals. When students enter the classroom, their instructors will continue to incorporate goal-setting. Students will be required to write weekly and monthly goals that consist of learning

academic content as well as progress toward earning their high school credential. Students will record their goals in an individualized student handbook that will be kept in the classroom. Students will record when they meet each of their goals. When the pilot program ends, the handbooks will be collected to record how many goals students were able to meet. Students cannot transition to postsecondary education if they do not make progress toward completing their high school credential.

3. How does on-going advising help to mitigate barriers and guide students on a pathway to transition once they earn their high school credential?

Currently, the TCS program has no structured advising that is offered to students on a consistent basis. The instructors of the students selected for the pilot program will take on the role of academic advisor for their respective students. Instructors will set aside one day a week for advising appointments with each of their students. These advising appointments will take place during instructional time and will consist of one-on-one sessions where each teacher reviews SMART goals that students have developed and assesses the completion of those goals. The students and instructors will make anecdotal notes in their student handbooks to record student progress on meeting their goals as well as to identify plans for helping students mitigate barriers to their education. The instructor, as advisor, will take the opportunity to find out the successes students are achieving in the classroom as well as the challenges and barriers they have that are competing against their goals. Financial barriers that may be hindering students from earning their high school credential and signing up to take the GED tests will be mitigated as well. These advising sessions will also include time where students have presentations from Student Services in regard to the LCC application process, FAFSA, the college placement test, as well as what to expect their first semester of college. The goal of these advising sessions and

presentations is to help students remain focused on their goals and to make a smooth transition to postsecondary education. Creating a college community for the students and tiers of support is crucial to student success and transition.

4. How do co-enrollment opportunities motivate students to complete their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education opportunities?

Adult education policy for North Carolina identifies a tuition fee waiver program available to students that will pay for students to take curriculum classes or one continuing education class that leads to a third-party credential. The pathways available to students at LCC include Health-Related courses, Trades courses, and Horticulture courses. All these courses fall under continuing education, but students can receive college credit for the course if they enroll in the degree programs for these program areas once they complete their high school credential. Students qualify for the tuition fee waiver based on their TABE assessment. This is the test students are given for placement and the test students take every 60 hours of instruction. Students are tested in reading and math and must achieve a 9.0 grade equivalency or higher in both areas to receive the waiver. The number of students co-enrolled in these courses will be tracked as well as any students who enroll in postsecondary education once they complete their high school credential. Student progress toward completing their high school credential that are co-enrolled will be compared to students that are not co-enrolled in other courses.

Data Analysis

TABE Assessment

Throughout the pilot program, several items were tracked and recorded to determine student progress. Over the 12 weeks that the pilot program was implemented, student performance on the TABE test was evaluated. This assessment is given as a placement test when

students enroll in the TCS program. The test gives a scale score and grade equivalency for math and reading and serves as a baseline to show a student's academic strengths and weaknesses. Student progress is determined by an increase in scale score in math and/or reading. An educational functioning level (EFL) gain can be achieved in either area if the scale score increase is significant. The threshold for an EFL gain is determined by the National Reporting System (NRS) and OCTAE (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education). If an EFL gain is achieved in either academic area, the TCS program receives additional state and federal funding for the student. This test is given to a student after every 60 hours of instruction. If students attend their classes consistently (i.e. 20 hours a week), they will have the opportunity to take the TABE test up to four times within the timeframe of the pilot program. Once students achieve a high school level in either academic area, they can begin official testing for the GED. Therefore, it is important to consider progress on the TABE test as a measure of determining the success of the pilot program.

HSE/GED Progress

The most popular test vendor students use when taking their GED is HiSET, which is a high school equivalency assessment created by Educational Testing Service (ETS). The test battery consists of five subject test that include Language Arts – Reading, Language Arts – Writing, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Students must achieve a score of eight on each subject test and have an overall score of 45 on the test battery to earn their GED. Students need their high school credential to transition to postsecondary education. Thus, progress students make toward earning their GED (i.e. passing individual subject tests) was tracked as a measure to determine the success of the pilot program.

Goal-Setting

Students wrote weekly and monthly SMART goals to frame a learning plan that hopefully lead to progress and success. Students kept a journal where they recorded their SMART goals. Instructors, acting as advisors, evaluated the student's progress toward achieving these goals on a weekly basis and when a goal was achieved it was recorded in their journals. At the end of the pilot program, these journals were collected to determine how many students achieved goals throughout the duration of the pilot program.

Co-Enrollment and Advising

Although it is difficult for many students to achieve their GED and transition to postsecondary education in a 12-week period, there is ample opportunity for students to make significant progress toward this goal. If students achieve a high school level on the TABE test in both math and reading, they have an opportunity to enroll in a course of study at no cost that can lead to college credit or an industry-recognized credential if they enroll into postsecondary education once they earn their high school credential. The TCS program has eight pathways that students can take advantage of that includes, Nurse Assistant I, Phlebotomy, Pharmacy Technician, EMT Basic, Horticulture, Computer Integrated Machining, Welding, and HVAC. Co-enrollment does show progress toward transition and an effort by the student to further their education. Thus, the number of students that qualify or enroll in one of the courses above was recorded and tracked.

Transition to Postsecondary Education

The number of students that make the transition to postsecondary education was tracked and recorded as well. The number of students that complete an LCC application and their FAFSA application was recorded to track the steps students are taking to transition.

Attendance and Retention

Finally, attendance and retention for each student was tracked and recorded to determine if the pilot program was effective. All classes for the TCS program are free to the student because of state and federal grant funding. Attendance and retention in the program are always a factor towards a student's success or failure. The classes students were enrolled in for the pilot program was held five days a week for four hours each day. Thus, students had an opportunity to attend class for up to 20 hours each week. The TCS program is funded by contact hours in terms of budget FTE. Thus, each instructor was required to have sign in sheets where students sign in and out each day. They were also required to record their attendance daily in Web Attendance, an online attendance roster. Thus, the parameters are already in place to track attendance for each student as well as retention. Students that are engaged in the learning process and that can see the progress they are making, are more likely to remain in the program throughout its duration. Therefore, attendance and retention were used as a measure to determine the program's success. If a student withdraws from the program or attends sporadically, goals will not be achieved, and students will never get to a point where they are able to transition to postsecondary education. Retention and attendance of students in the pilot program was compared to students that are not in the pilot program that have an opportunity to receive instruction for the same time and duration.

Selection of Participants

Three classrooms within the TCS program were selected for the study. These classes were selected because students must be at approximately a 6.0 grade equivalency in math and reading on the TABE test to enter this class. Thus, they are at a level where they have the potential to make significant progress toward earning their GED and transitioning to

postsecondary education. The first class is a GED class that students enroll in if they are interested in Horticulture or Culinary Arts careers. This teacher provides students with experiences in this career field that may include reading about these careers or working with plants in the greenhouse at LCC. The second class is a GED class that students enroll in if they are interested in trades (i.e. Welding, HVAC, etc.). This teacher provides students with learning experiences in this career field that may include reading about these careers or visiting trades classes on campus to learn welding, manufacturing, and more. The third class is a GED class that students enroll in if they are interested in Health-Related careers. Students in this class may read about health-related careers or have guest speakers who work in this career field who talk to students about their careers. When students attend orientation to register for classes, they take a career interest inventory that highlights career clusters that they have a bend toward. The results from this assessment is also used when placing students in on of the three classes that were used for the study. Thus, students in these classes have an idea of a potential career that they want to pursue. This is another reason why the three specific classes for this study were selected. New students enroll in the TCS program approximately every four weeks. However, only students that were enrolled when the pilot program began will be tracked. Although enrollment varies in these classes throughout the program year, the goal was to have a total of 25 participants for the pilot program.

Context for the Study

The context for this study is significant on a local, state, and federal context. At a local level, the President of LCC has carved out a portion of the college's new strategic plan to address transition of students from the TCS program to postsecondary education over the next five years

(2017-2022). Goal 3 of the plan is Achieve – Creating a Quality Student Experience. Goal 3 states the following rationale:

> Student success requires a quality student experience from the beginning of a student's journey to completion, building on clear and well-defined pathways for students to achieve their goals. We are committed to introducing the full college experience with an inclusive and well-rounded support system. We will reduce barriers to success by expanding our support for students from diverse backgrounds, from interest through completion to transfer or employment. We will promote quality instruction in the classroom and through distance education that is built on best practices and rigorous assessment and that actively engages students with flexible learning opportunities. Students will benefit from the creativity, expertise, and innovation of our employees, and we will promote collaboration among instruction, student services, and other departments. (LCC, 2017, p. 14)

Student success from beginning to completion is important at LCC. Goal 3 identifies goal-setting as a way for students to overcome barriers to accomplish their educational endeavors and advising to help students follow clear and well-defined pathways from beginning to end. Therefore, because goal-setting and advising are strategies defined in LCC's plan, they are a focus of this study as well. More specifically, priority initiative 3.3B of the strategic plan state's that the college will "identify and implement strategies to improve the matriculation and success of transitional students (i.e. students in the TCS program) into workforce development courses and curriculum programs" (LCC, 2017, p. 14). Thus, on a local level, transition of student in the TCS program is a priority for the college. This plan was developed by the administration at the

college and was approved by the Board of Trustees. Thus, local stakeholders at LCC have made this an integral component of helping the college move forward in regard to student success.

On a state level, transition is also important to the NCCCS. Every spring, the NCCCS issues a document for each of the 58 community colleges that is called the Desktop Monitoring Report. This document is for program improvement and rates adult education programs at each college in several areas. Specifically, this report provides information regarding four critical questions about the students in the TCS program: Are they enrolling? Are they attending? Are they learning? Are they transitioning? The data provided in this study was gathered from the Desktop Monitoring Report. The transition goals in this report include specific data on the number of students transitioning to postsecondary education each program year. Therefore, on a state level, transition is an area that the NCCCS is holding each adult education program accountable. Transition is a key indicator on the report that is compiled with other data to give each program an overall score. Thus, the state has a large stake in ensuring local programs are effective in this area.

On a national level, the WIOA legislation has impacted all adult education programs across the United States. Each program must adhere to and respond to 13 considerations when writing the AEFLA (Adult Education and Family Literacy Act) grant for state and federal funding. WIOA encourages the establishment of a high-quality local adult education delivery system (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). With the new legislation, the 13 considerations were amended to hold local adult education programs accountable to responding to how they will develop programming that promotes transition to postsecondary education (consideration 8). AEFLA grants require a response to all 13 considerations to be considered for funding. Thus, on a national level, adult education programs are held accountable for transition and must provide a

plan for transition to receive any funding. Therefore, state and federal funding becomes perhaps the largest stakeholder to ensuring that local programs are providing a systematic approach to helping students move beyond their high school credential.

Limitations

This study was confined to LCC, a rural institution in eastern North Carolina that serves approximately 16,000 students each year. By comparison, Wake Technical Community College (WTCC), located in Raleigh, North Carolina, serves approximately 74,000 students each year. LCC is deemed as a medium-sized college in a system that includes 58 community colleges. Although many of the community colleges are in rural areas, there are several colleges located in more urbanized areas, including Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, Burlington, and Wilmington. Thus, the outcomes of a study at a rural institution may not have the same results at an institution located in an urban area with a growing economy with expanding businesses and industries. Students in more urbanized areas may not be dealing with the same challenges and barriers to their education as students in more rural areas. However, research suggests that most adult education students are at or below the poverty level, despite where they may be located geographically.

The time it takes for an individual to earn their GED varies with each person. Some of the main factors that affect an individual's timeframe include reading level, math level, and the amount of time the individual has to dedicate to preparing for the exams. Students enter the program at various academic levels, which is determined by a placement test they take before registering for classes. Because students enter at various academic levels, it may be difficult for many students to earn their GED and prepare for transition to postsecondary education within the 12-week time period that the pilot program will be offered. Thus, the progress students made

toward this goal was tracked as well. This may include progress determined by the student's pre and post-test scores on the placement test and successfully passing any of the five subtests to the HiSET (i.e. GED test vendor), in addition to tracking a student's GED completion and enrollment into postsecondary education.

Outcomes may also vary from smaller institutions to larger institutions due to student population and the number of individuals dedicated to implementing a new program or strategies. Other colleges may place a different value system on their adult education program and want to put resources and time in developing and improving other programs. The climate of an institution could impact the outcomes of the study as well. Transition of students from adult education to postsecondary education or training programs requires different areas of the college to collaborate and work together. Some institutions may have different work environments that do not encourage programs to work together, collaborate, and share resources. However, because most of the 58 community colleges across the state are showing declines in enrollment, most are interested in how they can help current students progress and further their education.

Summary

Adult education is one of the most dynamic programs in the NCCCS. Students enter the program from all walks of life with multiple challenges and barriers that have the opportunity to derail them from their educational goals and aspirations. The service area for LCC that includes Lenoir, Greene, and Jones counties lies in a very rural area of Eastern North Carolina with a relatively high rate of poverty. This presents additional barriers to students who are returning to school to finish their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education. The WIOA legislation reaffirms the commitment that adult education programs across the country should have in ensuring that students are pursuing additional educational opportunities beyond

their high school credential. Many programs across the country have developed strategies to help students transition and the goal of this study is to identify specific strategies and programming that will enable more students in the TCS program to earn their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education. Not only is this a specific goal in LCC's new Strategic Plan, but it is also a goal for the NCCCS and all other community colleges across the country.

This study employed an action research-based approach. The first step in action research is to identify a problem that is specific on a local level. The problem with the TCS program is that there are not enough students transitioning to postsecondary education after earning their high school credential. The second step in action research is developing a systematic approach that seeks to solve the problem. The TCS program created a pilot program with a specific group of students that included research-based strategies to help students progress through the program and to make strides toward enrolling in postsecondary education. The data collected from this study was used to generate recommendations for program-wide improvement.

The success of the program was evaluated in multiple ways. When students enter the TCS program, they take the TABE assessment as a placement test. This test yields a scale score for both reading and math. Students take an alternate form of this assessment every 60 hours of instruction to determine academic progress. Scale scores for math and reading at the beginning of the pilot program (Week 1) was compared to scale scores at the end of the pilot program (Week 12) to determine if students made gains. The HiSET exam that is primarily used for GED testing includes five subject tests. When students pass the complete test battery, they will earn their high school credential. The progress students make toward this goal was also tracked and used as a measure of success for the program. If students do not earn their high school credential, it is unlikely they will be able to pursue higher education.

Goal-setting and advising was also an integral component to the pilot program. Students focused their education plans by writing weekly and monthly goals. Instructors advised students on a weekly basis to assess their progress toward meeting their academic goals. Thus, this was an additional measure used to determine if goal-setting and advising had an impact on student progress. Student attendance and retention in the classrooms where the pilot program was implemented was compared to similar classrooms in the TCS program to determine if the pilot program improved attendance and retention. Students are more likely to meet their goals and transition if they attend class consistently.

If students are at a 9.0 grade equivalency in both reading and math on the TABE assessment, they can take advantage of a tuition waiver program to enroll in a career pathway course that could lead to college credit if they enroll in postsecondary education. The success of students co-enrolled in career pathway courses was compared to students who were not co-enrolled to determine how it impacted student progress and transition.

Overall, the broad goal of this study was to help increase the number of students that enroll in postsecondary education after they earn their high school credential. Based on data that includes the number of students that have entered the transition cohort at LCC within the previous two program years, an average of 36% of students are transitioning into postsecondary education. The overall improvement goal of the study was that the findings would generate recommendations that could be implemented program-wide. The long-term goal is that program-wide reform would impact the transition cohort data for LCC and bring the number of students transitioning to postsecondary education to 50% over the next two years.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) that was signed into law in July 2014 by President Barack Obama gave a new identity to adult education programs across the United States. The legislation propelled adult education programs into the college arena like never before. No longer were programs allowed to simply just focus on a high school credential. Instruction that exposed students to career development and real-life application became important. Helping students think about their futures in terms of education and employment also became an important framework for adult education programs.

With all of these new considerations, programs across the state of North Carolina began to restructure, redesign, and revisit their mission and vision statements. From these growing pains, programs have continually been searching for the right methods and practices that will position them to be compliant with WIOA. One of the biggest challenges is transitioning students that earn their high school credential into college programs. The Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program at Lenoir Community College (LCC) produces high school equivalency (HSE/GED) graduates each year, but most never enroll into college programs and take that next step to further their education.

The purpose of this study was to determine strategies and best practices that encourage students in the TCS program at LCC to transition into postsecondary education opportunities upon completing their HSE/GED. This action research study design involved implementing a 12-week pilot program that included three classrooms and 23 participants. The participants in the pilot program received contextualized instruction, participated in weekly goal-setting and advising appointments, and had an opportunity for co-enrollment into short-term training programs while working towards their HSE/GED.

The pilot program for this study began October 3, 2018 and ended on December 14, 2018. Prior to the start of the pilot program, an open forum was held for former graduates to determine what the Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program was doing well in terms of meeting student needs and areas the program could improve to help more students be successful. After the open forum, three classrooms were selected to participate in the pilot program, including a total of 23 students. The instructors in these classrooms incorporated the REACT strategy into their daily lesson plans as a way to contextualize instruction for students. The instructors made an intentional effort in helping students apply what they were learning to real life. The instructors also incorporated weekly goal-setting and advising with their students as a way to help students have a plan for their learning and to target HSE/GED completion and transition to postsecondary education. Finally, students were offered opportunities for co-enrollment into courses that lead to industry-recognized credentials to determine if it helped students frame a career path and a clearer direction for postsecondary education. These interventions addressed four research questions: (1) How does contextualized learning experiences and contextualized instructional strategies motivate a student to pursue postsecondary education or training programs? (2) How does goal-setting help a student to earn a high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education? (3) How does on-going advising help to mitigate barriers and guide students on a pathway to transition once they earn their high school credential? (4) How do co-enrollment opportunities motivate students to complete their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education opportunities?

Pre-Study Implementation

Open Forum

The effects of Hurricane Florence that impacted eastern North Carolina on Friday, September 14, 2018 had a devastating impact on Lenoir Community College and surrounding areas. The college closed on Tuesday, September 11 and did not reopen until Tuesday, September 26. Many students did not return to the program after the hurricane and it has been a factor in relatively low enrollment in our programs throughout the fall 2018 semester. Because Hurricane Florence occurred near the time that my study was scheduled to begin, it is worth noting as a significant challenge to the implementation of the study and the number of participants.

On October 3, 2018, I held an open forum for students who had been previous High School Equivalency (GED) graduates from the Transitional and Career Studies program within the last 12 months. I had seven student who participated in this forum and I was expecting approximately 25 students. Thus, I made additional phone calls to recent graduates and conducted phone interviews for an additional 13 students. All students were asked eight questions from the Focus Group Survey Questionnaire so that I could gain a better understanding of why they were motivated to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program and how the program helped them to reach their goals. Out of the 20 students surveyed, nine students were currently enrolled in postsecondary education, which includes a curriculum program or a short-term credential program in continuing education. The data from each survey question were gathered to determine specific themes among the responses.

1. Why were you motivated to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program?

2. Were there other sources of motivation (i.e. family, friends, employment, etc.) that encouraged you to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program?

Ten students noted a family member (i.e. spouse, parent, or children) was a direct source of motivation in going back to school. The other participants noted that they wanted to have access to college programs or to a specific job they were wanting to apply for. One student had an interesting response to these two questions. She is a 17-year-old girl who was homeschooled for the last several years and had recently earned her high school credential. Her mother graduated from our HSE/GED program a year earlier and her mother insisted that she also come to school to get her HSE/GED. The student answers, "I wanted to be the second person in my house to be a graduate, just like my mom. My father didn't get that chance" (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). Another participant commented, "Having my son motivated me to want to get my GED so that I can get my life back on track" (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). This participant was recently married with a one-year-old child. She made some mistakes in high school but was determined to set a good example for her child and her newlywed husband. She also responded, "My husband motivated me to come take the placement test; I didn't believe in myself. But he believed in me!"

3. When you entered the Transitional and Career Studies program, what were your short-term goals? What were your long-term goals?

All students noted that their short-term goal was to pass a specific GED subject test or to earn their GED. Fifteen of the students surveyed noted that enrolling into college was their long-term goal, while five of the students surveyed noted that getting a better career was their long-term goal. One participant conveyed just how much the TCS program meant to her. She was a young, Latino student in her early twenties who had many obstacles to overcome in order to earn

her high school credential. She had graduated just a few months before the open forum. The participant was a high school dropout, had gotten into some trouble as a teen, and had a felony on her record. She commented, “My short-term goal was to finish my GED and start a career in nursing” (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). The participant is currently enrolled in a Nurse Assistant I program, which is an entry level certification for nursing.

4. How did the Transitional and Career Studies program help you complete your high school equivalency diploma (GED)?

All the students noted that caring and motivated teachers were the main source of their success. They noted that classroom assessments, encouragement from instructors, and the collaboration among staff helped them succeed. A few of the students noted that financial assistance in the form of mini scholarships that covered test fees was the reason they were able to take the required GED assessments. Thus, classroom support and monetary support were a direct link to the success of all the students that participated in the survey. One student in particular left a meaningful impact on the discussions as a whole. He is a 20-year-old, African American who had been in the TCS program for over two years. He was not focused nor motivated until he met a special teacher who believed in him. He became more focused on school and began attended his classes regularly. The student also began taking HSE/GED subject tests and passing them on the first attempt. He also became surrounded by a community of students who were pushing him to finish his HSE/GED, just like they were doing. He responded, “My instructor and the students that finished before me told me that I could do it if I put my mind to it” (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). He is currently enrolled in college and working part-time in environmental services at Lenoir Community College.

5. How did the Transitional and Career Studies program help you enroll into college (if it was your goal)?

One student noted that the rigorous classroom instruction prepared him to enroll into college. An overwhelming majority of the students noted that teachers and other staff members in the program gave them the information they needed to enroll into college, including where to go for the college placement test, how to complete a college application, and how complete a FAFSA application. One student credits her instructor as the reason she decided to enroll into college. She is the mother of the daughter mentioned earlier. She earned her HSE/GED a few years ago from the TCS program and immediately enrolled into college. She will graduate in May 2019 with a two-year transfer degree and plans to enroll at East Carolina University to complete her bachelor's degree in human services. She responded, "My instructor encouraged me very much to enroll into college by the many different conversations that we had on a daily basis. He peaked my interest very much" (Anonymous, October 3, 2018).

6. How did your instructor encourage or not encourage you to enroll into college?

All students stated that their teachers encouraged them to enroll into college. Many students remembered their teachers having class discussions on the importance of college and how jobs that lead to a sustainable wage required some postsecondary education. A few of the students remembered their teachers showing them the options available at the college, which eventually helped them narrow down the program they would eventually enroll in.

7. Describe the instruction you received in the classroom, including specific learning experiences that helped you think beyond your high school equivalency diploma (GED). Did any learning experiences influence your decision to enroll into college?

Every participant mentioned encouraging conversations with instructors as being one of the most important factors that influenced their decision to enroll into college or to think about going to college in the future. One participant noted, “My instructor asked us what career we wanted, and we would research and look into those careers” (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). This participant is currently enrolled in college and she gives all the credit to her teacher with helping her determine a good career for her. Another participant went even further by commenting, “My teacher told me how she got where she is now and how she met her goals and furthered her education. Her life story inspired me to keep going” (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). This student is a very special individual. She attended an HSE/GED class held in the community near downtown Kinston. Her husband is a truck driver and she decided to go back to school to get out of the house rather than being alone when her husband was away. She is a middle-aged woman with financial stability from the income her husband makes. What had initially been just something to do in her free time became something real that she knew she could achieve based on the impact of her instructor. She is currently enrolled in college. All of the learning experiences from the participants were less about specific instruction and more about the relationship they had with their teachers.

8. How could the Transitional and Career Studies program help students to enroll into college in an easier way?

Sixty percent of the participants thought that the program provided exactly what they needed to know in order to enroll into college. Another 35% of participants noted that a more step-by-step process would be helpful and a better understanding of financial options for paying for college would be helpful. One participant noted, “Maybe have an enrollment workshop explaining every step of enrolling before students actually enroll. It could really motivate

people" (Anonymous, October 3, 2018). She is the same individual mentioned earlier who was motivated to return to school after the birth of her son and the encouragement from her newlywed husband. One student noted the importance of co-enrollment while in the Transitional and Career Studies program as an important factor in helping her cross the bridge into college. This student was co-enrolled in a Nurse Assistant I program while completing her high school credential. When she enrolls into college, she feels that she already has a direction to go in because of the co-enrollment opportunity she was offered in the program. Most of the students mentioned a more streamlined, step-by-step process as a way to better serve students in the future. Many of the students mentioned a workshop or meeting after they complete their high school credential as a more effective way to articulate the college enrollment process.

Most of the students who participated in the open forum felt that their challenges with postsecondary enrollment occurred after leaving the Transitional and Career Studies program. They mentioned not having the guidance to get through the college enrollment process and the they did not receive the necessary support after leaving the TCS program to determine their major, the number of classes they should take, or the type of instructional environment they needed to be successful in college. Although most students did not mention anything that the TCS program could do to better support students, it was evident from the open forum that advising and helping students plan for their college future was necessary for students to successfully navigate the bridge to postsecondary education.

Pilot Program Survey

On October 4, 2018, the pilot program began with 23 participants agreeing to be part of the study. All participants completed a survey of six questions to gauge their background

knowledge of the interventions that would be used in the study as well as their opinion on how important and effective the interventions are to a student's educational success.

1. Describe the kind of instruction that you believe will best help you to learn.

All participants clearly stated that hands-on instruction was the best way that they learned. One student noted, "I prefer to learn by seeing and doing the work" (James, October 4, 2018). James is a young man in his late 20s who lives in a group home in Lenoir County. He stays with other men who need supervision and are unable to live on their own. The student is very intelligent, and his goal is to enroll in a computer technology program at the college. He enjoys learning how things work by taking something apart and putting it back together again. Thus, his statement as a kinesthetic learner fits his learning style very well.

Many students also mentioned the importance of one-on-one instruction. In a learning environment where there are typically 10-15 students, this can be very challenging. However, many students feel that some one-on-one time with a teacher is essential to their academic success. It is worthy to note that another student went on to say that he learns best through "step-by-step instruction and hands-on learning" (Jonathan, October 4, 2018). Jonathan is a 17-year-old student who previously earned a welding certificate while being enrolled in the HSE/GED program. Welding requires hands-on learning and sequential steps must be followed to weld metal properly. His interest in welding fits the learning style he described very well. His father works in construction and he is currently working on remodeling a mobile home so that he and his significant other can move out on their own and start their lives together. His father has taught him a lot about building and construction by watching, seeing, and doing. Thus, he compares his academic learning in a similar way. His goal is to secure a full-time job in welding, and he does not plan to pursue postsecondary education at this time. Many students need to see

the steps involved to help them make the connections from one learning task to the next and this was a theme throughout the survey results.

Lastly, a student noted that they learn best by "having instructional guidelines packaged in a way to help you understand a problem" (Monique, October 4, 2018). She is an 18-year-old student who has just started the program in the fall. Monique is ready to get herself on the right track after falling behind in school due to hanging around with a group who influenced her to lose focus on her education. She is unsure of what she wants to pursue after completing her HSE/GED but does want to continue her education at LCC. The student has transitioned well into the program and has built community with many students in her class and neighboring classes as well.

It seems that hands-on, engaging and active instruction, is a core value that all the students hold as being important to how they best learn. However, many students drilled down even further to comment that instruction should be packaged in a way where each step in the learning process is made clear and is systematic in connecting their learning from one task to the next.

2. How important is it that you are able to connect learning to real-life?

All participants state that connected learning to real-life was important and essential to their academic success. One participant commented, "I connect learning to real-life by trying different things, like taking what I learn here and adding it to the stuff I do outside of school" (Aaron, October 4, 2018). Aaron is a young man in his early 30s who has been in the HSE/GED program for over four years. He has a learning disability in reading and math but is determined to finish school. His father is an entrepreneur who has his own photography business and is also a musician who plays several instruments at a local church. Thus, this student grew up surrounded

by a parent who was self-sufficient and has earned a living by pursuing various interests and talents. The student is also very musically inclined and enjoys playing the drums at a local church. Therefore, he constantly looks for ways to apply his learning to his various interests. He desperately wants to pursue music as a postsecondary education option once he completes his high school credential.

Many of the participants also noted the connection between real-life application and a career, stating that real-life learning gives insight on a potential career choice. Another participant explained, “It is important to me that I can connect with learning in school to real-life because it shows how you will need it” (Sam, October 4, 2018). He is a 17-year-old student who is taken care of by his grandparents. Sam’s biological parents have not been in his life for quite a few years due to neglect and making poor choices. He has learned to cope with these challenges by attending school regularly and not letting things outside of his control get to him. He enjoys learning about different careers and visiting different industries in Lenoir County. The student has not determined a possible career choice but does want to pursue postsecondary education once he completes his high school credential. Although he has had problems with school attendance in the past, he appears to be very motivated at this time to complete the program. A general consensus with all participants is that adult learners value a real-life connection with learning because most are thinking about their own careers and wanting to become a successful part of the workforce. These students are becoming adults and are thinking critically about their futures, which is why almost all of them emphasized the important of real-life learning. They are trying to determine what their futures should look like and how they will be able to financially support themselves.

3. Describe how setting personal goals helps you to be successful with making progress in school.

This question prompted many thoughtful responses from the participants as many felt strongly about setting goals and connecting it to their academic progress. One participant responded, “Setting personal goals helps you to be successful in school because it makes you more determined and helps to train your mind on what you want in life” (Monique, October 4, 2018). Setting personal goals is important to her so that she does not get distracted or influenced by those around her into losing focus on her educational goals. Another participant explained, “Setting goals is like having a vision board, you see yourself accomplishing something as you work and complete each goal” (Elliot, October 4, 2018). Elliot is a 17-year-old student who appears to be motivated for a period of time and then just disappears from the classroom for weeks at a time. He has little support at home and struggles with getting along with his parents. He is perhaps one of the most advanced participants in the study in terms of his academic ability. If he would come to school consistently, his teacher is confident that he is ready to take all the subject tests required for earning his high school credential. He withdraws from the program shortly after the study begins and his instructor has been unable to reach him to encourage him to return to class. Although he has a clear understanding of what he needs to do to accomplish his goals, he is overwhelmed by the challenges in his own home, which prevents him from earning his high school credential.

Most participants had a clear understanding of the importance of setting goals and the advantages of planning out their learning goals, but many also noted how the responsibilities of life can make it challenging to meet goals that are set. This gives a glimpse as to why it is difficult to retain students in adult education programs until they complete their high school

equivalency diploma. For many students, these obstacles tend to trump the support systems that programs put in place to help students mitigate and overcome these barriers to their education. One participant commented, “I set my goals, but it’s hard sometimes to stick with it while other things hold you down and prevents you from succeeding” (Brianna, October 4, 2018). Brianna has been in the program for a few years but has not stayed long enough to make significant progress at any point in time due to withdrawing shortly after enrolling. She is motivated to learn but has many challenges outside of school. She is a single-parent with a son who is in elementary school. She works long hours at a gas station to try bring enough income into her household to support her family. She wants to quickly finish her HSE/GED and gets very frustrated with herself if she does not understand something quickly. She is very critical of her own learning and wants to give up every time she is faced with a learning challenge. Having so many responsibilities outside of school puts an overwhelming pressure on herself to get her education. This pressure tends to take her away from school frequently for extended periods of time, leaving many gaps in her learning.

Another participant responded, “Setting a goal is kind of hard due to the fact that I have a child and I usually think about her interests first” (Elizabeth, October 4, 2018). She is a young parent trying to juggle the responsibilities of being a mother and getting her HSE/GED all at the same time. Everything Elizabeth does is conditional on the fact that her child comes first. However, despite these challenges, she does earn her HSE/GED during the pilot program. Thus, she managed to set goals and she was able to reach those incremental steps along the way to reach her goal of earning her high school credential. It is worth noting that many students recognize the important of goal-setting, but many also find it difficult to meet those goals with the additional responsibilities and obstacles they have in their lives outside of school.

4. How important is advising to you while you are in school?

It is evident from the responses of all participants that they feel advising is important, but many seem to lack an understanding of what advising means. The participants framed advising from a coaching and mentoring standpoint. One participant responded, “It’s very important because then I can express the way I feel and I can learn from someone else” (Carolyn, October 4, 2018). This particular student is an 18-year-old girl who is currently living with her grandmother. Carolyn has been through quite a bit of sickness, which heavily impacted her attendance during the pilot study. She has been in the program a few times previously, but never made substantial progress. Despite her irregular attendance, she successfully completed two HSE/GED subject tests during the pilot study. She currently has three subject tests left to complete in order to earn her high school credential. This student needed to have someone to confide in (i.e. her instructor) to help her through the health challenges she has faced and to help her stay encouraged and motivated to complete her HSE/GED.

Another student explained, “It is important someone is there giving you the extra push to succeed” (Jonathan, October 4, 2018). If his instructor had not stayed on him outside of his school schedule, he likely would not have finished during the fall semester. His attendance was low during the pilot program because he was constantly looking for new employment. However, due to the instructor’s contact with the student outside of school, he was able to complete his last HSE/GED subject test during the pilot program, a goal for the student. Advising does include mentoring and coaching, but it also includes framing a plan through goal-setting and helping students connect the dots from one milestone to the next. This student did connect advising with their instructor stepping into this role. This shows that this participant values the support and guidance from their instructor and already sees this person in that role.

5. Describe the kind of advising that will best help you to reach your goals.

One of the first observations made from the responses to this question is that most participants see advising as a weekly occurrence with support from their teacher. One participant explained, “I really don’t know what will help me to reach my goals unless my teacher gets at me day in and day out” (Brianna, October 4, 2018). Brianna has so many obstacles outside of school, that it is extremely hard for her to stay focused on goal-setting. Her odd and long hours working at a gas station and dealing with an elementary school child who has behavioral challenges, always seems to pull her away from school. She needs someone to frame a plan to help her reach her goals in small steps. Otherwise, school becomes more of an endless burden and less about success. Other participants describe the type of advising they need in terms of one-on-one meetings, face-to-face sessions, and being something that is straight-forward where they know exactly what is required to help them meet their goals. Every participant with the exception of one, described advising in terms of helping them to achieve their high school equivalency diploma. Only one student saw advising as something that would help with their transition to postsecondary education. The participant stated, “Advising will help me think about my future job and courses I need to take, which might include welding and auto repair” (Bobby, October 4, 2018). Bobby has learning and behavioral challenges and is currently living in a Group Home because he cannot live on his own unsupervised. School is very challenging for him, but he is making slow progress. He has yet to take an HSE/GED subject test but does see the importance of thinking about his future. However, this way of thinking was not consistent across the participants in the pilot program.

6. Are you interested in being co-enrolled in a course that is related to your career interest while you are enrolled in your HSE/GED course? Why or why not.

Fifteen students or 65% of the participants agreed that co-enrollment was important and expressed interest in taking an additional course beyond their HSE/GED course. The reasons for their interest centered around two main themes. One theme was a connection between co-enrollment and securing a future job. The participant with multiple health issues and low attendance stated, “Yes, I would like to try a Nurse Assistant I or Phlebotomy class because then I can knock out two things at one time and have something to look forward to” (Carolyn, October 4, 2018). The second theme was that several participants viewed co-enrollment as a way of helping them define a postsecondary education career path. The student working long hours at the gas station responded, “Yes, because it will help me move forward and not stay stuck in one place; It will help me better myself” (Brianna, October 4, 2018). An unexpected summary from this question is that eight participants or 35% responded that they did not want to be co-enrolled in an additional course and were satisfied with only focusing on their HSE/GED course. Two additional themes surfaced from their responses. Some participants explained that their work schedule or family responsibilities would not afford the time necessary to be enrolled in an additional course. Others noted that it would simply be too much for them. One participant responded, “I wouldn’t want to be enrolled in a course related to my interest while already enrolled in my GED because I would want to stay focused on one course without having too much pressure and responsibilities trying to complete both at the same time” (Monique, October 4, 2018). It is important to consider that over one-third of the participants were not interested in co-enrollment.

Research Question 1 Major Findings

Research Question 1

How does contextualized learning experiences and contextualized instructional strategies motivate a student to pursue postsecondary education or training programs?

The three instructors that were part of the pilot study (i.e. Trades instructor, Horticulture and Culinary Arts instructor, and Health-Related instructor) all followed the REACT strategy when developing lesson plans to engage their students in the learning process. Each instructor followed the same lesson plan format and were required to identify the parts of the REACT strategy that they incorporated in their daily lessons. Instructors used the REACT strategy as a way to document contextualized instruction in their lesson plans.

A student's access to postsecondary education is highly limited without a high school credential. However, it takes incremental steps for a student to get to this point. Thus, several indicators were examined to determine if contextualized learning experiences position students to make progress toward enrolling in postsecondary education. The first indicator is student persistence and retention in the program. For the duration of the pilot program, participants in the study had an opportunity to attend 194 hours of instruction. Thus, the percentage of instructional time each participant attended was examined to determine if contextualized instruction had a significant impact on student persistence and retention.

Major Finding 1

Contextualized instruction did have an impact on student persistence and retention.

Table 4 describes the percentage of hours participants in the Horticulture and Culinary HSE/GED class attended and if a participant was retained or withdrawn from the course during the pilot study. For a participant to be considered as retained, she must have attended

Table 4

Instructional Hours Completed for Horticulture and Culinary HSE/GED Students

Student	Student Instructional Hours	Total Instructional Hours	Percentage of Instructional Hours Attended	Retained (R) Withdrew (W) HSE Earned (HSE)
Angelina	114.00	194	58.76%	R
Carolyn	14.75	194	7.60%	W
Damond	170.00	170	100.00%	HSE
Monique	145.64	164	88.80%	R
Jonathan	11.50	84	13.69%	HSE
Nora	73.00	194	37.63%	R
Regina	16.25	84	19.35%	HSE
Cindy	113.00	194	58.23%	R
Elizabeth	52.75	76	69.41%	HSE
Lamont	175.75	194	90.46%	R
Maelin	145.00	194	74.74%	HSE
Brianna	5.75	194	2.96%	W
Dana	14.75	194	7.47%	HSE

instructional hours during the last two weeks of the pilot study. If a participant completed their HSE/GED during the pilot study, he was not considered as retained or withdrawn. Six participants met this requirement from this class.

In terms of total instructional hours attended, there are variations with a few students. For example, if a participant earned their HSE, the total instructional hours from the day they entered the pilot study to the day they earned their HSE was considered so that the percentage of instructional hours were not skewed or misleading. Participants have the option to exit class at that time with no penalty as support services are still provided to encourage postsecondary transition. The only additional variation in total instructional hours is with Monique. This participant joined the pilot study approximately seven and half instructional days after the other participants.

With these factors considered, the average of the entire class for instructional hours attended is 48.39%. However, only two participants from this class withdrew from the study. Nearly half of this class earned their HSE, which is overcoming the most significant barrier for qualifying to enter postsecondary education.

Table 5 describes the students in the Trades HSE/GED class. The average instructional hours that all participants attended was 63.14%. Only two of the participants in this class withdrew with no participant earning their HSE.

Table 6 describes the final class for the pilot study, which is the Health-Related HSE/GED class. The number of participants was low in this class as this group of students were affected the most by Hurricane Florence. Many students either did not return after the hurricane or were delayed in returning due to flooding and wind damage. Thus, instructional hours were adjusted accordingly to reflect their delay in returning to class or slightly late start to the pilot

Table 5

Instructional Hours Completed for Trades HSE/GED Students

Student	Student Instructional Hours	Total Instructional Hours	Percentage of Instructional Hours Attended	Retained (R) Withdrew (W) HSE Earned (HSE)
Bobby	171.00	194	88.14%	R
Aaron	189.75	194	97.80%	R
Sam	120.75	194	62.24%	R
Daequan	105.75	194	54.51%	W
James	105.50	194	54.38%	R
Elliot	9.75	194	5.03%	W
Frank	154.75	194	79.86%	R

Table 6

Instructional Hours Completed for Health-Related HSE/GED Students

Student	Student Instructional Hours	Total Instructional Hours	Percentage of Instructional Hours Attended	Retained (R) Withdrew (W) HSE Earned (HSE)
Roberta	85.5	114	75%	R
Gina	154.75	178	86.94%	R
Brian	129	178	72.47%	R

study. The average instructional hours that all participants attended was 78.14%. None of the participants withdrew and no one earned their HSE.

Two additional classes that are considered control group one and control group two were compared to the participants in the three classes that participated in 10the pilot study. These two classes did not have any students that participated in the pilot study but are both considered HSE/GED classes that meet for the same number of instructional hours and on an identical schedule with the three participating classes. Tables 7 and 8 are used as a comparison to Tables 4, 5 and 6 in terms of student data.

In Control 1, the average instructional hours attended was 59.79%. Only one student in Control 1withdrew from the class. In Control 2, the average instructional hours attended was 61.29% with only student withdrawing from the class. However, none of the students in either class earned their HSE during the 194-hour instructional period.

The Health-Related HSE/GED class and the Trades HSE/GED class both had a class average of student hours attended that was higher than the Control 1 and Control 2 classes. Thus, contextualized instruction was associated with student persistence overall.

Major Finding 2

Contextualized instruction had an impact on HSE/GED completion.

A significant outcome of the study is an associated link between contextualized instruction and HSE/GED completion. The Horticulture and Culinary HSE/GED class had six participants that earned their high school credential. With a total of 23 participants in the pilot program, that equates to 26% earning this credential during the pilot program. None of the students in the Control 1 and Control 2 classes earned their high school credential.

Table 7

Instructional Hours Completed for HSE/GED (Control 1) Students

Student	Student Instructional Hours	Total Instructional Hours	Percentage of Instructional Hours Attended	Retained (R) Withdrew (W) HSE Earned (HSE)
Jessica	88	194	45.36%	R
Darius	58.5	194	30.15%	W
Chuck	141	194	72.68%	R
Tripp	176	194	90.72%	R
Martha	165	194	85.05%	R
Donnetta	67.50	194	34.79%	R

Table 8

Instructional Hours Completed for HSE/GED (Control 2) Students

Student	Student Instructional Hours	Total Instructional Hours	Percentage of Instructional Hours Attended	Retained (R) Withdrew (W) HSE Earned (HSE)
Jose	171.50	194	88.40%	R
Bre	14	194	7.22%	W
Earl	148	194	76.23%	R
Trevanta	176.50	194	90.98%	R
Mikal	83.50	194	43.04%	R
Lucy	120	194	61.86%	R

However, the percentage of instructional hours attended, persistence, and HSE completion are not the only indicators to consider in terms of contextualized instruction and its effect on student learning and outcomes. The last indicator used to determine the impact of contextualized instruction was the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE). The TABE test is a state and federal assessment that is used in reporting and performance to indicate the growth students make in reading and math. This test gives a scale score in reading and math and is given after approximately 40 – 60 hours of instruction. All participants in the pilot program and the students in the Control 1 and Control 2 classes were given the TABE test at the time the pilot study began and at least one additional time by the conclusion of the study.

Major Finding 3

Contextualized instruction did not have significant impact on progress in reading and math based on pre and post-testing with the TABE assessment.

Table 9 describes the TABE assessments given to the participants in the pilot study at the beginning of the pilot program in both reading and math (pre) and by the conclusion of the pilot program (post). The TABE assessments given are in terms of scale score and progress is measured by an increase in scale score from pre-testing to post-testing.

Progress is defined as an increase in scale score from pre and post-testing in reading or math. Seventeen of the 23 participants (74%) made an increase in scale score in either reading or math. Ten out of 23 participants (43%) made an increase in scale score in both reading and math. The students that have an asterisk by their student identification number achieved an educational functioning level gain. This simply means that based on scale score, these students achieved enough progress between pre and post-testing to be placed at higher academic level in either

Table 9

TABE Assessment Scores for Participants in the Pilot Program

Student	TABE Reading (Pre)	TABE Math (Pre)	TABE Reading (Post)	TABE Math (Post)
Roberta	514	483	489	484
Gina*	549	537	600	560
Brian*	491	499	489	534
Maelin	574	593	555	591
Angelina*	549	593	574	648
Carolyn	600	542	574	527
Damond*	570	593	574	648
Monique	549	512	502	547
Jonathan*	595	593	574	648
Nora*	600	549	593	537
Regina*	574	468	600	593
Cindy	585	593	537	551
Elizabeth*	590	550	600	593
Dana	600	593	590	593
Lamont*	555	550	595	627
Brianna*	NONE	525	NONE	590
Bobby	489	471	515	489
Aaron*	503	514	528	498
Sam*	549	476	585	535

Table 9 (continued)

Student	TABE Reading (Pre)	TABE Math (Pre)	TABE Reading (Post)	TABE Math (Post)
Daequan	549	NONE	555	NONE
James	569	567	543	560
Elliot	561	568	538	573
Franklin*	477	590	537	593

Note. ***** Indicates an Educational Functioning Level (EFL) Gain.

reading and/or math. There are six EFL levels for students in adult education programs where TABE is the primary assessment used for academic progress. For reading, performing below 367 places you at the lowest EFL. For math, performing below 313 places you at the lowest EFL. Students that place above 596 in reading place at the highest EFL and students that place above 595 in math place at the highest EFL. Achieving an EFL gain in either reading or math is significant because an adult education program achieves performance-based funding for every student that makes this gain. For the participants in the pilot program, 13 or 57% made an EFL gain. Table 10 gives a comparison of the Control 1 and Control 2 students and their TABE assessment data.

Ten out of the 12 students in this group (83%) of students made an increase in scale score from pre and post-testing in either reading or math. Six out of the 12 students (50%) made an increase in scale score in both reading and math. Seven students in this group (58%) achieved enough of an increase in scale score from pre to post-testing in reading or math to make an EFL gain.

Ten out of the 12 students in this group (83%) of students made an increase in scale score from pre and post-testing in either reading or math. Six out of the 12 students (50%) made an increase in scale score in both reading and math. Seven students in this group (58%) achieved enough of an increase in scale score from pre to post-testing in reading or math to make an EFL gain.

The students in the Control 1 and Control 2 groups had a higher percentage of students that made an increase in scale score in reading or math by 9% than the participants in the pilot program. The Control 1 and Control 2 groups also had a higher percentage of students that made an increase in both academic areas as compared to the students in the pilot program (by 7%).

Table 10

TABE Assessment Scores for Control 1 and Control 2 Students

Student	TABE Reading (Pre)	TABE Math (Pre)	TABE Reading (Post)	TABE Math (Post)
Jessica	511	473	561	503
Darius	502	481	441	491
Chuck*	NONE	396	NONE	468
Tripp*	501	456	475	520
Martha*	477	432	484	504
Donnetta	511	482	418	418
Jose*	526	360	477	503
Earl	537	521	541	534
Trevanta*	491	381	492	458
Mikal*	491	457	545	549
Bre	593	574	588	528
Lucy*	489	500	549	543

Note. ***** Indicates an Educational Functioning Level (EFL) Gain

Although less significant, the students in the Control 1 and Control 2 groups had a higher percentage of students that made an EFL gain as well (by 1%).

Research Question 2 Major Findings

Research Question 2

How does goal-setting help a student to earn a high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education?

At the beginning of the pilot program, each participant was given a notebook where they could record their weekly and monthly goals. The notebook also included a section for students to evaluate their progress toward meeting their goals. Each participant in the program had an opportunity to write and achieve three monthly goals. Each participant also had the opportunity to write and achieve up to 12 weekly goals. With 23 participants in the program, that gives a collective opportunity for 69 monthly goals to be written and achieved, and 276 weekly goals to be written and achieved. After the study ended, a total of 41 monthly goals were achieved and a total of 141 weekly goals were achieved. Thus, it is evident that participants were able to achieve a level of success in their respective classes whether or not a high school credential was earned and transition to postsecondary education was achieved.

The goals that participants wrote were varied and quite different from each other. Words from the goals students wrote were used to generate common themes. Some students focused on improving math skills, including success with fractions, geometry, and algebra. Other participants focused on improving reading comprehension skills. Several participants wrote goals that included completing an official HSE/GED subject test. However, other participants wrote goals that were not related to any academic area. One participant wrote a goal to ask more

questions in class and to be a more active learner. Another participant wrote a goal to attend class more. Thus, student success can be measured in multiple ways.

Major Finding

There was an association between goal-setting and HSE/GED credential attainment.

In terms of HSE/GED, eight participants attempted and passed at least one official subject test. A total of 18 official subject tests were attempted and passed, with six participants earning their high school credential. None of the students in the Control 1 and Control 2 groups took an HSE/GED subject test and none of these students earned their high school credential. Thus, six participants in the pilot program removed a major barrier to transitioning to postsecondary education by earning their HSE/GED. One student that earned her HSE/GED during the pilot program is Maelin, a student that is living in a foster home and has moved to several places over the years, which left gaps in her learning. She entered the TCS program approximately three years ago with learning challenges in both reading and math. Although she has never been professionally diagnosed with a learning disability, her multiple moves and placement in several schools put her significantly behind her peers. Maelin was initially placed in a classroom with very low-level learners, but made academic progress, and entered an HSE/GED classroom. She has been in this class nearly two years. During the duration of the pilot program, she took her last two HSE/GED subject tests and earned her high school credential. She was so excited to finally achieve this goal at twenty-two, at one time thinking she would never get it done. She responded, “Goal-setting and my teacher helped me to choose what was most important, my education. This gave me knowledge and clarity on what I am supposed to do and who I am to become. I learned to keep a strong mind and to keep pushing forward.” (Maelin, December 14, 2018). This student is now enrolled in her first semester of college and is

pursuing an associate degree in fine arts. Almost all of the goals that students achieved during the pilot study was centered on achieving a learning goal or completing an HSE/GED subject test.

High school credential attainment is significant for the Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program as well. Not only is performance-based funding earned through EFL gain and TABE testing, it is also earned when a student achieves their HSE/GED. The program receives state and federal funding for each student that earns this credential during the program year.

Research Question 3 Major Findings

Research Question 3

How does on-going advising help to mitigate barriers and guide students on a pathway to transition once they earn their high school credential?

All three instructors that were part of the pilot program not only helped participants write and evaluate their own goals but set aside time each Thursday for advising appointments. The advising appointments included the instructor meeting one-on-one with each participant and assessing their progress in the class as well as meeting their goals. The instructor also discussed postsecondary education opportunities and the steps participants needed to take to eventually transition into college. Advising appointments were recorded in the same student journal where students wrote their weekly goals.

Major Finding

There was an association with advising and transition to postsecondary education.

With six participants earning their HSE/GED credential, all had the opportunity to transition into college. One student decided not to enroll into college for Spring 2019 due to securing full-time employment with a sustainable wage. Another student decided not to enroll

into college for Spring 2019 due to taking care of her young daughter. However, she plans to enroll at some point on the future. However, four participants took the step to complete a college application and to complete their FAFSA (financial aid) applications. Three participants took the final step in the college enrollment process and registered for college courses for the Spring 2019 semester. They are currently enrolled in college.

Research Question 4 Major Findings

Research Question 4

How do co-enrollment opportunities motivate students to complete their high school credential and to transition to postsecondary education opportunities?

Eight participants in the pilot study were not interested in co-enrollment opportunities on the day that the pilot study began. After opportunities for co-enrollment were presented to students, only one participant, Regina, decided take advantage of being enrolled in a course that leads to an industry-recognized credential while completing her high school credential. This student is 19 years old and has an infant she was taking care of at home. She was currently living at home with her mother. The course she decided to take was a Nurse Assistant I (NAI) course. The course met on Mondays and Wednesdays from 8:30 am to 2:30 pm and would include 18 weeks of instruction and clinicals. The expectation for Regina was that she would attend her HSE/GED class on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm. The NAI course has a very strict attendance policy because students must receive at least 192 hours of instruction before they can do a clinical experience and finally sit before the state board exam. The course requires students to gain knowledge of patient care, blood pressure and other vital signs, as well as diagnosing potential healthcare problems with patients. It is an entry-level course that could transition into a two-year degree nursing program. Thus, due to the nature of

the course, students can only miss 15 hours of instructional time. If students exceed this amount of time, they cannot go to clinicals and cannot sit before the state exam. Therefore, most students are dropped from the course at this point.

The instructor of the NAI course has a direct line of communication with the TCS program so that potential barriers and obstacles for the student can be identified early and mitigated if possible. A fee waiver was applied, which allowed Regina to take the course at no cost. Literacy funds in the TCS program can be used for co-enrollment if students meet certain qualifications, including satisfactory TABE scores. Within the first two weeks of class, Regina missed one day of instruction and had been tardy. After talking with the student, she said that she understood and would not miss anymore class time. Over the next few weeks, she missed three additional classes. She had not talked with her NA1 instructor or her HSE/GED instructor. When the TCS office tried to contact her, she could not be reached. After a few days of trying to get in touch with the student, we were finally able to do so. Her infant had been very sick, and she had to stay home with her child. Regina never communicated this to any of her instructors. Thus, due to previous missed class time and the time she missed with her child, she was dropped from the NA1 course. When asked why she did not communicate her challenges to her instructors, she responded, “I just didn’t think about it” (Regina, October 31, 2018). During this time, she was also not attending her HSE/GED course. After another week, she finally returned to her HSE/GED course. What is interesting is that she almost quit her HSE/GED class as well. After she was withdrawn from the NAI class, I gave her a call. I helped her to revise her goals and plan and I told her to refocus and commit to her HSE/GED course. Within a few days, she returned to her HSE/GED course. Regina did earn her high school credential within the first half of the pilot program. Although I did an advising session with her over the phone and not her classroom

teacher, it was this strategic planning and revision of her goals that got her back into the classroom in a timely manner before she became discouraged and quit school altogether. After she completed her HSE/GED, I called her and asked her about pursuing postsecondary education. She stated, “I am not interested in pursuing postsecondary education at this time and want to focus on spending time with my baby” (Regina, December 14, 2018). For her, withdrawing from the NAI course took some pressure away and pushed her to complete her high school credential.

Although there were not any other students enrolled that participated in co-enrollment for the duration of the pilot program, two participants had participated in co-enrollment during previous semesters. Jonathan was co-enrolled in an evening welding course during the spring 2018 semester that would end in 16 weeks. The course met on Monday and Wednesday evenings from 5:30 pm – 9:30 pm. The expectation was that he would attend their HSE/GED course during the mornings from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The student was fee waivered for the course and took the course at no cost. The welding course is transferable into the two-year welding degree program upon satisfactory completion and successful completion of the high school credential. When he began the welding course, his attendance in the HSE/GED course became sporadic and inconsistent. He also missed several welding classes as well. After communicating with the student, it was determined that his sporadic attendance and missed classes was due to looking for a part-time job and eventually securing a part-time job that conflicted with both of his courses. However, after working with the welding instructor, Jonathan was able to complete the course and to earn a welding certificate. His attendance in the HSE/GED course remained sporadic over the remainder of the spring semester and the summer 2018 semester. With very minimal attendance in the fall 2018 semester, he was able to complete

his high school credential in late November. Jonathan had been enrolled in the TCS program since June 2017.

Two weeks prior to completing his high school credential, Jonathan secured full-time employment with Kinston Steel, a company located in Kinston, North Carolina. The company cuts steel that is used to build structures across the southern United States. When asked about pursuing a postsecondary degree in welding, the he commented that was satisfied with his current level of education and wanted to focus on his full-time job and securing a home so that he could move out from living at home with his parents. He responded, "I'm doing great. I'm actually a welder at Kinston Steel now. You guys helped me out a lot" (Jonathan, December 10, 2018). He used his welding credential to secure this full-time job and is satisfied with working and saving money for his home.

Dana was also co-enrolled in an additional course for the spring 2018 semester. She enrolled in a NAI course that met on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:30 am to 2:30 pm for a duration of 18 weeks. The expectation was that she would attend her HSE/GED course on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm. Dana followed a very similar pattern as the previous students. Her attendance became inconsistent in both her NAI and HSE/GED course. The same fee waiver was applied to this student, which means she took the course at no cost. Her first barrier was childcare for her toddler. This was mitigated by working with her mother to be able to watch her child while she was in school. The next barrier the student faced was transportation. She was without her license and had no vehicle to get to and from school, depending on her mother to bring her to school. Dana was offered transportation vouchers through the TCS program in partnership with Lenoir County Transit, the public transportation service for Lenoir County. When her mother began seeking employment, the

student took advantage of transportation vouchers. However, she soon lost this privilege when she was suspended from Lenoir County Transit due to not showing up at the stop to ride on several occasions. Thus, transportation became the deciding factor in her substantial missed class time and being dropped from the NA1 course. Dana's attendance remained sporadic in her HSE/GED course for the remainder of the spring and summer 2018 semesters. After minimal instructional time in the fall 2018 semester, she did complete her high school credential, after being enrolled in the TCS program for two years. When asked if she was planning to enroll in postsecondary education, the 19-year-old responded, "Me and my mom are not getting along, and I am going to have to take care of my child right now" (Dana, November 21, 2018).

The data collected from the pilot program in terms of co-enrollment were not expected, based on previous research and the positive link between co-enrollment and successful transition into postsecondary education.

Major Finding 1

The lack of student interest in pursuing co-enrollment opportunities while working toward their HSE/GED.

When the pilot study began, eight of the participants (35%) expressed no interest in pursuing co-enrollment opportunities. One reason that the participants cited for this response was related to a lack of time to pursue additional educational opportunities in addition to their HSE/GED course. Another reason the participants gave related to responsibilities at home, which included taking care of small children or family members who were chronically ill. Finally, some of the participants stated that they needed to pursue part-time job opportunities to bring income into their households and could not risk losing income by taking an additional course.

Major Finding 2

Although there was a lack of participation and student success for students who participated in co-enrollment, there was substantial success from students completing their HSE/GED.

At the beginning of the pilot study, 15 participants (65%) expressed interest in pursuing co-enrollment opportunities. However, only one student, Regina, took advantage of a co-enrollment opportunity during the pilot study. Regina took a Nurse Aide Assistant I (NAI) course, while pursuing her HSE/GED. However, she was withdrawn from the NAI course after the first two weeks due to missing too many instructional hours. She had an infant at home and gave reasons for missing class due to childcare problems and sickness. An additional student in the pilot study, Dana, who was enrolled in a NAI course in a previous semester followed the same success. She started the NAI course, but was withdrawn half way through the course due to having to tend to a young child at home and the lack of childcare available. The final participant in the pilot study that participated in co-enrollment in a previous semester was Jonathan. He did complete the welding course successfully but was close to failing the course due to missed class time.

However, all three students earned their HSE/GED diploma during the pilot study. Jonathan was thrilled to finish his high school credential. When he finished, he responded, “In order to meet my goal and be where I wanted, I had to keep pushing no matter how hard it got!” (Jonathan, November 21, 2018). Even though this student earned a welding credential through co-enrollment, it did not push him to continue his education through postsecondary enrollment. Currently, none of the students made the decision to apply to college and pursue postsecondary education. However, all students that were involved in co-enrollment did complete their

HSE/GED. Perhaps co-enrollment provided some sort of intrinsic motivation to finish their HSE/GED. Nonetheless, their completion removed a major barrier to their future success in pursuing gainful employment or additional education opportunities.

Summary of Findings

The REACT strategy, an acronym that stands for Relating, Experiencing, Applying, Cooperating, and Transferring, was used to train instructors in the pilot program on how to contextualize instruction in their respective classrooms. Contextualized learning helps students apply their learning to real-life experiences, that may include their jobs or simply in daily living. It helps students apply their learning to life outside of the classroom, which shows the relevance for learning various academic skills. After instructors incorporated the REACT strategy into their daily lesson plans for the pilot program, student retention and persistence, HSE/GED credential completion, and TABE assessment data were evaluated to determine any links between contextualized instruction and student outcomes. In regard to student retention and persistence, two out of three classrooms from the pilot program had a higher class average of hours attended than the Control 1 and Control 2 groups, which were two additional classrooms not part of the pilot program that had the same schedule as the pilot program classes. In addition, six out of 23 participants in the pilot program earned their HSE/GED while none of the students in the Control 2 and Control 2 groups earned their HSE/GED. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that TABE pre and post-testing in reading and math had lower outcomes in the pilot program classrooms than in the Control 1 and 2 classrooms. Thus, according to the assessment, students in the Control 1 and 2 groups on average showed more progress in their basic reading and math skills than students in the pilot program.

In terms of goal-setting, participants did show academic success. It is important to note that some of the goals that students achieved were reflective of non-academic progress (i.e. class attendance and class participation). However, participants achieved 59% of monthly goals written and 51% of the total weekly goals written. This included six students earning their HSE/GED.

Not only did participants write goals, instructors scheduled weekly advising sessions with each student to evaluate their progress toward meeting their individual goals and steps achieved toward enrolling into college. A total of 18 official HSE/GED subject tests were attempted and successfully passed, with six students earning their high school credential. Eighty percent of the participants that earned their HSE/GED completed their college application and completed the financial aid process. Sixty percent of the participants that earned their high school credential completed the final step of registering for Spring 2019 college classes and are now currently enrolled.

Finally, co-enrollment of participants in HSE/GED classes and an additional course that could lead to an industry-recognized credential or college credit was not significant in this study. With the expectation of many participants expressing interest in co-enrollment, it was surprising that so many showed no interest and only one student took advantage of enrolling in an additional course during the pilot study. Most students simply wanted to focus on their HSE/GED and did not feel they could commit to additional class time.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

In terms of contextualized instruction and its impact on students, there were several significant findings. First, contextualized instruction had an association between student retention and progress. Two of the three classes that took part in the pilot program had an overall higher average of student attendance and persistence than the Control 1 and Control 2 classes that were not part of the pilot program. There were also six HSE/GED graduates from the participants in the pilot program and no HSE/GED graduates from the students in the Control 1 and Control 2 classes. Thus, contextualized instruction that provides students with real-life application to their learning appears to have had an impact on high school credential completion.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is in regard to TABE pre and post-testing. This test measures a student's basic academic skills in both reading and math. Students are tested in reading comprehension by answering multiple choice questions from various fiction and non-fiction pieces of writing that range one to two pages in length. For math, students are tested in basic computation skills that includes working with fractions, integers, decimals and percentages. A portion of the test is measured without using a calculator and a portion of the test includes word problems that require calculator use. All participants in the study were tested prior to the start of the pilot program and near the end of the study. Two additional classes not part of the pilot program were assessed in the same timeframe. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in student success in terms of pre and post-testing on TABE assessment. Academic progress was essentially the same between participants in the study and non-participants in the study.

Participants in the pilot program kept data notebooks where they wrote weekly and monthly goals. Each week, the participant and their instructor evaluated their progress toward meeting their goal. Most goals were centered around improving reading and math skills. Again, it is important to note that six participants in the pilot program reached their goal of earning their high school credential. This removes a major barrier to students being able to make the transition into college.

Goal-setting and instructor-to-student weekly advising were fluid opportunities where the instructor could determine what students wanted to achieve and the timeframe they wanted to meet the benchmarks they had set. It was also a time where the instructor could have those critical and strategic conversations with students to help frame their academic progress and to help them stay on track toward achieving their academic goals. Four of the six students that completed their high school credential completed a college application for Lenoir Community College. Three of the students registered for Spring 2019 courses and are currently attending college.

In terms of co-enrollment, 65% of participants expressed interest in wanting to take a short-term course that leads to a credential for employment while being enrolled in their HSE/GED class. However, only one participant actually took advantage of co-enrollment during the pilot program and she dropped the course (Nurse Assistant I) within the first month of enrollment. Although she earned her high school credential, she was unsuccessful with completing the other course due to childcare issues. The lack of co-enrollment was one of the most surprising findings of the study. Most students simply wanted to focus on obtaining their HSE/GED and did not want to take on the added responsibility of co-enrolling a course where they could receive college credit and earn a credential for employment.

Discussion of Findings

Contextualized Instruction

Although contextualized instruction appears to have had some impact on student retention and persistence, there were still some challenges with keeping students engaged in the classroom. Eleven or 48% of the participants in the pilot program attended class for less than 60% of the instructional time offered during the study. Students in the Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program have multiple challenges and barriers that can have an impact on their attendance in school. In talking with many of the participants in the program, they identified three main barriers that kept them from attending school even more.

The first barrier was childcare. Several participants had small children and always had problems with finding adequate childcare. The problem was not that they did not have someone to watch their children, but that it was not consistent. For example, several participants would have a parent or grandparent to watch their child, but sometimes the parent would have to work, or the grandparent was not available. This impacted their school attendance. The students leaned on family members because they could provide childcare for free. The participants could not afford a licensed childcare facility, which would have given them the consistency needed to attend school on a daily basis.

The second barrier was transportation. Only eight or 35% of the participants in the pilot program had their own transportation. The TCS program partners with Lenoir County Transit, which is the local public transportation company of Lenoir County. The TCS program does provide transportation vouchers for students if they attend five hours of instructional time each day. After five hours, students receive a ticket voucher to ride home and a ticket voucher to return the next morning. Six students took advantage of this free service, but it was not without

its own challenges. Lenoir County Transit has very strict rules for riding. If you earn three no shows within 30 days, you are suspended from riding for a month unless you pay a fine. A no show occurs when someone is scheduled to ride but does not show up when transportation arrives. Participants would forget to call Lenoir County Transit when they could not ride, causing them to get suspended. They could not afford to pay the required fine, so they had to wait 30 days before they could ride again. Other participants would depend on rides from family members or friends, which did not always prove to be consistent and reliable. The college requires students to have five hours of instructional time a day to take advantage of this service, which means participants would have to attend an afternoon class in addition to their morning class to take advantage of the free ticket vouchers. Several participants were unable to do so due to childcare, picking up older children from school, or part-time jobs that required them to be at work during the afternoon. Thus, transportation was an ongoing barrier and challenge throughout the study.

The third and final barrier was a constant conflict with job opportunities. In the fall of 2018, Lenoir County's unemployment rate reached 3.9%, the lowest it has been since the late 1960's. Thus, many students in the TCS program have been able to find part-time or even full-time job opportunities, with or without a high school credential. If a student could work, they did. Many participants in the pilot program found some form of employment, which ended up impacting their school attendance. It is very difficult for a student to see the benefits of attending school when they have an opportunity to make money, even if is only for a short period of time. When manufacturers and other small businesses are hiring students without a high school credential, it is also difficult for students to see the benefit of putting school first and working with their employer to work outside of their school schedule.

Bronfenbrenner made significant contributions to the ecological system theory. The barriers that students had during the study could be attributed to the interactions of their immediate environment. Childcare and transportation issues can be mitigated by other community support services, such as social services. However, many students do not pursue opportunities for assistance because of a lack understanding the process or simply not having the support at home or in their immediate community. In terms of employment, many students in the program look for immediate gratification for making money. They have a fight or flight mentality and only think about their immediate needs. Thus, they go from one temporary job to the next to make ends meet for a short period of time and neglect the idea of completing their education, which would lead to more opportunities for a stable job with a sustainable wage. Again, it becomes the same cycle that their parents experienced and is the reality of many individuals in their immediate community. Students lack the support systems at home.

Kiser (2008) did extensive research with the social-constructivist theory in the ABE classroom. His research discussed the importance of students taking opportunities to learn together and to apply learning to real-life situations. Kiser's findings showed how these contextualized learning experiences positively impacted student progress and retention. However, much of his research was confined to correctional institutions that more or less have a captive audience. Even though contextualized learning experiences did impact student progress in the pilot study, it was not enough to overcome the aforementioned barriers that hindered and impacted the students' educational experiences.

Additionally, nearly 70% of students in the TCS program are non-white, with an overwhelming majority of these individuals being African American. Researchers who have contributed to the critical race theory have found that many adult education programs and

community colleges in general have an overrepresentation of African Americans. African Americans who earn their HSE/GED and decide to enter postsecondary education generally track into developmental courses and have lower success rates than other groups. Therefore, the barriers students face that hinder their inability to get to school and stay in school are only compounded by trends in student success of minority groups in adult education programs.

Lastly, WIOA legislation has placed a demand on adult education programs to be partially funded through performance. This includes gains students make in TABE testing and students earning their HSE/GED. Programs that do not meet performance benchmarks face an opportunity of losing federal funding, which is approximately 20% of a program's total budget. Adult education programs are also funded based on contact hours and not membership hours. Thus, if students are not coming to school and do not remain in school, programs lose funding. The TCS program and adult education programs in general work with an exceptionally hard to serve group. The funding metrics for these programs are not always supportive for student success and tend to marginalize individuals who are already one of the most marginalized groups on community college campuses.

However, despite these ongoing challenges, it is important to note that six participants earned their HSE/GED and 17 participants made progress from pre and post-testing on their TABE assessment. Although none of the students in the Control 1 and Control 2 classes earned their HSE/GED, they did show very similar progress in TABE testing. Thus, there is a stronger association with contextualized instruction and high school credential attainment than with TABE testing and retention. The current version of the TABE assessment tests a student's basic reading comprehension and math skills. The HSE/GED assessment covers a much broader scope of learning, including science, social studies, and writing. Contextualized instruction involves a

much more rigorous learning environment where students learn how to think critically, apply learning, and make connections with their learning to their day-to-day activities. This deeper level of learning may be a factor in the participants in the pilot program having more success with earning their high school credential than the students in other groups. However, the simplicity of concepts that are tested on the TABE test may also be the result of less variability in student success between participants in the pilot program and the Control 1 and Control 2 groups.

Goal-Setting

Not only was contextualized instruction associated with positive effects on student success, goal-setting did as well. Students who wrote weekly goals, made positive comments on how important it became to them. Gina noted in week 6, "I'm proud to say I feel that I've mastered adding and subtracting fractions" (November 9, 2018). Roberta wrote in week 8, "I believe I am making great progress in understanding fractions" (November 21, 2019). Many other participants made similar reflections from week to week, which shows how students are critically thinking about their own success. It is important for students to recognize their own success as this becomes a motivating factor for students to continue working hard and striving for success. Johnson and Reynolds (2007) also found that many participants in their study valued the success of meeting their own academic goals. In the same way that students in their study were motivated by achieving their own academic goals, the students in the pilot program shared the same benefits. Students who are not able to see success are often times discouraged and have a higher chance of withdrawing from educational programs.

Graham and Perin (2007) found that having students write weekly goals toward passing the writing portion of the GED test helped them to focus on the skills necessary to meet this goal

and man successfully passed the test. As students met weekly goals toward achieving the overarching goal of passing the writing portion of the GED test, they became self-motivated and self-determined. Instructors were also more purposeful with their instruction because students identified the areas they needed to improve on as they wrote their weekly goals. The same success that Graham and Perin found in their study was also found in this pilot study.

Advising

Individual advising appointments between the instructor and participant on a weekly basis did have an impact on high school credential completion and transition. Eight of the 23 participants attempted at least one HSE/GED subject test and successfully passed. With six participants earning their high school credential, three followed through with registering and enrolling into college. Although several participants made progress and 50% of those that earned their high school credential transitioned into college, there were many participants that did not make it to this point during the fall. Although many factors can contribute to the timeframe a student makes progress, a thought that reoccurred throughout the study was whether or not advising within the classroom was enough to help a student make satisfactory academic progress and meet their goals. Was the instructor, acting as advisor and mentor, enough support to the student? Do students need additional support systems outside of the classroom to ensure success? The reason these questions occurred was due to participants within the study continually visiting the office for additional supports, which might include transportation ideas, childcare ideas, financial assistance for paying for HSE/GED subject tests, and sometimes to simply talk about the problems they were having. It seems that many were not comfortable sharing some things within the confines of their classroom or with their respective instructor. Perhaps instructors did not understand additional resources that students could take advantage of at the college. Advising

seemed to be the intervention that was questioned most throughout the pilot program.

The study that Broadus and Martin (2013) completed with ABE students in a GED program included coordinated advising sessions from inside and outside of the classroom. They saw the most value when advising was done during class time and when it is was done outside of class time as well. I now have a better understanding of the importance and rationale behind this school of thought. Advising within the classroom by the instructors of the pilot program was beneficial with helping students meet academic goals, complete HSE/GED subject tests, and to improve their literacy and math skills. However, I now believe that additional advising efforts outside of class time are beneficial with helping students connect with resources to make the transition to college. A collective effort in connecting students with college admissions, financial aid, and career services may provide the additional wrap-around services that students need. It also keeps the burden of one individual (i.e. the classroom instructor) from having to be the expert in all these areas and the connective piece to all of these resources.

Co-Enrollment

Additionally, the lack of participants taking advantage of co-enrollment opportunities was questioned as well. Pappalardo and Schaffer's (2016) study of offering co-enrollment opportunities to ABE students at Northampton Community College helped them to explore various career pathways and to earn short-term credential credits that fed into degree programs. The benefit of co-enrollment helped students solidify a path for postsecondary education once they earned their high school credential. Students in the pilot program did not see the benefit of taking advantage of co-enrollment opportunities.

Thus, an intervention that seemed to be missing from this pilot program is that the advising did not include career planning or career exploration. The purpose of short-term

credential programs is to help students explore and potentially find a career path they may be interested in pursuing through postsecondary education. The classroom instructors, acting as advisors, focused more on academic progress connected to the HSE/GED than helping students set goals and plan for a career path. Although the subject may have been broached from time to time in the classroom, a consistent and concerted effort was not made throughout the pilot program. Based on participant responses when asked to take advantage of co-enrollment, they did not see the long-term value and only looked at the potential barriers and obstacles that co-enrollment could cause with complicating their schedules and compromising their time.

An additional question that surfaced during the pilot program was whether or not professional career advising would have impacted student success, retention, persistence, and even enrollment into postsecondary education by those that earned their high school credential. None of the instructors that participated in the pilot program are trained career advisors, but professionals are available at the college that could have stepped into this role. Again, is advising within the classroom between instructor and student enough?

Implications of Study

Contextualized instruction showed positive outcomes in terms of student retention and persistence. Overall, the participants in the pilot program persisted in their academic efforts at a higher rate than other students in the TCS program. The REACT strategy that instructors in the pilot program incorporated into their daily lesson planning gave opportunities for participants to explore their learning and to see how they could apply it in real life. Connections were able made between academic concepts and why they needed to know these skills for official HSE/GED testing as well as how they might use these skills in the community or on the job. Many instructors contextualize instruction every day, often times without even realizing it. Because the

instructors in the pilot program had to document the REACT strategy in their daily lesson plans, it made them more aware of how they contextualized instruction for their students. As instructors acknowledged their efforts, it trained them to think about additional ways they could incorporate contextualization across all academic areas. In many ways, this constant self-evaluation and self-reflection provided opportunities for the instructors in the pilot program to improve their own teaching methods because they had a good and concrete model to follow (i.e. the REACT strategy). The instructor's self-evaluation of their own teaching was an unexpected outcome of the study. Perhaps this strategy would benefit instructors who need additional supports in their teaching methods and could provide a platform for setting goals to improve their own teaching.

Goal-setting also showed positive outcomes with the students in the pilot program. When students have a structured environment where goal-setting is a consistent part of their learning and developing, it helps them take ownership of their own learning and helps them to be self-reflective on their strengths and weaknesses. It also provides an opportunity for students to think critically about their own learning and steps they can take to improve their academic outcomes. When a student has a goal to pursue, they always know what they are working towards, which is motivating in and out itself. In some ways, goal-setting not only helps students to stay focused and on a continual plan, it helps the instructor become acutely aware of the individual needs of their students. It also helps them to align their instruction to the learning plan the student has developed for themselves.

Weekly advising appointments between the instructors and participants in the pilot program did show positive outcomes in terms of student transition into postsecondary education. However, the supports that a part-time instructor can give in terms of advising may not be enough to support the student as a whole. Throughout the pilot program, participants visited the

office for help or additional resources to remove challenges they were facing in school and outside of school. It became evident that advising within the classroom may not be enough to help a student through challenging situations. A part-time instructor also has some disconnect between their classroom and institution as a whole, sometimes preventing students from getting information in a timely manner. This may include daycare support services, transportation support services, opportunities to apply for part-time job opportunities, and more. With students still looking for information outside of the classroom, it becomes beneficial to have outside advising and support to help mitigate potential roadblocks to a student's education.

The lack of interest and student success with co-enrollment opportunities was not expected during the pilot program. Only one student took advantage of co-enrollment during the pilot program and she was dismissed from the course shortly after registration. Goal-setting and advising focused solely on HSE/GED academic skills and there were not any goals that aligned with career advising or seeking out a potential career path while the participants pursued their high school credential. However, none of the instructors that were part of the pilot program are trained in career advising and there is a disconnect with them and the college in terms of resources students can lean on to help frame a potential career path. Again, advising within the classroom does not appear to be enough and instructors do not seem to have the necessary knowledge to help guide students through career exploration, planning, and consistent conversations concerning various career paths. It could also be an issue with finding time for career exploration and thoughtful conversations when HSE/GED academic skills take precedence in the classroom.

Recommendations

The next phase of this project will be to expand the best practices developed from the pilot study across a larger portion of the TCS program.

1. Provide training for additional HSE/GED instructors on the REACT strategy and how to contextualize instruction across multiple academic areas.

The three instructors that were involved in the pilot program had success with incorporating the REACT strategy into their daily lesson plans. The next phase of program improvement would be to have other instructors incorporate this strategy into their lesson planning. This would require more extensive professional development and would be difficult to do with large group of teachers. There are six additional HSE/GED instructors on the college's main campus that would be trained in this next phase. Thereafter, other teachers could be brought it as well. The three instructors in the pilot program that incorporated the REACT strategy into their instruction in the fall would lead the professional development with the six additional teachers. The instructors could discuss exactly how they incorporated the strategy, successes, and challenges in an authentic way because they actually used the strategy. Each of these three instructors would be assigned as a mentor to two of the new teachers to provide ongoing support and guidance as they begin to incorporate the strategy into their own classrooms.

2. Incorporate goal-setting with additional HSE/GED classrooms.

Goal-setting, based on the results of the pilot program study, made an impact on student progress toward high school credential completion and transition into college. The next phase of expanding this program would include the additional six HSE/GED instructors on campus incorporating weekly goal-setting into their instructional schedule with students. The three

original instructors from the pilot program would mentor the same instructors through effectively incorporating this strategy into their classrooms as well.

3. Provide outside support for instructors and students to properly advise students within the classroom.

The Transitional and Career Studies (TCS) program includes two full-time coordinators and one full-time assessment and retention specialist. The two coordinators oversee specific program areas and supervise different groups of instructors. The assessment and retention specialist oversee placement assessments for all students as well as post-testing. She also helps with retention and recruitment of students. Based on the results of the pilot program, it became clear that instructors needed additional supports with providing students with access to the necessary resources to help them be successful in the classroom. Thus, the two full-time coordinators and the assessment and retention specialist will each work with three instructors over the next semester to provide additional supports to students. This will cover the three instructors from the pilot program as well as the six new instructors that will be incorporating the additional strategies. This will include the instructor meeting briefly with the designated full-time staff person bi-weekly to give an update on any students that may be struggling in the classroom and to offer additional strategies or supports to help the student overcome these challenges. This could include information on transportation assistance, daycare assistance, financial assistance for covering HSE/GED test fees, counseling services, career planning, and much more. The idea is to have an additional person that the instructors can lean on to help ensure student retention, persistence, and success.

4. Incorporate the NCWorks Career Center resources to offer more structured career advising and planning with students.

The instructors in the pilot program did very well with helping students stay on track academically towards making progress with completing their high school credential. However, incorporating career advising and planning within the classroom became a challenge due to their lack of knowledge on how to structure this for their students. Lenoir Community College is unique in that it houses an NCWorks Career Center. Most of these centers are not located on a community college campus but this one is located in the same building as the TCS program. The NCWorks Career Center provides an array of support services for individuals at the college as well as the community. It houses the Employment Security Commission (ESC) office as well as career inventories and assessments, career advising, career planning, job searching, and financial assistance with completing short-term credentials, diplomas, certificates, and even an associate degree for qualifying individuals. These services are free to all individuals, including students in the TCS program. My recommendation would be to have individuals from the NCWorks Career Center visit TCS classrooms to discuss the services they offer and to make individual appointments with students that are interested in receiving help and guidance with choosing a career path. This could be done during their instructional time so that students do not have to worry about altering their schedules. This bridging of services would provide additional supports to students from trained professionals and would take some of the burden off of the instructors in trying to fill this gap for students. This would provide a more well-rounded approach to helping students plan for transition after they complete their high school credential. It may also encourage additional students to take advantage of co-enrollment opportunities because they have a better idea and plan for a potential career.

Future Studies

Two areas would be targeted for future studies, including advising and the partnership with the NCWorks Career Center. First, a study to propose the effectiveness of additional advising that includes the two full-time coordinators and the full-time assessment and retention specialist would be conducted to determine if advising outside of the classroom increases student success toward persistence and completion, high school credential attainment, and transition into postsecondary education. A major finding from the original study was that instructor advising within the classroom was not enough to ensure student success and transition. Thus, the future study would consider the effects of student success with having advising in the classroom with their instructor and additional support from outside the classroom as well.

An additional study would include incorporating the NCWorks Career Center staff and their services with the TCS program in a more structured way. Another major finding from the pilot program study was that not enough students were taking advantage of co-enrollment opportunities and instructors lacked an understanding in how to strategically advise students in terms of career planning. The NCWorks Career Center has trained staff that can offer career inventories and assessments, career planning and advising, job searching, and much more to students at no cost. Thus, a future study would involve the NCWorks Career Center offering classroom sessions where students could learn about the services the center offers. It would also include NCWorks Career Center staff making individualized appointments with students so that they could help with career assessments and career planning. The study would measure the effectiveness of how the NCWorks Career Center support services influence a student's decision to take advantage of co-enrollment opportunities and transition into postsecondary education. If a student has a better understanding of what careers may fit their aptitudes and interests, they may

desire to take advantage of co-enrollment opportunities and may enroll in postsecondary education at higher rate due to having a better career plan.

Summaries and Conclusions

Overall, the pilot program highlighted several areas of effectiveness and student success. Contextualized instruction had a positive impact on student persistence and retention in the classroom. However, the lack of co-enrollment of students in the pilot program was significant. Thus, additional recommendations that include advising outside of the classroom and the support of trained career advisors with the NCWorks Career Center are planned to determine if this impacts the number of students that take advantage of co-enrollment and postsecondary education. Many students mentioned wanting to just focus on their high school credential and not having enough time to dedicate to additional courses. Others said that children and part-time jobs impacted their inability to add anything else to their schedule. However, more students may see the value of co-enrollment and postsecondary education if they have a better understanding of the type of careers that would best suit their strengths, aptitudes, and interests. This could also impact student persistence and retention toward earning their HSE/GED due to having a better plan of what their next steps will be.

Additionally, having outside advising support for instructors may also have an impact on student success. Instructors need to have opportunities to collaborate with other professionals to help remove student barriers and challenges. Having the burden of this responsibility fall on one individual can be overwhelming and difficult. Thus, based on the outcomes of the pilot program, additional advising support and career planning services will be the focus of future studies to determine if it has an impact on student success.

Although the pilot program did not find solutions to all of the issues that impact student success in the TCS program, it did offer conclusions to better support students in the future. Having a clear plan of action to better help students in the TCS program is the most valuable learning experience gleaned from this study.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2018). *Socioeconomic status.* Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/

Angelis, J., Baker, L., Lawson, H., & Wilcox, K. (2014). The value of people, place and possibilities: A multiple case study of rural high school completion. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 29.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/1626176795?pq-origsite=summon

Balkam, L., Gillespie, P., & Skinner, L. (2000). The challenge of adult literacy: Students with learning disabilities in the ABE classroom. *Adult Basic Education, 10.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/227591599?pq-origsite=summon

Bauer, J., Kramer, K., Myhra, L., & Zuiker, V. (2016). *Comparison of poverty and income disparity of single mothers and fathers across three decades: 1990-2010.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/1764288398?pq-origsite=summon

Bensimon, E., & Bishop, R. (2012). Introduction: Why "critical"? The need for new ways of knowing. *The Review of Higher Education, 36,* 1-7. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0046

Bird, K., Foster M., & Ganzglass, E. (2014). *New opportunities to improve economic and career success for low-income youth and adults: Key provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).* Retrieved from http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:72738

Broadus, J., & Martin, V. (2013). *Enhancing GED instruction to prepare students for colleges and careers: Early success in Laguardia Community College's bridge to health and business program.* Retrieved from https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Enhancing_GED_Instruction_brief.pdf

Campbell, C., & Love, I. (2016). *Leveraging community colleges in the workforce innovation and opportunity act: A blueprint for state policymakers.* Retrieved from http://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/ECS_FundingReports_WIOA_F.pdf

Cao, H., Li, J., Liang, Y., O'Brien, L., Payir, A., & Tudge, J. (2016). Still misused after all these years? A reevaluation of the uses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8,* 427-445. doi:10.1111/jftr.12165

Carter, D., Paulsen, M., & St. John, E. (2005). Diversity, college costs, and postsecondary opportunity: An examination of the financial nexus between college choice and persistence for African American and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76,* 545-569. doi:10.1353/jhe.2005.0035

CLASP. (2013). *Funding career pathways and career pathway bridges.* Retrieved from https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/files/CPToolkit2012_V1R4.pdf

Conley, D., & French, E. (2013). Student ownership of learning as a key component of college readiness. *American Behavioral Scientist, 58*(8), 1018-1034. doi: 10.1177/0002764213515232

CORD. (2018). *Reacting to learn.* Retrieved from http://www.cord.org/cord_ctl_react.php

Crary-Ross, S., & Rutschow, E. (2014). *Beyond the GED: Promising models for moving high school dropouts to college.* Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED545454

Damian, R., Roberts, B., Shanahan, M., Su, R., & Ulrich, T. (2015). Can personality traits and intelligence compensate for background disadvantage? Predicting status attainment in adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *109*, 473-489. doi:10.1037/pspp0000024

DeSchryver, D., & Dlugoleski, D. (2015). *Accelerating change: How education technology developers can jump-start a new adult education market.* Retrieved from http://digitalpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/accelerating-learning-for-adult-education.pdf

Employment and Training Administration. (2016). *The workforce innovation and opportunity act.* Retrieved from https://www.doleta.gov/wioa/

Ewert, S. (2012). *What it's worth: Field of training and economic status in 2009.* Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2012/demo/p70-129.html

Forbes. (2010). Obama's goal for higher education. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/2010/08/01/america-education-reform-opinions-best-colleges-10-duncan.html#732430786fee

Gewertz, C. (2011). GED revision opens path to higher ed. *Education Week, 12.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/906172166?pq-origsite=summon

Gregg, N. (2012). Increasing access to learning for the adult basic education leaner with learning disabilities: Evidenced-based accommodation research. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 45*, 47-63. doi:10.1177/0022219411426855

Hock, M. (2011). Effective literacy instruction for adults with specific learning disabilities: Implications for adult educators. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 45,* p. 64-78. doi:10.1177/0022219411426859

Howard, T., & Navarro, O. (2016). Critical race theory 20 years later: Where do we go from here? *Urban Education, 51,* 253-273. doi:10.1177/0042085915622541

Huberman, A., Miles, M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook.* Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Hughey, M. (2007). *Critical Race Theory in education, all God's children got a song Adrienne D. Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau, 9*(4), 369-372. doi:10.1080/10999940701703885

Jackson, A., & Schafft, K. (2010). *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world.* University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.

Jacobson, E. (2017). Turning points: Recent trends in adult basic literacy, numeracy, and language education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2017,* 19-27. doi:10.1002/ace.20237

Javitz, H., Newman, L., & Wagner, M. (2014). The influence of family socioeconomic status on the post-high school outcomes of youth with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition of Exceptional Individuals, 37*(I), 5-17. doi:10.1177/2165143414523980

Johnson, J., & Reynolds, S. (2014). Pillars of support: A functional asses-based framework for ABE learners. *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education, 3.* Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?q=%22%22&ff1=subCommunity+Support&ff2=eduElementary+Education&id=EJ1049140

Kiser, M. (2008). Radical conversations: Part two cultivating social-constructivist learning methods in ABE classrooms. *Journal of Correctional Education, 59.* Retrieved from https://search-proquestcom.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/229786028/fulltextPDF/475FE0B30C4B4454PQ/1?accountid=10639

Lenoir Community College. (2017). *Reimagine*. (Strategic Plan).

Martin, L., Martin, F., & Southworth, E. (2015). A critical review of concept mapping research literature: Informing teaching and learning practices in GED preparation programs. *New Horizons in Adult Education Human Resource Development, 27.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/1704370154?pq-origsite=summon

McCann, C. (2017). *Adult education and family literacy act.* Retrieved from http://www.edcentral.org/edcyclopedia/adult-education-family-literacy-act/

Mertler, C. (2013). Classroom-based action research: revisiting the process as customizable and meaningful professional development for educators. *Journal of Pedagogic Development, 3,* 38-42. Retrieved from https://www.beds.ac.uk/jpd/volume-3-issue-3/classroom-based-action-research-revisiting-the-process-as-customizable-and-meaningful-professional-development-for-educators

Morgan, D. (2010). Reconsidering the role of interaction in analyzing and reporting focus groups. *Qualitative Health Research, 3,* 718-722. Retrieved from http://journals.sagepub.com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/doi/abs/10.1177/1049732310364627

Muth, B. (2008). Radical conversations: Part on social-constructivist methods in the ABE classroom. *Journal of Correctional Education, 59.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/229826392?pq-origsite=summon

NC Rural Center. (2016). *Articles.* Retrieved from http://www.ncruralcenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=75&Itemid=155

Ou, S., & Reynolds, A. (2014). Early determinants of postsecondary education participation and degree attainment: Findings from an inner-city minority cohort. *Education and Urban Society, 46,* 474-504. doi:10.1177/0013124512447810

Pappalardo, M., & Schaffer, W. (2016). Using research to design integrated education and training programs. *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education, 5.* Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/1879975771?pq-origsite=summon

Postsecondary Education. [Def. 1]. (2018). In *YourDictionary Online.* Retrieved from http://www.yourdictionary.com

Poverty. [Def. 1]. (2018). In *Merriam-Webster Online.* Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com

Sagar, R. (1992). *How to conduct collaborative action research.* Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Stephens, C. (2010). The potential barriers to adult GED transition. *Online Journal of Workforce Education and Development, IV.* Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=ojwed

Towncharts. (2018). *Lenoir County, North Carolina education data.* Retrieved from http://www.towncharts.com/North-Carolina/Education/Lenoir-County-NC-Education-data.html

Tyler, J. (2003). Economic benefits of the GED: Lessons from recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 73.* Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3516039

U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). *Quickfacts.* Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/search- results.html?q=poverty+NC&search.x=0&search.y=0&search=submit&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP

U. S. Census Bureau. (2017). *Quickfacts.* Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PS

U.S. Department of Education. (2014). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act overview of title II: Adult education and literacy. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/wioa-overview.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor. (2018). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Retrieved from https://www.doleta.gov/wioa/

Walpole, M. (2007). Economically and educationally challenged students in higher education: access to outcomes. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 33.* Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ791627

Yang, P. (2014). Who will succeed in college? Effect of high school experience and socioeconomic status. *International Journal of Chinese Education, 3,* 30-52. doi:10.1163/22125868-12340029

APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · **www.ecu.edu/ORIC/irb**

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Tony Walston
CC: Crystal Chambers

Date: 10/4/2018
Re: UMCIRB 18-001280
Transition from Adult Education to Postsecondary Education

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 10/3/2018 to 10/2/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
12 Week Pilot Program Survey Questionnaire (Pre/Post)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
12 Week Pilot Program Survey Questionnaire (Pre/Post)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Assent-12-17-years-of-age-03-12-2012	Consent Forms
Focus Group Survey Questionnaire	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Focus Group Survey Questionnaire	Surveys and Questionnaires
Informed-Consent-Document-No-More-Than-Minimal-Risk-02-05-18	Consent Forms
Open Forum Phone Script	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Parental-Permission-Form-02-05-18	Consent Forms
Transition from Adult Education to Postsecondary Education	Study Protocol or Grant Application

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The goal of this survey is to find out how the Transitional and Career Studies program is supporting student success in terms of high school equivalency diploma (GED) completion and enrollment into college. Your participation is voluntary but will be beneficial in helping the program improve the way it supports students. Your responses will remain anonymous for the purposes of this study.

1. Why were you motivated to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program?

2. Were their other sources of motivation (i.e. family, friends, employment, etc.) that encouraged you to enroll in the Transitional and Career Studies program?

3. When you entered the Transitional and Career Studies program, what were your short-term goals? What were your long-term goals?

4. How did the Transitional and Career Studies program help you complete your high school equivalency diploma (GED)?

5. How did the Transitional and Career Studies program help you enroll into college (if it was your goal)?

6. How did your instructor encourage or not encourage you to enroll into college?

7. Describe the type of instruction you received in the classroom, including specific learning experiences that helped you think beyond your high school equivalency diploma (GED). Did any learning experiences influence your decision to enroll into college?

8. How could the Transitional and Career Studies program help students to enroll into college in an easier way?

APPENDIX C: PILOT PROGRAM SURVEY QUESTIONS (PRE-ASSESSMENT)

The survey questions were developed based on successful practices in adult education programs at LaGuardia Community College in New York and Northampton Community College in Pennsylvania.

1. Describe the kind of instruction that you believe will best help you to learn.

2. How important is it that you are able to connect learning to real-life (i.e. career interest, job, etc.)?

3. Describe how setting personal goals helps you to be successful with making progress in school.

4. How important is advising to you while you are in school?

5. Describe the kind of advising that will best help you to reach your goals.

6. Are you interested in being co-enrolled in a course that is related to your career interest while you are enrolled in your HSE/GED course? Why or why not.