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Transitions for success: A phenomenological study of non-traditional GED completers into the community college

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Transitions for success: A phenomenological study of non-traditional GED completers

into the community college

by

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ABSTRACT

The vision statement of one large Midwestern community college is "dedicated to helping students achieve lifelong fulfillment by providing a quality, innovative and responsive learning environment. Each day, [the college] champions the aspirations of individuals, communities and the state..." Helping each individual realize a lifelong dream is centered on providing a quality education so that he or she may benefit economically, socially, and personally to achieve a better quality of life that expands those benefits to the community, state and world.

Evaluating where the college stands on access to individuals and the communities it serves is critical. It is important to determine whether the population within the service area is taking advantage of services at the community college to place themselves into a more beneficial and marketable position to earn more economically and become more productive members of society. This qualitative study is designed to examine the experiences and perceptions of General Education Development (GED) completers who have chosen to continue their education at the community college. A research participation request was sent to all graduates of either the spring 2010 or summer 2010 semester from a Midwestern community college. Out of 54 students who completed their degrees, six participants described their experiences from the initial stages of getting their GED's through the process of entering college, completing the coursework and acquiring the degree. Each participant provided a personal reflective essay and engaged in an interview and one perception check. Content from the personal reflective essays, transcriptions of the interviews and perception checks and educational records were the data used for this analysis. Although there has been an increasing number of individuals who choose to continue their education after completing

a GED, there is very little data determining the success level of this student population.

There has been neither a formal analysis of the success of GED completers entering the

community college setting nor an analysis of whether or not the GED completers have

successfully reached their goals and the issues that impacted the transition.   Analyzing the

transition experience and determining both the barriers and supports offered by the institution

as well as the personal aspects of the individual can increase awareness that may benefit the

college in understanding what programming is needed and beneficial; furthermore, analysis

can determine what aspects of the learner are critical to develop when the individual decides

to pursue higher education.

CHAPTER 1:   INTRODUCTION

"You are the embodiment of the information you choose to accept and act upon. To change

your circumstances you need to change your thinking and subsequent actions"

~Adlin Sinclair

America is certainly the land of opportunity, and that opportunity is becoming more

and more the function of education. Parents, educators, policymakers and both current and

former high school students (including dropouts) are increasingly convinced that some

postsecondary education is an essential prerequisite for finding reasonably well-paying jobs

(Bailey & Karp, 2003). Therefore, the belief is strong that in order for individuals to increase

the possibility of becoming productive members of society and thus, allowing for increased

community revenue and personal income, they need to access higher education. Both

positive personal and societal outcomes are the result of giving people the knowledge and

skills they need to get and maintain good jobs in today's work-based society. Those

individuals with the most education are much less likely to experience negative family and

personal attributes such as violence, addiction, illness, incarceration and other abuse

(Grossman and Kaestner, 1997; Maynard and McGrath, 1997; Witte, 1997).

Access to education, therefore, is a critical issue in today's society. It is of utmost

importance to ensure that all individuals have a chance at entering the higher education arena

and successfully reaching their goals. In the United States, community colleges typically

provide the most accessible avenue for higher education, particularly to those individuals

who may be labeled at-risk or disadvantaged (Joost, 2007). These individuals may have a

variety of issues that serve as barriers to completing an educational goal.

Generally, those who choose the community college may have characteristics that include lower test scores, delayed enrollment after high school or General Education Development (GED) completion, part-time college attendance, lower socioeconomic status, and possibly full-time work commitments to support their families (Bailey, Jenkins & Leinbach, 2005). Many of these same characteristics are representative of the individuals who choose to enhance their job placement by obtaining the GED certificate. Those individuals who obtained their GED were most likely to have dropped out of high school due to an inability to perform at a successful level, personal reasons that have not allowed them to focus on education, feelings of not being able to fit into the high school environment, unaffordable tuition cost of a college or university, or a variety of other reasons (George & Schaefer, 2002). Therefore, it would be assumed that community colleges have a number of students who have completed the GED successfully and have decided to pursue a class, degree, diploma or certificate. However, few studies exist that indicate that GED completers have transitioned successfully and completed their academic goals at the community college. This research was developed to provide insight into the transition experience of GED completers into the community college and gain an understanding of issues experienced by these individuals. The participants in this study were asked to share their experiences, evaluate the meanings these experiences had on them and consider the impact this process left on them as they proceed forward from the educational experience. These narratives provided insight into their self-concept, the educational process and what it means to them, and for some, an awareness of who they have become as a product of higher education.

Statement of the Problem

Community colleges have a mission of open access to all who decide to participate in higher education. However, being egalitarian and providing open access to the institution and providing opportunities for individuals regardless of their abilities to succeed creates a dilemma for the community college. Increasing failure rates of students at community colleges shifted the concerns of access to higher education at the community colleges to trying to retain students (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).   Retention of students is a critical issue in higher education. Research has shown that successful students who are more likely to graduate exhibit characteristics that include having a strong high school record, coming from higher income families, having parents who also went to college, attending college immediately after high school, attending college full time, and not interrupting their college studies (Adelman, 1999; 2003; Bailey, Alfonso, Scott & Leinbach, 2005; Cabrera, Burkum, and La Nasa, 2005). As identified earlier, these characteristics are not typically representative of the GED completer. The characteristics of the adult learner who has completed the GED may be drastically different and include being frightened and anxious in the unfamiliar college environment, have poor self concepts in relation to academic success, and may be very proficient at life coping skills but not academic skills (Joost, 2007). Providing the resources necessary for an individual to experience educational success, and therefore be eligible to enter the job market at an adequate level that ensures personal and professional gratuity is critical to the advancement of an individual in today's society. Due to the fact that there is little research on the success of the GED graduate who transitions into the community college, it is difficult to determine if there is a group of individuals who are falling through the cracks and not receiving educational support and being retained in the

educational arena to allow for successful completion of their academic goals. There are several strategies for success in place when an individual attempts to obtain the GED. The individualized attention and the ability for the student to focus one-on-one with the GED educational materials in a self-paced, personalized format may be the strategies that the individual needs to be able to successfully attain the GED (George-Ezzelle, Zhang, & Douglas, 2006). As the traditional college or community college setting may not offer this educational format, it may be difficult for the GED completers to transition well into the community college setting and be successful on their own.

<div align="center">The Educating of America</div>

The high school diploma and its equivalent neither provide nor guarantee an income above the poverty level as they may have in years past. Today's economy is alarming for many who hold jobs as well as for those who are new college graduates looking for employment. Due to layoffs, retirements, and company closures, it is becoming more difficult for individuals to gain employment. Employers are not only looking for skilled workers, but also those who are termed "knowledge workers" – those who have more education are also able to continuously learn new skills with the ever-changing expectations within the workforce. Educating America can result in a more educated workforce, which may lead to an increase in economic growth as educated workers inspire more worker interaction which leads to increased productivity, more effective management and the more rapid integration of technology and other helpful and crucial innovations (Moretti, 2004). In 2006, of the top 20 fastest growing jobs, at least 15 of them required some form of post-secondary education and several require a bachelor's degree or higher. Jobs that require skill development by on-the-job training are now becoming obsolete (Choitz and Prince, 2008).

Those without an education may be competing for jobs with many who have undergraduate degrees and even graduate degrees.   In order for many to even consider looking for employment that requires a degree, they must step back and complete the basics for a degree – successfully acquiring a GED. Completing the GED is a huge undertaking for many. Due to the constraints of lack of finances, family responsibilities, job commitments and child- care needs, many consider getting the GED as the last step in the educational process.

Looking past this goal to another of attending college may be overwhelming and even inconceivable for some. In order to move out of poverty and make themselves more marketable in the job search, getting the GED may not be enough. However, the concept of attending college and acquiring a new skill or earning a degree is not feasible to those who have not had that precedent set within their family structures. Confusion as to cost, commitment, sacrifice and more are beyond what some individuals can comprehend or visualize for themselves. Getting these individuals in the door of higher education and through the educational process has long been an issue for many colleges.

Purpose of the study

It is the mission of the community college to provide open access to a variety of individuals who choose to increase their potential through higher education. Community colleges offer career readiness programs, personal enrichment courses, and opportunities for seamless articulation and access to colleges and universities. Tyler (2001) noted that: even though college pays off for GED holders, only 30-35% obtain any post-secondary education, only 5 to 10% obtain at least a year of post-secondary education, and very few (between 0.5 and 3%) acquire even an associate's degree (p. 42).

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the transition experience of the GED completer that chooses to enroll in the community college. Having an understanding of the transitions into the college that these individuals experience can provide insight into programs which aim to increase access and retention at the community college. Having knowledge of the transition experience for the GED completer can only be achieved through an increase in research within this area. It is important that policymakers and administrators are aware of the student population of the community college and that the needs of these students are being met. Although an individual's attributes are a large determinant in the persistence and success of the GED completer obtaining a degree, the institution is an essential component in allowing for the success of the individual student.

Research Questions

This study attempts to understand the transition experience of the GED completer into the community college setting. Knowing how these individuals experienced the process of maneuvering through the various aspects of college such as admissions, testing, and attending classes will help the institution understand what may or may not be in place, either in the institution or within the individual, to allow for the successful transition experience of the GED completer into the community college setting. How does the community college make itself more accessible and welcoming to the GED completer who desires to attempt higher education? What does it take for an individual to consider him or herself ready to attempt college, and what aspects of college does he or she find intimidating or helpful? It is imperative to understand that the answers to these important questions for both the institution and the individual can be insightful to both entities – the GED student and the community college.

An objective in conducting this study was to obtain narrative data and provide rich descriptions of the experiences of individuals who had completed the GED and who chose to continue their education at the community college. Participants were chosen from those who had graduated from a large Midwestern community college who completed their initial application for admission by stating they had received their GED and had also applied for graduation for the spring or summer of 2010. These individuals may have chosen to earn their GED and begin college right away or had obtained their GED and then after a period of time decided to pursue postsecondary education.

Therefore, the following research questions guided the development and data analysis of this study:

1). What difficulties were experienced when the GED student decided to enter college after acquiring a GED?

2). What has allowed the GED completer to transition successfully into the community college?

3). What are the GED completer's own thoughts/perception of his/her level of success at the community college?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical and empirical literature on the educational attainment of GED graduates and college success draws from many disciplines including psychological, economic, demographic and personal/social psychology. While each of these perspectives has informed this research study, the conceptual models and consequent interpretation of the results relies on several theories directly related to the concepts analyzed in the educational process: the college transition theory and self-efficacy theory.

A qualitative researcher is charged with making sense of the experiences of the research participants, interpreting their personal stories, and determining if there are theories available to explain the behavioral phenomenon (Stein, 2004). Qualitative research has the potential ability to empower groups of individuals who are typically marginalized by society; the metaphor of "giving voice" is often used to describe the ability for qualitative research to initiate social change – we are hearing the voices of those who are not the mainstream and may not have the abilities, skills, understanding or awareness of how to have their messages or needs understood (Mishler, 1986; Rappaport, 1990).

This study utilizes qualitative research methods in order to seek to understand and discover the meanings that people have constructed about a process or a phenomenon they experience in their lives (Merriam, 2002). As a counselor in the community college setting, this researcher is aware that there are individuals attending the community college who may have little support from others in the belief that there is a need for higher education, who may lack a thorough understanding of the process of accessing higher education, and who may not have the confidence or may lack skills to be successful in higher education. In order to further understanding and knowledge of those who choose to access higher education and who possess the aforementioned constraints, this qualitative study is of major importance.

The constructionist view has the foundational belief that meaning is constructed, not discovered (Crotty, 1998). Crotty continues:

> As Heidegger and Merlou-Ponty repeatedly state, the world is 'always already there'. The world and objects in the world may be in themselves meaningless; yet they are our partners in the generation of meaning and need to be taken seriously. It is surely important and liberating, to distinguish theory consistent

with experienced reality from theory that is not. Objectivity and subjectivity

need to be brought together and held together rather indissolubly.

Constructionism does precisely that. (p. 44)

Research from a constructionist paradigm manifests the assumptions that: 1). Our experience of or within the world does not dictate our understanding of the world. What we understand to be knowledge of the world is not formulated through the process of induction or testing of hypothesis; 2). The process of our understanding of our world comes from interrelationships with others within our world; and, 3). The degree to which an understanding remains consistent and stable over time is not fundamentally dependent on the validity of the perspective of the individual; rather, the stability or abandonment of the construct relies on the commitment level by the individual of their personal understanding as it is questioned within a community of participants within the interrelations of the environment or situations (Gergen, 1985).

In regards to this research study, understanding how the individuals perceived their experiences and maintained that perception throughout the experience provides insight into several personal attributes. These may include the relationship of personal awareness, receptivity to new concepts and an understanding of how attempting and maneuvering through higher education constructed their identity formation and philosophical understandings of themselves developed throughout this experience – and ultimately, their reality of this experience. Chiari and Nuzzo (1996) argue that the term "constructionism" should be reserved for the approaches that struggle to overcome the realism-idealism dichotomy, and distinguish two broad categories of constructionism - "epistemological" and "hermeneutic". Epistemological constructionists believe that there can be many equally

legitimate constructions of one external reality, whereas hermeneutic constructionists share a view of knowledge as interpretation; an interpretation historically founded rather than timeless, contextually verifiable rather than universally valid, and linguistically generated and socially negotiated rather than cognitively and individually produced (p. 167).

According to psychologist Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995), the concept of reality through the lens of constructivism is the intermingling of things and relationships on which we rely and infinitely believe others rely on as well. Davis (2002) provides an explication of the utilization of the phenomenological approach as being consistent with the epistemological assumptions of constructivism. Phenomenology attempts to understand the experience from the perspective of the individual, has the assumption that people make unique meaning out of their experiences, and asserts that this investigation may be informed by a hermeneutic philosophical position (p. 511). Utilizing the constructionist paradigm in this study has empowered the researcher to understand the reality or truths of the participants' experiences as constructed by the individuals within each of their unique stories.

<div align="center">Rationale for the Use of Phenomenology</div>

This research study utilizes the phenomenological method of inquiry. With the phenomenological perspective, Edmund Husserl asserts that each person lives in and is affected by a world that surrounds him or her and that most individuals take for granted the experiences of the world that they live in (Aspers, 2004). As this nonchalant attitude toward lived experiences is typically how each individual lives in his or her everyday life, there must be a process through the phenomenological methodology to determine how an individual actually interpreted a certain experience. For this particular study, understanding how the GED completer lived through and was affected by the transition experience into the

community college would be informatively critical. In order for an individual to define what Husserl refers to as a "pure descriptive science of essential being" (Moore, 1942), there is a process that needs to be implemented by the phenomenological researcher in which the researcher regards the naturalistic standpoint of the everyday life experience in relation to the physical content and the spatial content of the experience. This inquiry requires that researchers go through a process of defining and eliminating their own assumptions and biases, examine the phenomenon without presuppositions and to describe the deep structure of the phenomenon experienced by the individuals based on internal themes that are discovered (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Moustakas, 1994). Understanding through this unbiased and "pure" lens how both the physical and spatial content of the transition experience affected the student would help both practitioners and administrators develop and implement critical resources for assisting these transition students into the community college.

<center>Significance of the Study</center>

In order to understand the human experience, it is essential to gain an understanding from the most basic perspective. Interviewing, observing and critically analyzing the lived experiences of others in order to formulate a unique perspective can provide essential information to administrators and staff at the community college. This knowledge can assist in providing impetus of direction and implications for future research that may increase our understanding and allow for critical issues to be researched and productive measures implemented, particularly for the student population at the community college.

The findings of this study will provide insight into the experience of the GED completer who chooses to attend the community college to reach an educational goal,

whether it is through completing a course or acquiring a diploma, certificate or degree. These findings will allow administrators, student affairs personnel, faculty and staff at the community college to have a better understanding of the community college transition experience and provide services that will enable these individuals to make more productive and effective decisions concerning developing an admissions process that is student friendly, programming for populations who may struggle academically, financially and socio-economically, and putting in place retention aids for those who find the educational environment intimidating or unwelcoming.

<div align="center">Role of the Researcher</div>

Personal Narrative and Assumptions of Researcher

It is important in the research process for the researcher to be aware of his or her own biases in relation to the study. Qualitative researchers try to interact with their participants in the most nonthreatening, unobtrusive and natural manner possible in order to ensure authenticity within the relationship (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Due to this consideration, qualitative researchers are concerned with their own subjectivity and how this may impact the study and have an effect on the data and final research product (LeCompte, 1987). Qualitative researchers attempt to study objectively the subjective states of research participants (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Although the collaborative process is valued among the researcher and the participants, (Morrow et al., 2001), it is important to understand that the biases, values and judgments of the researcher do become part of the research writings (Cresswell, 1998). Bogden and Biklen (2003) provide assurance that being aware of researcher bias is not only important but expected and accepted:

"Acknowledge that no matter how hard you try you cannot divorce research and writing from past experiences, who you are, what you believe and what you value. Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable. The goal is to become more reflective and conscious of how who you are may shape and enrich what you do, not to eliminate it. On the other hand, do not be so head strong about who you are and what you believe that it leads to being unreflective and to losing your self-consciousness…you need to be open to being shaped by the research experience and to have your thinking be informed by the data". (p. 34)

There are several strategies that researchers may employ to ensure that they are conscious and aware of their biases and the impact of these on the study. A personal narrative and disclosure of assumptions by the researcher is obligatory when understanding that the researcher is the primary instrument of inquiry and thereby has the responsibility to make his or her own assumptions, experiences and biases known concerning the topic of the research (Morrow et al., 2001). The following narrative is designed to formulate an understanding of the researcher's position or standpoint of higher education and the experience of transitioning into the higher education arena.

My pursuit of higher education came at a time in my life when I needed to experience growth and find significance. The community college, because of its close proximity and lower cost, was my initial encounter with the higher education realm, and it significantly impacted my life. This life change developed with respect to how my perceptions changed regarding my own academic abilities and the limitless opportunities for personal and occupational development that could lead to an enhanced quality of life. I was implicitly

changed due to this process. I realized during my tenure at the community college that I could excel with my academic abilities and that my education was providing me the tools I needed to reach my personal goals and aspirations. I also found that my own personal goals and aspirations were enhanced and became boundless due to self-perceived growth and satisfaction in my choice of career. One of my first occupations after acquiring my bachelor's degree was as a GED instructor and then site supervisor. During this experience, I found it very rewarding to see others reach the same conclusions I did in regard to the benefits of education. Currently, as a counselor in the community college setting, I strive to find ways to advocate and assist students to reach their personal and educational goals, allowing them to experience what they deem to be success. My counseling role allows me to be connected throughout the community college institution to a variety of entities that are in place to promulgate student success. I know what it took for me as an individual to transition into the community college with a high school diploma and become somewhat comfortable with the education process. It is important for me to be aware of the impact of the institution on students who may not have been comfortable in the secondary education setting; as well as be aware of the strategies students employ themselves that allow them to be successful in the educational transition process. I work with many prospective or new students who express fear, concern, confusion and frustration when trying to understand and navigate through the college process. Knowing how students view their transition experience will provide another perspective on what needs to be in place for those who wish to further their education at the community college.

  I also had several assumptions regarding what I believed the participants in this study would provide to me through the interviews and essays regarding their transition experience:

a). Due to lack of an educational emphasis in the household, the students would

struggle with understanding how to transition into college;

b). Most of the GED completers would be apprehensive toward postsecondary

education because they did not have an agreeable education experience in

secondary or possibly even elementary education;

c). The students were all "forced" into the college arena due to either economic

constraints (they lacked success finding a job so they decided to enhance their

skills before beginning the job search again) or lack of finding other

employment;

d). The majority of the students would be non-traditional and would have family

and other outside factors that would inhibit their success level in college;

e). Students' impression of college was merely as something that had to be

accomplished in order to allow them more opportunities.

Because I began my college experience with many outside constraints, I assumed my

experience would be similar to a majority of the participants, and I believed that the empathy

I could employ regarding these similarities would allow for a building of rapport with the

students. However, due to the fact that a phenomenological researcher must be aware of

biases and not allow them to interfere with the research process, I made an extensive effort to

set aside these assumptions so they did not interfere with the understanding of the meaning

making that was determined from the students stories.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

The community college is one avenue of higher education for a variety of students.

Many of those students who choose the community college are individuals who have

completed their GED and wish to pursue higher education but may be doubtful of their

academic skills, unable to afford other means of higher education, or may possess other at-

risk factors. In order to conduct a valid research study that will provide critical information

to administrators and stakeholders within the community college setting, it is important to

define what is being researched and identify an appropriate research methodology. This

phenomenological research study will attempt to identify the issues that impact the process of

a successful transition into the community college setting by those students who have entered

into higher education after acquiring their GED.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Education is arguably the most critical issue in allowing an individual to become a productive member of society and opens the doors for a variety of opportunities in both personal development and socio-economic development of an individual. However, there are increasing numbers of individuals who have chosen to drop out of education due to a variety of reasons. In 2000, American adults who dropped out of high school and were over 25 years of age were twice as likely to be unemployed as those who graduated high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002); in addition, the median income of those who dropped out and did not acquire a high school diploma was substantially less than the median income of those who did graduate high school but lacked a college degree ($25,095 vs $34,303 for men and $17,919 vs. $24,970 for women) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Research also shows that there are non-pecuniary benefits to higher education as well. Those who access higher education have increased life expectancy and overall general health, improved quality of life for themselves and their children, increased social status, lower rates of incarceration, and higher rates of volunteerism and voter participation (Williams & Swail, 2005). Additionally, higher education appears to produce individuals who are more open-minded, cultured, rational, consistent, and less authoritarian than those with less education; students who pursue higher education pass the non-monetary benefits of their enrollment on to succeeding generations. Other traits developed through education were decreased prejudice and enhanced knowledge of world affairs and social status (Rowley & Hurtado, 2002). Cohn and Geske (1992), postulate that parent's education levels positively correlate with health status of their children and lower mortality rates as

well as an overall more optimistic view of past and future personal progress. These factors

allow for an enriched life experience for those who choose to access higher education.

Although the valid reasons cited above would be considered substantial for providing

incentive for an individual to pursue higher education, only 54% of traditional students who

possess a goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree reach that goal within five years of

enrollment in college (Choy, 2002). Adults obtaining their GED typically recognize that

they need to continue their education but do not necessarily follow through. In a report from

the GED Testing Service (2005):

> 63% of those who passed the GED said they took the test in order to qualify
>
> for further education. Very few GED holders go on to complete even a year
>
> of postsecondary education, however. Reviewing studies of large, national
>
> datasets as well as a few smaller studies, Tyler (2001) noted that "even though
>
> college pays off for GED holders, only 30 to 35% obtain any postsecondary
>
> education, only 5 to 10% obtain at least a year of postsecondary education,
>
> and very few (between 0.5 and 3%) acquire even an associate's degree". (pg.
>
> 42)

Knowing how to access higher education, persistence, and completion of a

postsecondary degree is contingent upon many things including the personal attributes of the

adult learner or GED completer. Reder (1999) found that college persistence (in this case

persistence is defined as completion or still working toward a postsecondary credential at

five years) was higher for students with high school diplomas (54%) than for those who

completed the GED (28%) at two year institutions; furthermore, 75% of high school diploma

recipients were persisting through a four-year degree compared to 51% of GED completers

trying to acquire a four-year degree. Although it is challenging to determine the difficulties attributed toward college access, persistence through college and completion of a degree for the GED completer, several issues have been found to have some impact on these areas. In a report by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (2006), the following challenges have been documented:

1). Inadequate academic preparation, in particular limited exposure to college-level reading and algebra, computer skills, and research paper writing; (Santos, 2004; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001)

2). Financial constraints due to limited knowledge or understanding of access to financial aid, lost wages if full time workers had to cut back on work hours to accommodate college, and hidden costs of college such as textbooks, supplies,transportation and childcare costs for those with children; (ACE, 2004; Bosworth & Choitz, 2002; Cook, King, Carnevale, & Desrochers, 2004)

3). The need for effective strategies to balance the scheduling/time Management demands of all aspects of life such as demands of work, family/relationships, and study/homework time commitments; (Gooden, Matus-Grossman, Wavelet, Diaz, & Seupersad, 2002)

4). Difficulty navigating the college environment from understanding the admissions process, understanding the learning environment, college culture, and financial aid structure; (Brickman & Braun, 1999) and

5). Personal and psychological barriers, especially the fact that one may doubt his or her ability to succeed as a college student and a need for significant

levels of personal and career counseling. (Hill, 2004) (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006, pg. 7)

In order to provide an understanding for this study researching the General Educational Development student who has transitioned into the community college, it is important to conduct an all-encompassing review of the literature regarding the aspects that impact and encompass the GED completer.

<div align="center">The GED Completer</div>

The General Education Diploma is an alternative for those who chose to not follow a traditional route of acquiring a high school diploma. Also known as the high school equivalency diploma, the GED is awarded to students who can pass an examination which determines that the test taker has a content knowledge equal to the minimum expected of a high school graduate. Individuals who choose to drop out of high school and acquire the General Educational Development certificate attribute a variety of reasons as to why they chose this method of equivalence to high school completion. The reasons expressed by these individuals are attributed to both personal and institutional characteristics and include large amounts of absenteeism (due largely in part to boredom and unhappiness in the secondary education setting); poor study habits, and feelings of not "fitting in", as well as lack of support from teachers and lack of academic skills (George-Ezzelle, et al., 2006). Getting a better job and achieving personal satisfaction are the two reasons most expressed by individuals working to get their GED. Positive role modeling is the third most reported reason for getting the GED. Among these top reasons for getting the GED, furthering education through either a technical trade program or a community college was high on the list (George & Schaefer, 2002). Eleven percent of individuals aged 18 to 24 who received a

high school diploma in 2001 took the GED test as the equivalent. Most individuals who acquire the GED do so by age 20; however, age is increasing among those who take the GED, and this appears to be related to economic situations and competition for increased wages (Elvery, 2005). Attaining a GED within four years of dropping out of high school has been shown to increase the probability of attending college for both males and females who have chosen to leave high school (Murane, Willett & Parker Boudette, 1997). Garet, Jing, and Kutner (1996) conducted research that found that completion of the GED, particularly for women, was a strong predictor of number of years of vocational training required; and Kroll and Qi's (1995) study showed that those who received their GED were three to four times as likely to continue into higher education in either two-year community colleges or four-year college or universities or attend vocational training as compared to individuals who failed to achieve their GED.

GED completers tend to come from a disadvantaged background, frequently live in a female-headed household by the age of 14, and among those female completers have had their first child by 20. Of the GED completers who choose to go on to college, most are older and take more time to transition into college (Miralani, 2006). Those who choose to go on to college, compared to their traditional college-going counterparts of the same age have lower employment rates, hours of work and wages (Tyler, 2004). There are very few studies researching the GED completer who decides to continue into higher education. Of those few studies completed, some outcomes indicate that earning a GED may somewhat increase the chances that an individual will continue his or her education or training, but provides little evidence that the individual will find better employment or better earnings (Prince & Jenkins, 2005).

Although there is a lack of information concerning the success of the GED completer into the community college, there appears to be much interest – enough to spark some national foundations to provide funding for research in this area.   The Ford Foundation's Bridges to Opportunity initiative, the Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative, and the National Governor's Association Pathways to Advancement project are noteworthy organizations that are delving in to this phenomenon and researching the success of adult learners (Prince & Jenkins, 2005).

In summary, although there is an understanding by those who complete their GED that higher education is beneficial, very few actually go on to higher education, and of those who do, very few are successful. Several areas of concern have been identified through the limited number of studies that have been conducted on the GED completer who chooses the community college route. These areas of concern include the need to address the aspects of inadequate academic preparation, financial constraints due to limited knowledge of and/or access to financial aid, lost wages by those who may have to cut back on hours of employment to access education; the need for effective strategies to manage the competing demands of work, family/relationships, childcare needs and school; difficulty navigating the educational process; and personal and psychological barriers, especially the lack of confidence in personal ability and the need for personal and career counseling (Zafft, Kallenbach & Spohn, 2006).

GED Completer's Choice of the Community College

Community colleges, as open access institutions, are available to all students regardless of ability, background or goals for their pursuit of higher education. There is a dearth of literature in existence that discusses the area concerning students who graduate with

a General Educational Development diploma and transfer into the community college in order to advance their education. Lofstrum and Tyler (2005) state: "[The] effectiveness of GED [credential] acquisition as a route into postsecondary education is a woefully understudied area" (p. 2). Little is researched or understood about either the transition or success of GED students who choose to enter into the community college.

Dowdy and Golden (2004) conducted a study which showed that GED completers possess a variety of diverse characteristics that distinguish them from traditional high school students who choose the college route. Many GED graduates have been or still are in the workforce and may be married and/or parenting. Thus this diversity brings a much richer lived experience to the classroom; however, GED completers may not be as prepared for college as their high school graduate counterparts who are more likely to be exposed to college preparatory courses and career and vocational guidance.

The U.S. Department of Education (2001) submitted a report titled Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education, which provided a summary of the characteristics of the community college student. According to this report these community college student attributes are:

79% -- Students who work (full-time and part-time) in addition to taking

classes

69% -- Students who attend part-time

41% -- Students who are first-generation college students

41% -- Students who work full-time jobs in addition to taking classes

35% -- Students who are parents or have other dependents

35% -- Students who are at least 30 years old

29% -- Students who have household incomes less than $20,000

17% -- Students who are single parents

In regards to the similarities between the GED completer characteristics and the student population who enter the higher education arena, it would be assumed that the community college is the typical educational avenue of choice for those who have obtained their GED. Community colleges have been in existence since 1945. Since that time, many individuals have made the community college their choice for higher education. Reasons for choosing the community college other than overall general population expansion include older adults returning to higher education to increase a skill or advance their education to make themselves more employable, the ability to attend classes part-time, and the offering of financial aid. Many individuals choose a one year diploma or certificate to increase an occupational skill or to gain training, and many of these programs are provided by vocational institutions or community colleges (Grubb, 2002). Other reasons for attending the community college include coming to the community college to "sample" higher education, possibly due to close proximity to home and the fact that the community college has a lower tuition rate. Some students may have very specific career goals that can be met by the acquirement of an associate degree or certificate (Bailey, et al., 2005). Further research on a student's choice for college suggests that the community college is attended because of student's uncertainties about college ("they said I couldn't do it"); a result of setbacks that did not allow them to attend college traditionally; aspirations to receive training in a specific occupation; influence of family and peers; location (close proximity); and institutional characteristics that appealed to the student (Bailey, et al., 2005). Bers and Galowich (2002) conducted a study which interviewed parents who had children who had enrolled at the

community college. Consistent with the aforementioned research the parents indicated that

their students chose the community college for factors relating to cost and to the students'

uncertainties about college. For the majority of parents in the study, their first

recommendation for postsecondary education was the community college due to financial

factors and the fact that they wanted to continue to be involved in their child's education.

Stokes and Somers (2004) also found factors that relate to the area of cost as a reason

students choose the community college. On the Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey,

students who chose to enroll at a community college indicated that they were more likely to

be financially supporting themselves, work outside of college, have no high school diploma

and have lower academic achievement; further, these students were more responsive to

immediate cost rather than net cost of attending the community college.

The majority of community college students are enrolled in vocational/technical

programs, according to Boesel and McFarland (1994), and the fact that GED enrollments in

vocational programs are substantial tends to increase the possibility that GED graduates will

choose the community college. Given that community colleges are open access and provide

a vocational and technical training format for many individuals who are working full time,

have family responsibilities and seek programs that are demanded by the labor market, it is

evident that the community college would be the choice for the GED completer. However, it

is important to identify whether these students are successful in reaching their educational

goals at the community college. A study conducted by the National Center for Educational

Statistics found that GED completers had on average more "nontraditional" characteristics

that predicted postsecondary attrition than those of the high school graduates who chose to

pursue higher education. Some of these characteristics were delayed enrollment, part time

schooling while working full time, financial independence (were supporting selves), and had parental responsibilities (NCES, 2002). An initiative known as Breaking Through, which is designed to improve the outcome of low-skilled, low-literate adults who are looking to gain advanced employment by acquiring occupational college course credit and certificate programs, observes that there are basically two categories of these nontraditional students – 1). Students who are not ready for college; and 2). Students whose life presents challenges that do not allow them to believe they can complete college credit. Of those individuals who attempt college, many may believe it is not a viable option. In other words, these individuals do not have the information, skills or understanding of college expectations to allow them to believe that they can manage college including the time commitment, life challenges that occur, expense, and academic difficulty. Another barrier is not having a clear educational and career goal that can keep them motivated; still other barriers are an intimidating college environment ("I don't belong here"), poor previous experience in school, lack of computer and study skills, and possibly learning disabilities (USDE, 2007). Most research tends to illustrate the facts that of most GED candidates who choose to pursue postsecondary education, few will complete the first year or a degree program (Duke & Ganzglass, 2007; Murnane, Willet, & Tyler, 2000; NCAL, 2008; Reder, 1999; Tyler, 2005). Prince and Jenkins (2005) found that those who choose to enter the community college and are low-skilled should be encouraged by the community college or technical school to set a minimum goal of achieving at least one year of college level courses and earn a credential to help formulate personal success. Persistence in higher education can be determined as a direct result of goal-setting by the student, such as the goal of attaining a degree or diploma (Boesel, Alsalam & Smith, 1998).

Navigating the postsecondary educational system can be difficult, and someone who has the above mentioned characteristics or traits may find the process so difficult that he or she may decide that education simply is too challenging or not right for them. Hagedorn (2005) describes "four corners of friction" for these adult students who may be attempting to navigate the postsecondary waters – access, success, retention, and institutional accommodations. Access may mean flexibility of class schedule and format, entrance testing rigor, and institutions that are supportive of adult commitments. Success is defined as grades. Retention (of which the definition is vague and is difficult to gauge at the community college) is defined as course completion and as students who remained enrolled across multiple age steps. Institutional accommodation was determined by a survey asking students to identify possible obstacles to attaining their academic goals (Hagedorn, 2005). Each of these aspects, when considered by the institution as to how it impacts the student, can provide pertinent information to the administration and policymakers at the community college. Because institutional environments are unique, these areas of influence may have considerable impact on students' academic goals, college experiences and self-concepts (Astin, 1993).

The community college has provided opportunities for many disadvantaged individuals who may not otherwise attempt postsecondary education (Fusch, 1996). An institution's understanding of how it serves its student population in regard to the above factors can tremendously impact the success of its student population. Assisting GED completers into the community colleges should be considered an integral function of the community colleges. The transition from completing a GED and enrolling at the community college appears to be more likely if the GED completer took the GED classes at a community

college (FDE, 2002). If community colleges are not serving students well, then many of the students who have so many compounding issues that impact their success may have no other opportunity for education and are more likely to drain resources from their communities and government than contribute to them.

In regards to student success, many students have a variety of difficulties making a successful transition into college. Being able to understand the theoretical manifestations of the experience of the college transition and then to explore the theory of self-efficacy helps one to understand the motivations for successfully making and completing the transition process.

<div align="center">College Transition Theory</div>

Educational institutions are becoming increasingly concerned with enrollment predictions and college retention. Navigating the higher education realm and successfully maneuvering through the educational process has been delved into by many in the educational arena and has produced a large body of literature (Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Knox, 2005; Laing, Robinson & Johnston, 2005; Macaro & Wingate, 2004; Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2000; Rhodes, Bill, Biscomb, Nevill, & Bruneau, 2002), but the transition of GED completer into the community college has been less researched.

Students aspire to, apply to, and enroll in college through a complex process that encompasses longitudinal and interactive experiences involving an individual's aspirations and achievements, learning opportunities and intervention programs in high schools and through institutional admissions (Oakes, 2004). As has been noted in the literature review for this study, the GED completer has existed on the peripherals of this typical student demographic. The GED completer tends to have had a considerably varied path through the

educational institution and consequently was not privileged to the understanding nor the assistance of maneuvering through the above described complex passage. Some of the characteristics of the individual who chooses the GED path, as mentioned earlier, are being in lower socioeconomic status (SES), coming from a single-parent family, changing schools two or more times, and earning average grades in elementary school (Chen & Kaufman, 1997). These limitations and constraints offer some insight into the discombobulating nature of the process experienced by the GED completers transitioning into college, as they may not have had access to the developmental and educational aspects of learning the college pipeline process.

Considerable demographic disparities exist in college enrollment and completion rates along the lines of race, socioeconomic status, and gender, to name a few. There is a wide variety of demographic characteristics, goals, needs and life circumstances within the student population at the community college. Acquiring a GED is a monumental undertaking for many; transitioning on and attempting and successfully completing postsecondary education is considered for many to be an undertaking that is too gargantuan. Several economic studies reveal that GED completers tend to have poorer labor market outcomes than those with a traditional high school diploma. A variety of studies on GED completers reveal that these individuals complete their secondary school degrees and begin college at substantially later ages than traditional high school graduates. Furthermore, the GED completers tend to enter a community college rather than a four year college for the reasons previously cited. Even though there are many personal, social and economical benefits to pursuing a degree, as reviewed earlier, research shows that only 30-35% of GED recipients go on to benefit from any postsecondary education; only 5-10% will obtain at least one year

of postsecondary education and only 3% actually gain an associate's degree (Murnane, Willett & Tyler, 2000). Understanding and addressing the causes or constraints that inhibit an individual from pursuing advanced education has been overlooked by previous research yet is critical information for community college administration and staff in order to provide programming that allows for successful transition of the GED completer into the community college. The successful transition process is not only benefited by understanding the navigational process, but also by understanding the individual.

Change in an individual's life is inevitable with the transition into college as there are new educational and social environments that provide an impact on that person (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). When adults make the transition into college, they are adapting into a process of continuing and changing reactions which evokes an individual's changing and continuous appraisal of self-in-situation (Schlossberg, 1984). Understanding the expectations of this new environment is required of the individual who wants to achieve success. For the individual who has completed a secondary equivalency by going the non-traditional route of the GED completer, becoming aware of the underpinnings of what is required in college takes additional learning. As previously noted, access, persistence, and finally, completion of a postsecondary credential is directly related to the level of skills and knowledge that a student must acquire regarding college success. Access to college is a key condition for those who consider post-secondary education, and the transition from high school completion to college is a pivotal juncture for attrition in the educational process (Hauser, 1993). Time management, computer skills, and math skills are just some of the areas that students must increase their knowledge and utilization of in order to be successful at college (Zafft, 2008). Nancy Schlossberg proposes a transition theory that not only

provides insight into factors related to the transition process and the environment, but also the individual – whether he or she is a traditional or non-traditional aged college student (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman (1995) define transition as "any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (p. 27). The college transition experience creates a major life-change in any one of those individuals who choose to add higher education to their many other life roles. In order to be considered a transition, there must be individual perceptions of change attached to the experience. The role of perception is stressed in transitions. To understand the meaning of the transition to the individual, one needs to understand the type (anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events), context (one's relationship to the transition) and impact (degree to which it alters one's life) of the transition (Schlossberg, et al, 1995).

Schlossberg et al. (1995) denote three non discrete types of transitions: (1) anticipated transitions – ones that occur predictably; (2) unanticipated transitions – those that are not predictable or scheduled and yet occur; and (3) nonevents – those events that would be expected to occur but do not. These nonevents have classifications as (a) personal – related to the individual's aspirations; (b) ripple – experienced dependent on the nonevent of someone close; (c) resultant – caused by another event; and (d) delayed – anticipating an event that may still occur. It is important to note that nonevents are associated more with probability than possibility. When an event is likely to occur but fails to do so, this is a nonevent (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996). The transition process requires dealing with the transition over a period of time. The individual moves from preoccupation with a transition to an integration of the transition. The length of time needed to experience full integration may vary with each individual's experience, depending on how the transition is viewed by

the individual. How an individual perceives the integration into the transition is based on what Schlossberg et al (1995) termed to be the "4 S's". These factors that influence a person's ability to cope with transition are: situation, self, support, and strategies.

Situation refers to interface of the individual with the transition in regards to the constellation of experiential and perceptual factors. These factors include the trigger – what precipitated the transition; the timing – is it viewed as "on time" or "off time" in regards to social expectations; control – what is perceived as within his or her control; role change – is this a change in role for the individual and is this change good or bad?; duration – is it seen as permanent, temporary or uncertain change?; previous experience with a similar transition – how did the individual cope the last time this was experienced?; concurrent stress – is there other stress present?; and assessment – how does the individual view the transition in regards to responsibility? Is it brought on by self or others, and how is the individual affected by this perception?

The next factor of *self* is comprised of the personal and demographic characteristics of the individual. It includes socioeconomic status, gender, age (emphasizing psychological, social, and functional age over chronological age), stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity.

The factor of *support* refers to the social resources that the student has available to him or her including family and friends, close relationships, social networks, institutions and communities that may assist the student through the educational process. The functions of support are defined as affect, affirmations, aid and honest feedback from others (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Strategies, the fourth S in Schlossberg's theory, include those coping responses that are comfortable and inherent in an individual which helps to improve a situation (Marks &

Robb Jones, 2004). The higher the levels of impact these factors have on the individual, the better the outcome within the transition. For example, the better the individual understands the context of the situation at hand, the personal and demographic characteristics of the self, the support available to the individual and the strategies (or coping responses) the individual has access to employ, the more positive the transition experience will be for the individual (Schlossberg, et al, 1995).

In theories of transition, the notion of identity is paramount. Unique and strange practices force reconsideration of practices and, ultimately, in identity development (Wenger, 1998). The individual's identity trajectory is constructed through the student's interactions of past, present and future aspirations. An individual who had past failures in the educational system may have lower aspirations for any success in the educational arena. Students who actively engage in considering the new practices that it takes to be persistent in their new educational world, and who analyze and understand their reactions to these practices allow for identity shifts that enable participation in the new educational environment that will hopefully lead to success (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

For the mainstream student who chooses college after the traditional secondary route of completing high school and immediately pursuing college, the social environment is a key to assist him or her by experiencing connections with others who have shared the same transition experience. For the GED completer who chooses the community college, adjusting to the college environment may test the durability of those primary and secondary socialization areas (primary includes those close in proximity and support such as family, and secondary includes outside support – work, church, and community, for instance). Students are on their own in college in regards to managing their time, maneuvering through the

coursework and managing their finances while pursuing a degree (Tinto, 1987). Many of those who completed the GED and decided to pursue higher education may have to work long hours to support themselves and their families while trying to complete the degree. This pressure over and above the complications and difficulties experienced in the classroom and coursework can be an added source of frustration leading to attrition. Most students will meet new, diverse groups of peers whose values may not match their own. This experience may challenge an individual who is outside his or her comfort zone and cause new areas of confusion and anxiety internally. These considerations and others can cause the student to question the importance of pursing an education and his or her commitment to this learning endeavor, and put pressure on his or her decision to continue or to drop out and make life return to its more facile existence.

<div align="center">Self-Efficacy Theory</div>

Success in college largely depends on student's own perception of their abilities and whether or not they can be successful in an attempt at higher education. Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001) have consistently shown through their research that academic stress, self-esteem, and holding a high value for and showing a strong commitment to education are predictive of self-efficacy, which is a cogent predictor of academic persistence decisions. The construct of self-efficacy began with Bandura's (1977) publication of "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." The tenets of self-efficacy have since been tested in many disciplines and settings and have received support from a growing body of research in diverse fields. During the past decade, self-efficacy has received increasing attention in the educational arena in particular in relation to academic motivation (Pintrich & Schunk, 1995).

Self-efficacy defined is the personal belief that individuals have in their ability to exercise influence over events that impact their lives (Bandura, 1994). According to social cognitive theory, personal influence varies in regards to specific events. Depending on the event, it may entail managing regulation of one's emotions, thought processes, levels of motivation, affective states and actions, or changing conditions within the environment. These contextual factors are scrutinized within the basis of self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy judgments considered in regards to these factors are both situation and task-specific, and typically individuals make use of these particular judgments in relation to a desired goal (Bandura, 1989). These beliefs of personal influence or confidence affect the individual in the choices he or she makes and the actions he or she pursue. People will want to engage in those tasks in which they feel confident and competent and avoid those in which they do not. Studies regarding self-efficacy have been conducted in relation to attributions (Schunk, 1981), goal setting (Locke & Latham, 1990), problem solving (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1989), reward contingencies (Schunk, 1983), and varied academic performances (Bouffard & Vezeau, 1996). According to research, self-efficacy beliefs are correlated with other self-beliefs within the individual as well as with personal motivation, academic choices, changes and achievement demonstrated by the individual (Pajares, 1996).

Several research studies support Bandura's contention that self-efficacy can work with other self-beliefs such as influencing effort, motivation, persistence and perseverance (Lent, Brown & Larkin, 1984; Schunk & Hanson, 1985). Bouffard-Bouchard, Parent, and Larivee (1991) conducted research in which they found that students with high self-efficacy also worked to increase memory and therefore increased persistence.

Self-efficacy as defined by Bandura in relation to success in college (Goddard & Goddard, 2001) is "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 207). Self-efficacy and other expectancy beliefs have one tenet in common: they are beliefs about one's personal capabilities; they differ in that self-efficacy is defined in relation to an individual's beliefs about his or her own potentialities toward a specific performance and achieving specific results (Pajares, 1996). Self-efficacy findings coincide on two major points: when efficacy beliefs are considered globally in relation to an individual's abilities and/or do not correspond to criteria for a particular task, the ability to predict whether the self-efficacy beliefs have any predictive value is diminished or even nullified; when efficacy is reviewed in relation to specific criteria for a specific task, prediction is enhanced. In other words, when an individual has experienced success on a specific task, self-efficacy for the task may increase, but this does not extend to the individual globally. The fact that many GED completers lack an understanding of the college experience and expectations have been duly noted as a critical issue related to the student who chose to complete the GED rather than graduate from high school. These particular students may have a deficiency in their self-efficacy beliefs that does not allow for individual success in higher education. It is not surprising that many low-level learners who struggle have low self-efficacy for academics. Struggling learners may tend to believe that they lack the academic ability to succeed and consequently avoid academics and give up quickly when difficulties arise. They are convinced that they do not have the capabilities to organize and execute courses of action that may be required for achieving a given educational attainment (Henk & Melnick, 1995). This belief permeates their understanding, and they are convinced that academics guarantee failure and humiliation.

Women in particular report lower educational self-efficacy, have lower self-esteem, experience higher academic stress and perceive less support for attempting higher education (Rayle, Arredondo, & Robinson Kurpius, 2005). In a study by Reisberg (2000), women's stress levels were significantly higher than men in a group of students attending orientation and the first week of classes in a college setting. Factors contributing to these women's stress were time spent on college coursework and child and home care responsibilities. In regards to the typical demographic of the GED completer as being an individual with a variety of outside responsibilities and obligations, it would be understandable that women GED completers had the same anxieties and stressors.

As cited in Margolis and McCabe (2006) self-efficacy theorists suggest that low self-efficacy causes motivational problems. If students believe they cannot succeed at an educational task, they will quickly give up, avoid it, or resist it. Such behaviors may exacerbate other deficits and create additional academic difficulties such as poor grades, conflict with teachers, special education placement and ultimately retention. The key to motivating and engaging these struggling learners is to get them to believe they can succeed (Pressley, Dolezal, Raphael, Mohan, Roehrig & Bogner, (2003). Beliefs can certainly change behavior. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) conclude that "as research has shown, students are motivated to engage in tasks and achieve them when they believe they can accomplish the task" (p. 134). Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) propose that self-efficacy plays a major "facilitative role and that once an individual sees or experiences success, this would increase self-efficacy and therefore may lead to increased use of cognitive strategies and thus better academic performance, and that students need to have the 'will' and the 'skill' to be successful in classrooms" (p. 38). Tinto (1975) would be in agreement as well as expand on

motivation as he hypothesized that a student's own personal commitment to gaining an education would positively influence his or her own academic persistence. It would therefore be reasonable to predict that a personal value of commitment to education would also be related to more positive self-beliefs and lower academic stress as well as create higher self-efficacy beliefs.

Students acquire their self-efficacy information from four sources: their individual task performance – known as enactive mastery (students' recognition of the degree to which they succeed on tasks); vicarious experiences (learning through others' experiences); verbal persuasion (communication from which learners can interpret and evaluate information); and their physiological reactions or states (how students feel before, during and after engaging in a task) (Alderman, 2004). Based on what these students infer from these sources, personal self-efficacy is developed. It's important that these sources be honest and forthright for the individual. For example, when the individual receives verbal persuasion, the learner will believe that success will be substantial if the message giver provides greater credibility. When a learner continually fails tasks after repeated exhortations to try and assurances of success from the message giver, future verbal communications from either the message giver or people who hold similar roles will be less persuasive. Individuals can capitalize on providing sources of self-efficacy through messages by recognizing when a learner succeeds on a task and providing feedback to the learner on the task-specific skills which the learner used to bring about this success (Margolis & McCabe, 2006). How individuals interpret the results of their performance attainments allows for them to alter their self-beliefs and their environments. Students with low self-efficacy may believe that things are tougher than they really are, which in turn fosters stress, depression and doubt in the individual's abilities.

High self-efficacy, in turn, helps create a less stressful attitude and more success in completing difficult tasks and activities. Research on the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic success is abundant (Pajares, 1996). Researchers should continue to assess the link between motivation and self-regulatory variables as outcome measures and in real academic contexts in order to better understand the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and motivation constructs (Ames, 1992). In providing for success of the GED completer into the community college setting, it would be important to determine the individual's established level of self-efficacy belief in relation to his or her academic abilities. This knowledge could assist the educator in utilizing strategies that would enhance the personal self-efficacy belief in order for the student to increase motivation and therefore experience success in his or her academic endeavors.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

Understanding the attributes of the GED completer and the particular action of choosing the community college are very important aspects of awareness for those who work with students as well as community college administrators. Knowing the transition process and how it impacts an individual, even outside of the educational setting, is important. The college transition can be intimidating for even the most capable and knowledgeable individual. Understanding the impact that this has on the individual who struggles in personal self-efficacy beliefs and who has little support for higher education is important. Institutional programming which allows for increasing self-efficacy beliefs and personal growth in the individual provides the advantage of creating personal and academic success for the GED completer that chooses the community college as the path to higher education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

"Learn to regard the souls around you as parts of some grand instrument. It is for each of us

to know the keys and stops, that we may draw forth the harmonies that lie sleeping in the

silent octaves" ~ Anonymous

Qualitative research takes a naturalistic approach to its subject matter; researchers

who choose the qualitative approach study things in their natural settings, attempting to make

sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin

& Lincoln, 2003). The purpose of this study lends itself well to the phenomenological

research method, as the aim of this research is to provide a voice to those who have

completed their GED and transitioned into the community college successfully. Hearing the

stories of these individuals who chose to acquire their GED and pursue higher education

allowed the researcher some insight into this lived experience and helped the investigator

form an understanding of what this moment in the students' lives meant to them. The

researcher in this study attempted to provide from these stories a thick, rich description and

an unbiased and accurate depiction of the process of making this transition and its meaning to

the individuals who accomplished the task they set as their goal. Efforts were made to

extrapolate recurring themes among the participants, which led to new insights related to the

experience of transitioning from GED completer into the community college.

Phenomenology was chosen as the research method for this study as the goal of this

research was to discover the lived experiences of individuals who chose to acquire their GED

and then decided to pursue postsecondary education. The perceptions of these students

regarding the transition are tantamount to understanding the needs, desires, goals and

ultimate success of those who navigated the transition successfully. Understanding the

student's experience is not only germane to the issue, but critical in understanding what is needed by the student and the professional for developing programming that may be most effective. Postsecondary research has been conducted on retention, access, graduation and transfer within the community college setting; however, little information has been garnered from particular student populations. Although race, ethnicity and gender have been increasing as the basis for research in higher education, little has been done to understand the unique population of the adult learner who has acquired a GED and desires to continue in higher education.

Since its inception in 1942, over 17 million adults have passed the GED, and although roughly 60 percent of the candidates state that they are taking the test for educational purposes, many do not continue due to adverse life circumstances or other barriers (ACE, 2009; Maralani, 2006; Reder, 1999; Tyler, 2005). Gaining an understanding of their transition process will provide insight as there is little research conducted on this particular student population. Providing the students with an opportunity to voice and explain their experience requires a phenomenological approach which is designed to capture, understand, and distribute that voice. The exploration of this transition experience for the GED completer was guided by the general questions of this study:

1). what difficulties were experienced when the GED student decides to enter college after acquiring a GED?

2). what has allowed the GED completer to transition successfully into the community college?

3). what are the GED completer's own thoughts/perception of his/her level of success at the community college?

Phenomenology

Qualitative research is looked upon by many researchers as a premiere method that enhances the study of behavior embedded in a larger social world as it emphasizes detailed, first-hand descriptions of people and settings (Trickett, 1996). Creswell (1998) metaphorically describes qualitative research as a "…intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material" (p. 13). Qualitative research inquiry is aimed at describing and clarifying people's lives through the human experience, and researchers using qualitative methods gather data that serves as evidence for the "distilled descriptions" of the individuals (Polkinghorne, 2005). These descriptions will provide both genuine and uncorrupted data with which to understand the transition process of the GED completer into the community college.

The phenomenological approach began with the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Husserl was interested in understanding how an individual perceives his or her environment and, more specifically, what one thinks about the experiences within the environment. He asserts that each person lives in and is affected by a world that surrounds him or her and that most individuals take for granted the experiences of the world that they live in (Aspers, 2004). As this nonchalant attitude toward lived experiences is typically how each individual lives in his or her everyday life, there must be a process through the phenomenological methodology to determine how an individual actually interpreted his or her lived experience. In order for an individual to define what Husserl refers to as a "pure descriptive science of essential being" (Moore, 1942), there is a process that needs to be implemented by the phenomenological researcher in

which the researcher regards the naturalistic standpoint of the everyday life experience in relation to the physical content and the spatial content of the experience. The philosopher Martin Heidegger continued to expand on Husserl's stance on phenomenology. As Husserl valued the importance of defining the original objects within the experience, Heidegger advocates instead for the understanding of the experience rather than the description (Dowling, 2005).

Heidegger believes the primary phenomenon with which phenomenology is concerned is the essence of being (Cohen & Omery, 1994). This essence of being is considered to be the nature or meaning of that phenomenon that an individual experiences. In phenomenology, the lived experience –and a clear understanding of this personal experience—is essential to obtaining an accurate referral to the experience in order to explain it to others. Heidegger uses the term "being-in-the-world" to connote the way that human beings exist, act or are involved in the world they are experiencing (van Manen, 1990). Heidegger propounds that understanding of this "being" is a reciprocal activity, that comprehension of an experience lies in how one understands the experience prior to existing within it, and how one understands the experience *after* having had the experience. Heidegger proposes the "hermeneutic circle" as a means to try to provide an illustration for this concept of reciprocity (Dowling, 2005). Hermeneutics, in a general view, combines the science of interpretation and explanation. Hermeneutics asserts that there is a link between the researcher and what is being interpreted and that this link must be analyzed so that the researcher has a clear understanding of his or her own subjectivity that may be imposed on the process. Understanding this personal knowledge will allow the researcher to be able to extract this knowledge and concentrate on the experience of the individual being studied.

This circular process or "hermeneutic circle" is most definitely reciprocal throughout the research (Lichtman, 2006). This philosophical foundation of hermeneutic phenomenology can provide phenomenological research with a direction focused on the unique, lived experience of the particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen (1990):

> From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is to always question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to *know* the world is to *be* in the world a certain way, the act of researching – questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of "intentionality." (p. 5)

In regards to how research is conducted in a hermeneutic phenomenological study, then, van Manen (1990) states that:

> To *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: To construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the life world, yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication or meaning can reveal. (p. 18)

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer followed the work of Heidegger. Gadamer supplemented the phenomenological movement by proposing two central concepts of prejudgment and universality. Within the concept of prejudgment, Gadamer argues that every individual has preconceived prejudices; prejudices that are both beneficial to our

understanding and those that obstruct our understanding. Therefore, during phenomenological research, understanding is extracted from the personal experiences of the researcher as the researcher has perceived the experience to be with the prejudices included. As the researcher analyzes the experience, he or she interprets the experience of the researched individual through social, cultural and gender implications including the prejudices of the researcher (Koch, 1999). It is necessary, therefore, according to Gadamer, to ensure that feedback and further discussion takes place with those participants within the study to ensure accuracy of the individual's experience.

Phenomenological research seeks to understand the 'what' of the experience rather than the 'why' (Polkinghorne, 1989). The purpose of phenomenological research is to bring to light the phenomenological experience of an individual through careful description that depicts the experience through a combination of intuition, investigation, and careful analysis of the individual's statements of the experience. As described earlier regarding the difference between Husserl's stance and Heidegger's stance on the researcher's role of relating the experience of the individual, Husserl relates that with bracketing and reduction the researcher can come to an accurate deduction of the individual's experience that does not contain intuitive fragments on the researcher's behalf. Husserl suggests that yes, there is immediate intuition when interpreting knowledge; however, the individual does not search deductively but derives the knowledge from its ultimate sources as seen through the general insights of the individual (Sinha, 1963). Heidegger relates that hermeneutic phenomenology suggests that interpretation by the individual researcher is unavoidable (Osborne, 1994).

Alfred Schutz, a pioneer in phenomenological research, "became increasingly certain that an adequate solution to the basic methodological problems of the sciences of man could

only be found in a precise description of the peculiar human constitution…what remained to be done was to apply the phenomenological method to the social world, the product of human symbolic action and material work" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973; p. 19). This phenomenological approach allowed attention to be focused on the individual's perception and how the experience was perceived relationally to the individual. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) credited Max Weber, a German philosopher, for much of the work done to refine phenomenological perspective. They characterized Weber as being "concerned with understanding human behavior from the actor's own frame of reference.…[He] examines how the world is experienced. For him or her, the important reality is what people imagine it to be" (p. 2). Phenomenological research differs from other descriptive and qualitative approaches

> because its focus is on the subject's experienced meaning instead of on description of their overt actions or behavior. Phenomenology maintains the critical distinction between what presents itself as part of a person's awareness and what might exist as a reality 'outside' of our experience. (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 44)

Phenomenology is "concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). It is critical to note that because of the understanding that the researcher's own stance on issues may play into the interpretation of the lived experience, there must be a variety of ways that this can be minimized on the part of the researcher including bracketing, reflexivity and member checking.

Role of the Researcher

In phenomenological methodology, Husserl's term *epoche* is the initial step in coming to an understanding of things, issues, ideas. The challenge of the epoche is to be transparent to ourselves; to have no position or stance, but to view the situation from the most essential of aspects. Epoche is a way of perceiving life in its most fundamental of forms: looking, noticing, becoming aware without passing a judgment on what we see, think, imagine or feel (Moustakas, 1994). When we consider this essence of the experience, we are moving to a deeper level of understanding of the event or situation.

The role of the qualitative researcher is to make sense of and try to understand the experiences of participants, to interpret their stories, and determine if there is a connection to theory that may explain the behavioral phenomenon (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Therefore, the researcher possesses a unique and critical role in the process of phenomenological investigation. As cited in Moustakas (1994), Idhe (1977) has stated that "every experiencing has its reference or direction towards what is experienced and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is present" (pp.42-43). This refers to the understanding that in order to present the experience from another's point of view, the researcher must have a full understanding of the textural description of the experience. In regards to this description, every aspect of the experience is fully described, and every dimension is paid equal attention and is included. In the process of transcendental phenomenology, the researcher needs to bracket the phenomenon from his or her own understanding and describe what remains of the natural experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The experience is taken through this "reductions" process, consisting of bracketing out the elements within the original naturalistic situation (phenomenological

reduction), as well as through bracketing out what Husserl termed "eidetic" or empirical ego

of the experience, and therefore should leave only the essence of the experience. This

bracketing is important in the sense that we are looking at the experience from the most

"clean" or unaffected position. What must be considered are the world and its objects as they

are presented to the individual who has the experience. This bracketing is to be considered

as to how anyone would view the experience, and not necessarily how one individual

perceived the experience (Drummond, 2006).

At what stage of a study bracketing should be introduced is up for debate (Dowling,

2005). Drew (2004) presents the notion that bracketing is done properly in the analysis phase

of the research and is inappropriate during the interviewing stage, when the focus should be

on the interviewee. Bracketing is explained by Ashworth (1999):

> The procedure has the purpose of allowing the life world of the participant in
>
> the research to emerge in clarity so as to allow a study of some specific
>
> phenomenon within the life-world to be carried out. The researcher must
>
> suspend presupposition in order to enter the life-world… Two main categories
>
> of pre-suppositions should be bracketed: those to do with the temptation to
>
> impose on the investigation of the life-world claims emanating from objective
>
> science or other authoritative sources, and those to do with the imposition of
>
> criteria of validity arising outside the life-world itself. (pp. 708-709)

It is crucial that this interviewer critically review her own positionality and have a

clear understanding of her own perspectives and biases in order to effectively bracket

her impositions and remove them from the interpretive experience.

The researcher analyzes the experience of the individual by bringing together all information including the objects and environment as well as the empirical egos of the one who has had the experience. This bracketing out and then evaluating from a new perspective is a critical component of phenomenology, as Husserl believes (Moore, 1942). In order to effectively determine the most "clean" position of the experience, the reductions process requires the constant act of reviewing the process in all consciousness, where the experience is looked at and described, looked at again and described, and its existing textural qualities are continuously examined. This becomes something of a rhythmic process moving back and forth between evaluation and description (Moustakas, 1994).

Perception in relation to how an individual experiences an event and the sensations that are experienced within the events are key concepts of Merleau-Ponty's stance on phenomenology. He defines sensation as the way that an individual experiences and is affected by the state of him or herself. This relationship within the self and the understanding of how the individual senses his or her surroundings is paramount to what the individual perceives within an experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).

A qualitative researcher who chooses to use the phenomenological methodology will be required to view the phenomenon of the individual holistically. This deepens the experience of the individual and allows for full processing of the information by the researcher to include all aspects of the experience in order to get a full understanding of the experience by the individual's experience. Phenomenologist's acknowledge that there is no "one-reality" as to how events are experienced; rather, experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions including how the experience is lived in time and spatiality as well as

our relationship to others within the experience (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Reality in the phenomenological stance is "socially constructed" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Determining the reality of the experience for the individual is the goal of the phenomenological approach. Interpretation by the researcher of the participant's information and being able to represent that participant in his or her most precise, personal sense is important in phenomenological research; however, it is understood that the biases, values, and judgment of the researcher will and should become part of the research report (Creswell, 1998).

Understanding how the individual experiences the event is found by implications intuited by the researcher and in duly noting how bracketing has occurred in order to make these intuitions as "fresh" and "clean" as possible. Subjectivity within the realm of phenomenology is an inevitable starting point for the researcher. The problem of subjectivity can only be solved when it is realized in relation to the problem of interpretation. The phenomenological researcher must be sure that the data within the research is analyzed as a lived experience interpreted and not interpretations of interpretations (Levering, 2006). The phenomenological principle of analysis contains within itself the tracking back from the immediate, provided, complex experience to the simple elements of the phenomenon (Sinha, 1963). This would require analyzing the information that the study participant has provided with the least amount of previous information contained within the researcher. What is "bracketed" also remains available for reflection as to how this information prohibits or deters an understanding of the essential experience by the study participant (Drummond, 2006).

The study of GED completers' transition experience into the community college and desiring to understand how that experience was impacted by both self and institutional aspects is consistent with and will be enhanced by the phenomenological method of inquiry. The goal of this investigation is to deeply understand the phenomenon of accepting the challenge of higher education and successfully reaching personal goals that allow the individual to benefit society as well as experience personal growth.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative samples are designed to produce applicable research from case to case, and therefore, the selection of the samples for participation in the qualitative study must remain sufficiently open and flexible so as to permit randomness and diversity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coyne (1997) clarifies by stating that the underlying principle in the selection strategy common to all qualitative research is selecting "information-rich" (p. 627) cases that are selected to fit the study specifically. In order to obtain data that will be significant to this study, it must begin by determining potential candidates for interview. A phenomenological study is best suited to purposive or purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). Creswell (1998) recommends criterion sampling, as this sampling would include individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon being studied and can provide information-rich cases. Information-rich cases are those that can provide information about the phenomenon and have the greatest potential for contributing to the central importance of the purpose of the research and providing extensive and appropriate coverage of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Coverage refers to more than just the number of participants interviewed; it relates as well to the relationship within the research among methodological approach, research

questions, data collection, and participant selection strategies (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006). Richards (2002) refers to this complete and complex coverage as the "scope of the study" and suggests "the scope of the study is never just a question of how many, but always includes who, where and which settings will be studied; and what can be asked and answered" (p. 68). In regards to participant selection then, qualitative research is guided by the premise that participants be selected purposefully in regard to how well they will be able to illuminate the phenomenon being investigated and the overarching relationship between the nature of the questions being asked and the overall congruency of the contextual influences on participant selection, data collection and data analysis (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006).

Although there is not a particular number of participants required to conduct a phenomenological study, Creswell (2007) recommends that the number be sufficient to provide information saturation – a concept that suggests that additional participants would not be able to offer substantial additional information and that no new aspects would emerge with additional participant input. Patton (2002) states that "[t]here are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" (p. 244), and goes on to specify that "sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244). It is important to note that this is not giving permission to only use a small number for ease or convenience; rather it is to ensure that the researcher be directed back to the purpose of the study and focus on the conclusiveness and significance for the study when determining sample size (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). For a more specific count, Dukes (1984) recommends between 3 and 10 participants and Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that

researchers interview between 5 and 25 individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon for a study. The overarching guide for the researcher is to conduct the research with the appropriate number of participants which will provide a full and insightful understanding of the experience. This may be accomplished very effectively even within a smaller sampling size when the researcher interviews the participants more than once or can provide some alternative means of acquiring insight such as through participant development of collages, stories, essays and/or journaling. The researcher can diminish levels of ambiguity by expressing the purpose of the study in a succinct and clear statement, providing a framework from which to determine the utmost levels of appropriate coverage of the phenomenon within the study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

The sampling criterion for this research was specific to the following: admissions application information and graduation application status. Participants were selected based on their admission application designation of GED completer and their graduation application status of completing a degree in either the spring or summer of 2010. Since the intent of this study is to gain insight into the transition process of the GED completer into the community college, it was judged to be a successful completion based on the fact that the participants were filing an application for graduation after meeting the requirements for completing a degree.

Permission was first obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the researcher's institution of study. Participants for the study were then selected based on their applicableness to the study; they were located by designation on a report provided by the vice-president of institutional research at a large Midwestern community college. The report contained minimal identifying information for those who had completed a degree either in

the spring or summer of 2010 and who had begun their education at the college by acquiring

a GED as indicated on their admission application. There were identifiers for a total of 54

individuals. A recruitment letter (Appendix A) was sent electronically to all who qualified

for this study. Of the 54 whose identifiers indicated possible participation in the study, nine

individuals responded. Of the nine respondents, six actually completed the study. All six

participants were individuals who had acquired a GED and had completed a degree within

the spring or summer 2010 terms at the community college. Each of the participants was

easily accessible as they had just completed the requirements for an associate degree - an

associate of arts (1), associate of science (2), associate of applied science (2), or associate of

general studies (1). There was an equal distribution of gender, as three participants were

male and three were female. The participants ranged in age from 25 – 53 years with the

median age being 39.5. All six participants were White, which represents the

homogeneousness of the population the sample was derived from: a predominately White

student population in a Midwestern community college.

When each participant contacted the researcher to present themselves as willing to

participate in the study, the researcher then provided the potential participant with an

informed consent agreement (Appendix B). This informed consent provided the potential

participant with terms of the research study including researcher information, an introduction

to the study, and a description of the procedures; informed them of any risks potential to the

research study; expressed benefits of the study; any implied costs or compensation incurred

by the study, and expressly defined the participants' rights and confidentiality assurance by

the researcher and educational institution. Each participant was directed to read the informed

consent, ask any questions for clarification and then sign the document denoting willingness to participate in the study.

As a qualitative study, data are gathered primarily within the form of spoken or written word rather than in the form of numbers (Polkinghorne, 2005). As a means to understand the lived experiences of these participants, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted following Seidman's (2006) three interview series approach. Open ended, semi-structured interview questions (Appendix C) were developed by the researcher as a means to elicit rich, thick descriptions of the transition experience into the community college from each participant. These questions were designed to allow the participant to provide a thoughtful, meaningful description of the experience, rather than a simple recollection of events. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests acquiring this kind of information from interviews so as to glean more experiential data from the participants.

The phenomenological method attempts to reach the lived world experience (Kvale, 1983), and to accommodate this, the process of phenomenological interviewing should be informal and interactive (Moustakas, 1994). Janesick (1998) defines "interview" as "a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in the communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic" (p. 30). Seidman (2006) states that interviewing

provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a

way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic

assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make

of their experience affects the way they carry out that

experience…Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides

access to understanding their action. (p. 5)

Patton (1990) infers that without an understanding of context, there is less of a

possibility of exploring the meaning of the experience under investigation, and Seidman

(2006) concurs and reaffirms this concept by stating that "people's behaviors become

meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of

those around them" (p. 13).

In the initial interview, participants were asked the "how" of their experience, such as

motivation and what brought them to the time in their lives when they were making the

transition into the community college. Understanding what education meant to these

individuals who decided to pursue higher education is an important defining concept for each

of the participants. The researcher encouraged each participant to tell as much about him or

herself in relation to the topic as possible.

Progressing through the interview, the researcher elicits information that provides for

defining the concreteness of the situation for the individual. The participant is asked to

reconstruct the details of the experience for the researcher: "Describe your admissions

experience" and "Discuss your experience including attending classes, completing

homework…" These interview questions allowed the individuals to provide situational and

concrete details to lend an understanding of the transition into education experience and how

it had impacted them.

Finally, interview questions which help elicit the "meaning" of the experience to the

individual are critical for phenomenological research. Seidman (2006) states that

making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the

factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also

requires that they look at their present experience in detail and in the context

in which it occurs. The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events

that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details

of their present experience establishes conditions for reflecting upon what

they are now doing in their lives (p. 18-19).

One critical question for this phenomenological researcher is at what point to bring

the description process to an end (or at what number to limit the interviews) and to begin the

reduction process. In regard to this dilemma, it is critical to understand the distinction

between decision and recognition. A researcher who is comfortable with phenomenological

approach understands that one does not decide when the description or interview is over;

rather, the researcher recognizes that the reduction process has already begun, and therefore,

the interviews are ending (Merriam, 2002).

As this researcher interviewed the study participants, it was necessary to reframe to

each participant what the interviewer heard so as to be as authentic as possible in the

understanding of the experience. Researchers who utilize the phenomenological

methodology interview subjects with the mutual understanding within the interview process

that subjects are to recount their experiences as they happened and not try to postulate as to

how the researcher might be thinking or try to determine what the researcher wants to hear.

Another important factor within the interview process is the rapport between the researcher

and the subject. Within the phenomenological methodology, the participants can be viewed

as co-researchers because they are subjects from within the phenomenon who also have a personal interest in illuminating the phenomenon in question (Osborne, 1994).

All six participants completed the interviews, which were audio taped and transcribed, submitted a personal essay and were available for fact-checking in a follow-up interview after the researcher conducted a thorough review of all interview transcripts and essays. Any follow- up questions were designed to obtain depth, detail, and subtlety, while clarifying answers that were vague or superficial. The review of the interview transcripts and essays provided the landscape for robust, rich, in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon of the transition process for each participant.

Participant Descriptions

In order to provide a background for the participants in this study, the following is a description of each participant. Providing participant descriptions will allow for a clearer understanding of this study and provide insight into the textural description offered later in this research. Each of the descriptions was developed from the data and then was refined through feedback from the participant. Names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and some identifying information was omitted for the purpose of confidentiality.

Sierra

Sierra is a white female in her mid-thirties. She received her GED at 17 after leaving high school due to a pregnancy. At the age of 18, Sierra took a certified nurse assistant class at the local community college. This was her only experience with higher education until she returned to college in the fall of 2007 at the age of 32. She entered college to pursue an associate of science degree. When she returned full-time to postsecondary education, Sierra had a husband and four children ranging in age from nine to fourteen. Sierra comes from a

family where her father has his master's degree and her mother has a cosmetology certificate. Sierra and her nuclear family of a husband and four children experienced major health crises before she returned to college; when her husband was diagnosed with cancer, and then her son was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Sierra successfully completed her AS degree and is enrolled at a four year institution to continue her education and receive a bachelor's degree.

Belinda

Belinda is a white female in her mid-twenties. She was a strong academic student and was taking advanced placement courses in high school. She left high school in tenth grade due to a family relocation. Belinda didn't want to continue high school in a new school, so she decided to get her GED at the age of 18. Belinda got her LPN diploma at a community college, which was her first experience with higher education. She then began college full-time in the fall of 2008 to pursue an associate of applied science degree. Belinda has four young children between the ages of three and one. When Belinda was young her parents returned to college to pursue postsecondary degrees. Belinda is currently looking for employment and is taking courses at a four year institution to progress toward a bachelor's degree.

Matthew

Matthew is a white male in his early fifties. Matthew was strong academically in elementary and junior high grades and "loved school". However, he chose to leave high school in ninth grade in order to support his nuclear family. He came from an impoverished background, and the family needed his financial support, so he went to work. He received his GED when he was in his mid-twenties. Matthew took a couple of college classes in his late thirties, as he was drawn to increasing his knowledge. Matthew worked in the

production industry for many years, and when his company was transferred overseas, he decided to go back to college. He began at a community college in 2005 part-time and became a full-time student in 2008. Matthew completed his associate of science degree and anticipates beginning coursework toward a bachelor's degree once he finds employment.

Meredith

Meredith is a white female in her mid-thirties. She dropped out of high school at the age of 16. She is a single mother and is raising a teenage son. Meredith began college immediately after acquiring her GED in her mid-twenties and has been pursuing her degree over a period of five years. Meredith's father had some postsecondary education through a technical school; her mother went to work for the government immediately after graduating from high school. Meredith has a sister with whom she is close who attended college, and turned to her for assistance and support. Meredith has completed her associate of general studies degree and is planning on enrolling at a four year university to pursue her bachelor's degree. Her ultimate goal is to achieve a doctorate.

Ronnie

Ronnie is a male in his mid-forties. His father's job was relocated when he was in the eleventh grade in high school, and Ronnie decided that he did not want to attend a new high school. Ronnie did not struggle academically in high school or junior high but admits that he didn't give his best effort toward his classes; rather, he focused on extracurricular activities as he played on the high school football team. When Ronnie decided not to return to traditional high school, he opted to get his GED a year later at the age of 18. Ronnie held a number of jobs in production and earned a good salary, but in 2001 he was in a major car accident leaving him with a traumatic brain injury. Ronnie decided to pursue higher

education as a direct result of his brain injury – "I'm feeding my brain all this information to keep my brain functioning". He began college in 2006 to pursue an associate of arts degree. Ronnie is the first in his immediate family to receive a high school diploma equivalency and the first to receive a college degree. His father was a farmer and his mother a homemaker. Ronnie had two grown sons when he began his college education. He is currently enrolled at a four year institution pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Caleb

Caleb is a white male in his mid-forties. Caleb did not complete high school; he was taking classes his junior year in high school at both high school and at a technical school and decided to drop out – "I didn't think I needed [education], didn't want it". He was hurt at his job performing manual labor and was faced with the prospect of going on disability. He decided to pursue higher education to avoid going on disability. Caleb was not strong academically in high school and elementary school due to his disinterest. He decided to go to college but needed to get his GED first. At the age of thirty-three he acquired his GED in August 2007 and began full- time at the college immediately in the fall of 2007. Caleb has a wife and children who have supported him in his education – "they were behind me and were proud of me and happy that I was doing it". Caleb completed his associate of applied science degree and is currently enrolled in a certificate program.

<div align="center">Data Analysis Procedures</div>

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of making meaning of information obtained from the participants; it is a creative process rather than a technical one (Denzin, 1989). Phenomenological data analysis steps are similar for most phenomenologist (Moustakas, 1994), as the phenomenological researcher will focus on the descriptions of

what all participants of a certain phenomenon have in common within the experience and try to reduce these individual descriptions to one of a more universal essence, or a "grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177).

Beginning the analysis procedure starts with organizing the data then delving into the documentation which would include transcripts and essays submitted by the study participants. This study employed the phenomenological analysis described by Moustakas (1994) as a Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method. This method of organizing and analyzing data was applied to interview transcripts and personal essays of the individuals in this study who had originally acquired the GED and had transitioned into the community college.

Horizonalization

The data are studied through methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis for significant statements or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) calls this step in the data analysis process horizonalization. Horizonalization requires being receptive to each statement made by the participant of his or her experience and encouraging a rhythmical flow between both the researcher and the participant, which inspires comprehensive disclosure of the experience and greater understanding of the meaning by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

As a participant's description of the phenomenon may be lengthy and complex, especially when it involves time, multiple features, facets and processes, the researcher must differentiate this description by identifying meaning units or *invariant constituents* that organize the data for later analysis. The invariant constituents are the specific, unique

attributes of the experience that stand out (Moustakas, 1994). The underlying concept in phenomenological data analysis is to immerse oneself in the data, engage with it reflectively, and generate a rich description that will enlighten the reader as to the deeper essential structures embedded in that particular experience for a particular individual (Thorne, 2000). With the analysis of these statements, the researcher identifies clusters of meanings or significant themes emerging from the data. This leads the researcher toward development of a description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon experienced by the individuals within the study. Each horizon elicited through the research interview adds meaning and provides an increasingly clear portrayal of the experience of the transition process for these individuals who chose to pursue postsecondary education after acquiring a GED.

In phenomenological description and interpretation, themes are critical in helping to make something of a lived experience or text by interpreting its meaning through a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure. Themes give order to research and writing by providing the framework for the experiential structures that make up the experience (van Manen, 1990). The meanings that were derived from horizonalization were then clustered into themes and subthemes in order to better understand and describe their interrelationships.

During this process of identifying statements that held information relevant to the topic of the transition experience into the community college, coding is implemented. Using some version of grounded theory to work with the data and develop meanings is one way that researchers begin analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using open coding, or a system of reading through the transcripts line by line and working intensively with the data, the researcher can identify the initial themes and categories of interest. Codes are imposed on

the data based on what the researcher "sees" in the statements; it is necessary to make sure

that the researcher understands the theme and categories, and this can be accomplished by

reading through the transcripts several times for clarification (Esterberg, 2002). The goal of

coding, then, is not to count things as in quantitative research; rather, it is to "fracture" the

data and rearrange the information provided into categories which allows for comparison

between similar things in the same category and that aid the researcher in developing theory

(Strauss, 1987).

Moving from more general to specific understanding of themes is known as focused

coding (Esterberg, 2002). In this stage of the analysis process, the initial themes are

understood and duly noted, and the transcripts are reviewed even more diligently to find

specific statements that reflect the voice of the participants as understood by the researcher.

Identification of these reflective statements is critical in identifying, understanding and

relaying this in the formulation of results for the research. Any repetitive and overlapping

statements or vague expressions are eliminated by the researcher leaving what is known as

the invariant constituents. These are statements that contain an element of the experience

that is necessary for understanding the experience.

Textural Description

Those remaining invariant constituents and themes are then used to construct a

textural description of the transition experience of the GED completers into the community

college for each of the participants. These descriptions presented a verification of each

participant's own experience and depict clear images and rich descriptions of the actual event

of making the transition into the community college. The participant's descriptions are

presented using his or her own words and mode(s) of expression in order to relay the

significant and perceptual message of the participant. Moustakas (1994) articulates the essence of the textural description:

> Throughout there is an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and
>
> phenomenon. In this process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are
>
> recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value,
>
> nonrepetitive constituents of the experience are linked thematically, and a full
>
> description is described (p. 96).

During the phase of developing the textural description through phenomenological reduction, a conscious description in the participant's own words of the individual's self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1989) of the transition experience into the community college is produced.

Structural Description

After defining a textural description for each participant, a structural description is then developed. In order to develop the structural description, the researcher must utilize what is known as imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) defines the task of imaginative variation as:

> to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination,
>
> varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals,
>
> and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives,
>
> different positions, roles or functions. (pp. 97-98)

This process includes a total immersion by the researcher into the written data, moving back and forth from a position of imaginative variation to that of verification. Using the textural

description as the foundation, the structural description attempts to provide an account of the underlying essence of the experience by the GED completers into the community college: the "how" that allows the researcher to fully connect with what the participant experienced in the essence of the transition. The concept of imaginative variation relies on the ability of the researcher to be able to remove him or herself from the fact, logic, and reasonableness in order to assume a more reflective stance and to be able to conceptualize that anything is possible (Polkinghorne, 1989). Through imaginative variation, the researcher is able to develop an enhanced and expanded version of the textural description, which allows the opportunity to seek all possible meanings and divergent perspectives of the participant's stories. This process includes a total immersion of the researcher into the written data and moving back and forth from a position of imaginative variation to one of verification. It is important for the researcher to contemplate the fit of the imaginative variations of the researcher and the structures within the participant data to provide sufficient verification.

Textural-Structural Description

The next step in the analysis process requires the integration of the textural and structural descriptions which allow for the synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This synthesis requires the incorporation of the invariant constituents that emerged as core themes. The fundamental synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions portrays the essences at a particular time and place from the unique perspective of the researcher who is following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective understanding of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). This researcher was challenged to blend the conscious experiences and perceptions which the participants relayed with the underlying structural interpretations by the researcher so as to produce a synthesized

description of the experience. Again, it was important that the researcher maintain a posture of both immersion and reflectivity in order to truly and honestly represent the meaning and essence of the phenomenon of the GED completer's transition into the community college.

Composite Textural-Structural Description

After developing the textural-structural descriptions of the study participants, review of these descriptions allow for formulation of the composite textural-structural description. The invariant themes of every participant are analyzed for an understanding and depiction of the experiences of the group as a whole. This composite focuses on the aspects of the experience that were "transsituational" or allowing for description of the general experience by all rather than the specific details of the experience as reported specifically by the participants (Giorgi, 1986). Husseral, as cited in Moustakas (1994), defines the composite description as having "…the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is." This overall integration of the experiences of the individuals was provided within a thematic structure which provides a rich, thick description of the essence of the transition experience for the GED completers who decided to pursue postsecondary education. This structure was fabricated from multiple reviews of the transcribed data and essays by the researcher, conceptualizing the participant's experiences, and confirming the concepts with the data and verification checks with the participants.

Strategies for Validating Findings

The validity of a phenomenological study is contingent upon whether the reader of the research has confidence that the outcomes or findings are well-grounded and well-supported. The degree of validity of the findings of the phenomenological research depends upon the power of the presentation to convince the reader that the

findings are accurate and therefore, valid (Pokinghorne, 1989). The researcher must persuade the reader that the steps beginning with data collection through data analysis and synthesis and presented in the findings have followed a logical thought process that can be traced and viewed as valid. Polkinghorne (1989) identifies five questions that researchers might ask themselves in order to garner trustworthiness and ultimately, validity:

1. Did the interviewer influence the contents of the subjects' descriptions in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the subjects' actual experience?

2. Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?

3. In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Has the researcher identified these alternatives?

4. Is it possible to go from the general structure description to the transcriptions and account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?

5. Is the structural description situation-specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations? (p. 57).

Each of these questions was addressed when coding, transcribing and analyzing transcripts to ensure the utmost in validity concerning this research study.

Validity in a research study can be determined by the level of trustworthiness, what some term goodness, to indicate quality criteria in qualitative inquiry (Arminio

& Hutlgren, 2002). Gathering an understanding from each of the components of phenomenological methodology including the bracketing, the analysis of the interviews both texturally and structurally and continuously providing feedback for verification to the participant, the phenomenological researcher can then write a description of the experience that presents the essence of the phenomenon. The goal of the write-up of the experience is for the reader to come away with an understanding of the phenomenon that allows the individual to understand the full experience of the phenomenon by those who made the transition from GED completer into the community college.

In order to confirm an understanding of the phenomenon that the participant experienced, along with the previously mentioned aspects of epoche and bracketing, it is important for this researcher to check for unintended consequences. The attachment of meaning to the unintended consequences can be critical toward the understanding of the experience for the participant and the understanding of the phenomenon itself. The significance of this is determined by the participant. If he or she sees a consequence as uninteresting and therefore not intentional or significant, the researcher may come to a false conclusion of the experience or phenomenon. By recognizing the consequence and relating the understanding of the consequence to the participant, the researcher may be able to present a picture of the participant's life-world and connect his or her meaningful actions with both intended and unintended consequences. This ability to connect all aspects of the experience helps in relaying the phenomenon most significantly to others (Aspers, 2004). Member checking is a critical component of maintaining validity within the research study.

In qualitative research, conventional standards of reliability and internal and external validity provide insight to varying criteria. Eisner (1998) reasoned coherence was an appropriate standard. Coherence is the logical or natural connection or consistency of an argument that a researcher presents. It would be imperative for researchers to effectively consider the means by which their conclusions have been supported; to what extent multiple data sources have been utilized and verified to give credence to the interpretations that they have made and if the observations are congruent with the wholeness of the study; and if there are anomalies that cannot be reconciled. Erickson (1986) identified three types of evidentiary inadequacy that have bearing on adequacy of type, amount, and variety of data: 1) inadequate amounts of evidence, 2) inadequate variety of evidence, and 3) faulty interpretation of evidence which can impact validity. In order for this researcher to ensure that the above types of evidentiary inadequacy were attended to and addressed within the research, methodology and summarization of findings for this research, it was critical that the researcher immerse herself in the processes of reviewing the transcribed materials of each research participant, noting informational redundancy; by the sixth transcription review and analysis, consistent information had provided distinct and describable themes that captured the meaning of the phenomenon.

<div style="text-align: center;">Summary</div>

This phenomenological study was conducted as a means of understanding the lived experience of making the transition from GED completer to a student in a community college setting. Utilizing the phenomenological approach was intentional

in that this research included understanding the role of the researcher, sampling, interviewing as means of obtaining data, data analysis processes, verification, and measures to ensure confidentiality. This process allowed the researcher to not only review personal biases and attributes in relation to this phenomenon, but also to understand - through entrenching the self in the stories of these individuals - and developing an understanding of what this lived experience of acquiring a GED and choosing to pursue higher education meant to these unique persons. Giving voice to these individuals' lived moments of hesitation, fear of the unknown, doubt, self-analysis and ultimate personal success is an invaluable experience for this researcher.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sierra

Textural Description

Education is very important to be successful in life. That refers to everything because you have to have an education to be successful in everything that you do, to advance in your job, but also to learn more about yourself.

I started taking classes…it's just, well, mine stands for over like an 18 year period from when I first got my GED to now, but it was more because it was close and the classes were easier to get to. And they just worked around my schedule. I wasn't familiar with college, so I chose to go to the one I heard most about that was close and I could try to afford.

I was…well, 17 when I got my GED, and then I was 18 when I went for my CNA training, so I think I was 31 when I went back to school years after getting my CNA. I have four children, so I had to wait till they were old enough to study when I studied or I wasn't going to be able to be successful, so I had to wait for them to be ready. My youngest was nine and my oldest was 14 at the time I started back.   I wanted to be a leader for my children because I wanted them to go to school and not have to have, you know, the suffering you have to go through when you don't have an education and are trying to get a job. You just want them to be successful, and if I can do it then they can do it. I didn't doubt myself or my capabilities when I did decide to go back because before I went back to school I went through a lot of…just a lot, and I figured if I can go through that then I can go through anything, so I might as well go back to school. My husband had cancer and then soon after that my son had brain surgery for a brain tumor, so we had gone through all that personal

stuff and I was in the health care field and I was ready to do something different. So I thought

if we can go through that then I can go and learn some new skills to do something else.

Because I had all the health care that I had wanted. I needed a break from the health care

area! I changed my mind on my career decision many times believe it or not, and I'm still

kind of changing them now. I did the office specialist certification and then the accounting

certification. I've got the associate in general studies, and I just got the associate of science,

and then I transferred to a university. I started in the business administration and just

recently changed it to human services. I change my mind a lot because I kind of worked the

last couple years in a business, and I really miss working with people, that face to face.

Because I spent 15 years as a nursing assistant so I thought I would like to do something

closer to what I had experienced. I still might change my mind. A lot of it is just for my own

knowledge. I'll probably use it for a job, but it's really that I want to learn new things.

The admissions process, finding out about college was actually pretty easy.   I was surprised

at how easy it was. I think it was easy because I had gone there for my GED and then my

nurse training, too. So I walked in and the counselors were really nice and sat down with me.

Even then I didn't know for sure what I wanted to do, but they helped me get started. And I

know that if I have any questions I can just walk in and they'll help me. When I first started

back to college, at that time I wasn't able to take classes during the day because I had a job

and it wasn't as flexible. The homework was quite a bit at first, but I got used to it. It was

computers; this was the thing I had to learn because I hadn't ever had computers in school

before. But I had a computer at home, so I was a little familiar, but it was just a big learning

process.   Oh, it was very easy to work through. I never had any instructors where if I had a

problem I couldn't go to them and let them know I was having problems.

And my family was behind me going to school. It made them do their homework while I did mine. They kind of liked that. College is something my kids will do. My oldest is a senior now, and we're starting to look into colleges, and he's seen that if I can do it, he can do it. There were some times he even tutored me! We had a good system there.   My dad has his master's but they never pushed for college or really they didn't even talk much about it. And since my kids have been little I've always talked about how important it is and how I want them to be successful and not have to worry about different things. My mom went to beauty school, so she had that. When I was growing up, my parents were a lot older, so when I was growing up they didn't work; they were retired. My dad struggled with work. I have to say my parents had some problems, and he had schizophrenia so he did, he retired from the IRS but because of the mental problems it made it tough for him to work. They were just trying to get through life in general.

I really decided to go to college just because I wanted to learn more skills because all of the jobs ask for computer skills at the very least and wanted you to have computer skills on all the applications and I didn't, and I knew I needed help in that department. When I got near finishing my associate degree, I realized I didn't want it to end and I wanted to continue. That's why I enrolled in the other college, and I wanted to take classes at the community college that I knew would transfer over. So I knew I wanted to further my education, and I wanted to do it at a reasonable price as long as I could. So at the university I started with business administration, but I've been looking through the different jobs, and it looks like human services is in high demand right now, and I'm interested in that too, so I'm kind of pointing towards that. I might change back, I don't know, but at this time for me to change I had the same amount of credits so…

I just realized that I have gained a lot more knowledge and that I can keep studying and keep going. I'd like to get a master,s but that's a lot of money, so I don't know. I know I started out just wanting to learn so much and to do something better with my life, but it's kind of switched to more of a lifelong learning process…I just want to keep going! I want to get a job that I can be at long term and maybe retire from. And when I was in nursing before there was a lot of lifting, and I don't want to do lifting for the rest of my life. I want to do something else.

I want to do more of using my skills to help people. I kind of want to get back into that area – helping. And with the mental health, knowing that like I've gone through a lot of that myself, I've experienced a lot in my family. It's helping me decide which direction I want to go in. I have to really watch what I want to do and what will allow me to get a job. If they're not hiring, they won't hire me!

I would say it was definitely worth it, and I wish I hadn't waited so long, but you never know what life's going to bring. You're never too old to go back to school. And I saw a lot of people older than me, and I guess it's a good feeling that you're not the only one!

Structural Description

Sierra believes that education is a key to advancement in both personal and professional aspects of life. Although Sierra tends to be very private about her personal life and struggles, she appears to reflect on them largely to allow the personal issues to provide guidance for her career choice and educational goals.

Sierra started back to college after some thought-provoking, life-changing personal issues impacted her life. She has experienced a lot of health crises within both her family of origin and her nuclear family of husband and four children.

Sierra grew up in a family where her mother and father were older and actually retired while she was going through her elementary and high school years. Experiencing life with older parents who were struggling emotionally and mentally allowed Sierra to gain insight into what is important in life. Not a lot of thought was put into a career goal as Sierra progressed through her early educational years. She had experienced the turmoil of living in a household where her parents would struggle due to her father's mental health issues. Seeing her father struggle and her mother working as a cosmetologist helped form the basis of her perceptions of success. The realization that success is defined as being able to 1) perform in a career with a high level of intelligence and knowledge, and 2) working in an area where one has had some connection and empathy, and with additional education can perform the job well has grown from Sierra's perception of her parents' career role-modeling.

Formulating her own understanding of what she wanted to do for a career has been a process for Sierra, and she considers many aspects as she maneuvers through the decision-making procedure. She began her career as a certified nurse assistant at 18 years old, after completing her GED at age 17. Sierra's motivation to acquire her GED derived from the need to get on with her life and not have to deal with finishing high school. She was ready to progress to the next step, and in order to get there quickly, she studied for and passed her GED completion exams, allowing her to move forward to the next step. She began her career as a certified nurse assistant and worked in this field for 15 years.

Her own family's struggles provided an understanding that life is fragile, and if an individual wanted to live a more rewarding life, then conscious direction toward planning, implementing and fulfilling life goals is required. Becoming aware that life is what you

make it and decisions should be made while taking into consideration personal values and factual considerations grew out of the course of life events that Sierra had experienced. Coming to terms with the prognosis of a possibly terminal illness for both her husband and her son were life-changing experiences for Sierra. Her husband was diagnosed with cancer and put up a fight to get to remission with his diagnosis. Her son developed a brain tumor that required surgery and recovery to regain his health. After experiencing these very difficult health crises one right after the other, Sierra decided that being in the health care field was not what she wanted any longer. She became very determined to move out of that area as it was difficult to deal with being employed in the field and having to live through that experience again with all the similarities to her own family's health issues. She also gained a renewed sense of accomplishment – if she could make it through these two family health crises, she could set a goal of a new career and achieve it because of her newfound personal understandings of her own strength and determination. It took a lot of personal encouragement and motivation to help both her husband and child through these health crises, and the ability for her to find this determination and push forward through the difficult times allowed her to build a renewed sense of purpose in her life.

Living through the health crises, coupled with a sense of needing to be successful in life and providing a role model for her children to be successful were guiding factors in Sierra's choice to return to college. The life situations she had experienced as a child and then as a wife and mother caused her to reflect on what is important in life. Her desire to see her children be successful in career choices that they would be motivated to pursue and not just accept; her developed distaste for working in the health care field which was a constant reminder of what she had experienced with her husband and son; a newfound sense of

purpose to be in a career where she was motivated by her personal value of helping others; and the desire to expand her career marketability into something other than her only educational expertise of certified nurse assistant allowed her to begin her journey into higher education.

The personal value of being a role model to her children shaped the timing of Sierra's enrollment in the higher education arena. Her value of providing for her children and not taking away from their emotional development by having a mother in college and the time, energy and mental commitment that required was of high priority. She chose to return when her children were in school and ready to benefit from the role modeling provided them. The fact that she could study alongside her children provided the familial connection that she didn't necessarily have as a child; her alienation from her parents due to the fact that they were struggling with mental health issues and that they were much older parents caused disconnect and loneliness as well as early personal maturation due to the responsibility placed upon her as Sierra proceeded through her childhood and early adolescence. The ability to connect with her children and to provide positive and healthy role-modeling by participating in similar activities of studying and doing homework provided a nurturing and therefore rewarding experience for Sierra and her family.

Choosing an area in higher education to pursue began with a search of what was needed in the workforce. At the time she chose to pursue higher education at the age of 31, Sierra chose the field of business as one which might have many opportunities when she completed her education. The strong value of being productive in a job and meeting the needs of the community was the motivating factor for her to pursue a business degree. The reality of having a specialization so that she could be more marketable was a motivator for

her to pursue the certifications in both accounting and office specialist. Sierra is very in tune with her personal goals and needs, and this awareness increases as a product of her life experiences which is one of Sierra's strengths. When she began the educational experience to increase her knowledge base and find a job that was different than what she had been in for 15 years, she also increased her longing for knowledge itself. Her choices now are based on not only increasing her knowledge in a field, but also allowing her to look at other options for her own interests and values. She realized after working in the business field that one of her values is in helping others. She's changed her major a couple of times to remain consistent with those values and what she finds as personal strengths within herself.

Sierra's level of maturity and confidence that she has gained from the early responsibilities in her life and her life circumstances have allowed Sierra to feel confident in her abilities and commitments. Not only does she realize internally when it's time to develop another goal; she is also well aware of her abilities to pursue these goals and what direction to take to begin the process. She's very comfortable with putting herself outside her comfort zone and asking people for assistance when needed. When she started back at the community college as an adult learner, she felt comfortable as this was an institution she had become familiar with when she had acquired her GED and taken her nurse aide certification course. Knowing that she would get the help she needed by taking the initiative and asking questions, Sierra found the ability to get back into college an easy process. Sierra was able to maneuver successfully and with confidence through her educational endeavors when she realized that the community college she chose provided inexpensive ways of obtaining the information necessary to perform her job duties better and eventually find employment that suited her values and interests. Difficult life circumstances as a child and then as a mother

and wife provided insight into her strengths and provided a means to develop her character and drive. Realizing that there is a time and a place for everything, Sierra found it important to support her family through each major health crisis and then take the newfound information and her personal awareness and develop new goals that provided for a better life situation for both her and her family. What started out as an interest in changing careers became more of a lifelong interest in learning. She not only wants to continue to advance in her education and achieve a bachelor's degree but is striving for possibly obtaining a master's degree. Sierra has demonstrated a commitment to not only becoming a better person productively in relation to a career goal, but in providing for herself and her family in such a way that she is meeting her nurturing, caring, and personal development needs to provide in the best way she can for her family that also allows her personal growth and satisfaction.

Belinda

Textural Description

Education to me means more knowledge, getting further ahead in life. I had almost finished high school – made it through 10th grade and my dad got a job and moved. My parents were both in college while I was growing up, so I saw how much time it took away from doing things. My motivation to continue going to school was first off, finishing high school. So important to finish and wanted to do it. I'm very committed and never failed at anything, so I needed to finish this. When I first went back to get my GED I didn't think that I couldn't do it. When I was in high school I was in AP classes, and I was on the honor roll and all those things, so I knew I wouldn't have any problems. It was just that I took a different route because of what I did. It wasn't a matter of me thinking I couldn't do it; it

was just that some things came in my life at that time and I couldn't finish. We had moved, and I didn't want to try to go to high school somewhere new.

When I decided to go on to college it was not very good because my parents didn't talk about how I was supposed to do it or what I was supposed to do or how that was all set up. They didn't hold my hand when I walked through the door and tell me exactly what I was supposed to do, so it took me a long time to say these are the classes that I need to sign up for, financial aid and then I have to go back, and I had to go back so many times because one department would need something and one department would need something else. Those were…it was kind of awful. My parents…I mean they didn't help and not in a bad way, not that they didn't want to. It's just that I guess I didn't ask them. I didn't think it was going to be that bad. You never hear about anybody talking about that stuff I guess.

I remember getting really frustrated. I was just like…give me a paper with all the things I need to do and what order they need to be done in because I didn't know, and I was getting very frustrated because I didn't know if I was going to be able to start in the fall when I wanted to. I had got my GED at the end of the summer, and I wanted to start that fall, and so I was afraid I wouldn't be able to start fall semester. So I was getting really frustrated with all the things they needed; all the different areas, financial aid, filling out the application, getting my classes, all of that. People weren't connecting the dots for me.

Once I got that all straightened out and got my classes and all that… I never had a problem, I guess, with any of that. Because I guess that's who I am. I would turn my work in on time, and I would show up to class, and I'd get the work done. I mean it got harder as it went on because I went into the nursing program, and that's definitely a challenge, so it got harder and harder. But I made it through I guess.

When I went through, I did my LPN in Texas, and I actually finished my RN up here and when I was going through I've never failed at anything. You know I had to feel equipped for…and I'd have to push it harder. I'd think "oh, my gosh" and I've never failed at anything, so I'm not going to this time. And then the same thing happened in RN school. It was really challenging, and I would study like crazy, and I thought I knew this stuff like the back of my hand, and then it would come to the tests and then I was like, "this is nothing I studied," and I could tell you a million things about the heart, and then none of the questions were about the heart. But then again I said I've never failed at anything, and I'm not going to this time. And so I put in the work and all those long hours before and after class and staying up late at night all that and got it done. I guess I just used my determination. When I started my LPN I had no kids, and during my RN year I had one child, and then I had to stop a week before classes started because I thought I was pregnant, and then we got custody of my husband's older kids, so I went into RN school up here thinking with only one child I can do this, and then I got pregnant and had to wait a whole year to be on the waiting list to start, and now I had four kids by that time. And so it's like "Ok, I can do this, I can do this I just had to be really organized and determined". And I didn't say…until I got the final, final grade I didn't give up. Because you go through all these different classes and you're like "Ok, I've finished this one…and oh this semester's a little bit easier, but I didn't give up that determination until the very, very end". I was determined because I had four kids, and I didn't want them to see me have to go through school like my parents did, or how I had to see my parents. My kids are 3 and 1 and so they're not going to remember me going through RN school; they're not going to remember me being gone all the time and the late hours and not getting to go see their recitals or games

or whatever because I finished now. Not interfering with being able to live our lives. I remember that with my parents and how they missed times in my life.

When I got closer to the end my feelings about being able to do it just got stronger I think. I think when you're in your twenties you are trying to find yourself a little bit, and with the whole challenge of school I think that it just makes you find yourself harder and quicker. So I grew stronger because I was able to find myself quicker, if that makes sense. Like when you're able to step through those challenges and therefore you could build your identity from that…I'm a strong person, I'm a committed person and knowing that, you find yourself. And the nursing was great. I can't speak for everyone, but in nursing a lot of my beliefs can be challenged because of ethical stuff, and so it really makes you think about that stuff. And then you get put in a situation where you really have to do that.

I guess what I've gained most out of the experience is that I can do anything that I put my mind to. Because nobody can believe that I have 4 kids at the ages that they are and was able to…I have a husband who is also in school full-time and I was able to make it through that year. Because there's people that have no kids or their kids are grown up or whatever and they can barely make it and in particular the nursing program. Everyone was just like "I can't believe how you did it!" I guess I get my determination from my dad. I look up to my dad a lot. He chose a different career path, and that's why he went to college later. He was a dancer in the beginning and traveled with shows and went overseas and did shows, and then he met my mom and decided "ok, I'm going to try to teach" and then that wasn't bringing in enough income for three kids, so he changed.   But he was always trying to move forward and eventually when I got my GED was when he was going back to school for his master's degree. He was determined that he was going to get there eventually. I just didn't want it to

take forever like they were. I got the determination I guess from him but the timing was definitely not from them!

I want to be able to make money and work. I've already signed up for some prerequisites for a BSN program, but right now I'm looking for a job, and they're pretty scarce over here. Because I've applied ever since I've gotten out and I've done so many applications I just want to go nuts, but I'm looking for…I know a hospital where if you work for them they'll pay for you to get your BSN and so yeah, I'm definitely looking for a place that will help pay to further my education. Um, I'm not sure if I'll do it as quickly as my RN. Because the program that's with the hospital…their classes are a little different because they go in 11 week sessions and so you take 2 classes every 11 weeks and so with something like that, and it's all online, you would only meet once a month. So if it was something like that, I think I could be fine, and it only takes a year and I could get it over with. That's what I'm doing right now is taking two online classes as prerequisites so that if I would get hired and they ask if I want to do it I can say yeah and go ahead and start. I'm taking them both online this semester. And I've taken classes online before, so I know what it is and everything. I just keep going!

Structural Description

Belinda completed her GED due to the fact that she had moved in her senior year and didn't want to start her last year in a new place and have to integrate herself into a new environment for such a short time. Her decision to get her GED rather than just not finish high school was based on her high priority of success – she had never walked away from completing anything in her life and therefore, not finishing high school was not an option for her. Her sense of confidence and awareness of her abilities was a strong motivator for her.

Prior to leaving high school, Belinda was involved in Advanced Placement classes, so she had built a strong academic foundation and had already realized her intellectual strengths. As failure was not an option for her high personal standards, Belinda chose to get her GED and complete her high school education quickly so that she could move on. Beginning her coursework to complete her Licensed Practical Nursing program in Texas was set as her next step in her educational endeavors after completing her GED.

Belinda grew up in a household where attending college was not stressed. Her only understanding of college was formed at an early age when her father decided to return to college because of his awareness that teaching dance classes was not sufficient to provide the means to raise a family of three children. However, Belinda did not receive much guidance regarding how to get in to college. Her frustrations with college came about in large part due to the admissions process. Because she was unfamiliar with the process of completing an application, applying for federal financial aid and completing any entry requirements, Belinda became frustrated with the educational process. Her drive and motivation to complete an advanced degree beyond high school assisted her in dealing with her frustrations and acquiring the needed information to get accepted to college rather than simply walking away. She had already begun the process, and the high value she placed on never giving up in any situation allowed her to pursue her dream of getting into college. Belinda had also decided to progress directly from completing her GED to enrolling in college, and since it was late in the semester, her fear was that she couldn't accomplish this immediately and she would have to wait. Putting her dreams on hold was very frustrating for her and produced much anxiety as she maneuvered her way through the college admissions process.

Once Belinda has dedicated herself to a goal or commitment, her motivation propels her through the tasks needed to be completed. In regards to her dream of higher education, once enrolled in classes, she did the work needed to be successful. As things become more difficult, Belinda strives even harder, and the commitment becomes more intense. As she re-evaluates her circumstances and the impending results, she can develop and implement strategies that allow for success. Her desire to be successful is a very intense motivator for her, and she will not accept the alternative – failure.

Belinda's experience of seeing her father go through college while she was young and the commitment, time and energy that it took away from her and her family was a motivator to complete her degree before her children were old enough to comprehend that she could not be as involved with the family. Knowing how difficult it was growing up in a family where the father was always busy studying and unable to attend activities that the family held left an indelible mark on Belinda, and she had developed the insight and understanding of how this would impact her family – something she had a strong desire to avoid. Planning out her educational goals required understanding when it was best for her to return to school. However, life did not always cater to her desires, and due to life circumstances, she ended up having several young children at home while she attempted to go back to school.

Belinda seemed to find more personal awareness as well as the increase in wisdom and intelligence she experienced from taking classes. Committing to accomplishing a degree and all the work that entailed allowed Belinda to find and develop her own personal strengths. She was consumed with commitment to success, and the ensuing praise and acknowledgement that she received from friends, family and classmates as they watched her

pursue her goals provided personal insights which allowed for increased self-confidence and character-building.

Being a productive member of society is a very important value for Belinda. Being able to assist in providing for her family allows her to feel useful and an integral key to her family's happiness. Realizing that there are additional goals that can be obtained to provide even more of a substantial support for the family, Belinda is looking at furthering her education even more. In her quest for employment she is strongly considering employers who might offer potential tuition assistance so that she can take her education even further. With economic constraints and raising a family as priority, she is aware that education comes at a cost and currently is deliberating as to the cost and the benefits of any potential positions in her chosen career field of nursing.

Matthew

Textural Description

Education to me is something that was taken away at a young age. I was only allowed to go to grade 9, so it's something very important. What I want to say is education is extremely important because it's so important to the understanding what's going on, your ability to cope with the world, your ability to land a job. It's about learning. Learning is something everybody should want to do. You don't want to become stagnant. I've always wanted to be a lifelong learner, even when I had gone to work at Maytag, which kind of eliminated the possibility of going to college. When I worked the swing shift which at the time then I couldn't really go to college because they didn't have any online classes or anything like that so when we got to the situation where they were closing the plant down, we were offered retraining benefits, and I ended up going into a job that totally paid GED

and no real background in factory work and custodial work are actually not that great and acquiring anything decent as far as wages and as far as, you know, finding something that I really enjoy.

I chose to go to the community college first and foremost due to cost. It was extremely expensive of course to go to a university, and you know I didn't want to have to get into taking out a bunch of student loans. The retraining programs that were allowed for us had limited funds, and the community college was about the only route available that would go up to two years of schooling and be able to pay for the college completely without having any money come out of our own pockets. So I had funding. I can't remember exactly what it was. It has something to do with the NAFTA program as they more or less… part of the factory was sent out of the US. We were allowed to have two years of unemployment and two years of schooling. They paid for the tuition, they paid for the books, and they paid us gas money plus we got unemployment for two years. So I ended up getting a free ride to college and having enough income to survive anyway.

When I started college, I mean I knew I could handle anything like that - everybody has little doubts come to mind, but I realized probably when I was in my early, early teens I learned a lesson from my mom which was find something you're good at, and do your best at that, and don't worry about the things you can't be really good at. Well I knew I would be really good at a lot of the physical components, but I knew I wouldn't be very good at things like art and music. So I had always thought those to be irrelevant, but I took a couple of classes more or less to prove to myself that I could do it, and so I took a couple classes after my GED and got hooked and wanted to take more classes. First off, I was a 9th grade dropout; I didn't finish 9th grade. My parents did not have the income to be able to afford to

send me to school, pay for clothes, stuff like that. Financially we were poor. So I would have graduated in 1975. Probably about 1981 or 1982 or maybe it was later than that…anyway I decided many years later to take the test and see how I can do on it, and the pretest said I was fine and that I didn't need to study, and I went ahead and took the GED, and that was, I'm guessing, about 7 years after I would have graduated. I took the GED just out of personal pride, just to prove to myself that I could do it. I had loved school. Since I had to drop out I just really wanted to prove to myself and prove to everybody else that I could do it. I've always had to prove myself to everybody else because you know sometimes people look down on those who don't have a high school diploma, stuff like that. So I decided when the plant closed that I wanted to go back to school.

When I decided I might try college, well, let me state that I worked with a bunch of engineers at Maytag, so I tend to be kind of anal retentive. I mean that's just the way engineers are; it's just a statement, but it's true. And what I did was I went and gathered the information; Maytag was having a lot of college fairs at the plant trying to get people to go to college, and I went through and gathered all the information. Went through all the books of all the different colleges of everyone from universities out of state to all the ones in state and focused on those more, beings that I didn't plan on going out of state for college, so I tried to keep it reasonably local with the furthest one away being about an 85 mile one way trip. And I just went through all the books to see which different programs were offered and tried to find one I thought would fit me, and I did all kinds of stupid things like cost-benefit analysis. Again, I work with engineers, so we kind of look at everything from all the different angles – how long it takes, what classes or what programs have the best opportunity to develop what I

desire to get into. I worked a little with a government agency representative looking at the different things that were available – I did a lot of my homework.

When I did start back to school it just felt really comfortable. It felt exciting because I wasn't with a bunch of… see I'm 53, so returning to school at my age back then - I was still 50… um, you know I'm older than 85 percent of the people out there. More than that- more like 95%. In my class I think I was the oldest one. I think my biggest issue was getting used to being around the younger students. And the lack of desire some of the fresh out of high school people showed. As far as the class work, as far as the coursework, as far as the communication with teachers, I had taken a couple; I had taken actually about 5 or 6 classes before I actually signed up full time. So I already knew what to expect, and even I think my biggest issue I had was the apathetic attitude of the people like "who cares, I'll just get a passing grade" and I just can't fathom not wanting to do your best. I've always been like that. I'd have a teacher that said turn in a 2 page paper and I'd turn in 13. And it was all about making sure everything was perfect, and you never turned in slop. Partly it's pride in myself; partly it's proving myself, and other people I really don't know why. I think that's the main thing I don't know how you can NOT care about something and not understand the reason why that's not important in their life or should be important.

As I got toward the end of my degree I had doubts. Not in capabilities. In feelings - I had too much fears. One is I knew I was entering the workforce at a poor time or re-entering the workforce at a bad time. Over the last two years we all know what the economy's been like. So I was really worried about trying to find a decent job which I still am worried about. In fact, I was going to have an interview tonight, but the guy was going to a funeral, so I got delayed on that one for a week. But feelings, oddly enough was a feeling of sadness. A

feeling of I don't want this to end. If you've ever watched Animal House I'd love to go to college and be a professional student! I mean not the party animal but just 13 years of going to college being a full-time student and never having to go back to work. But I'm the oddball. I'll take more courses. It's all up to what I do and my financial situation. A lifelong learner? Oh yeah. I do a lot of reading, and I still have my finite math book that I'm still playing around with. That was the only class I didn't complete because I overextended myself. I have too much going on at once, and I decided real fast I had to drop something. And I wasn't about to drop my internship. I have a major in management and another in business administration. And I had started on my bachelor's degree, but that's on hold till I can hopefully find a job that offers tuition reimbursement.

I'm probably a better person at the social aspects of school than I was when I went in. But the social aspects were part of the thing that bothered me not knowing what to do. And I have learned to get along with an extremely wide diverse group of people. I would think that will help me in the future but right now of course with the job market…Actually, what I would like to do is be in some form where I am able to do some kind of training to help people out. Whether that training be like in a corporate situation, or something they'll need to do their job easier, or whether it be as a supervisor type thing where I help them to learn how to do their job better or whether it be in some form of giving them guidance of some sort. That being said, I don't want to be a social worker. One of the things I did when I was at Maytag towards the end there when they were getting ready to shut the plant down I heard a lot of negativity out on the work floor. People are going "I can't go back to school, blah, blah, blah, I'm just going to take any job I can find" and I'm like, "you've got a chance here, you might never again have this chance to go out there, get an education, try to learn

something you can", and I'd say I'd probably got, oh, at least a half dozen people to really consider what I told them about the possibilities, and they went out and got their degrees. If you can inspire others to become the best they can be then that's quite a life, isn't it? So the associate degree is the stepping stone.

Structural Description

Matthew values education extensively and always has. As a young child, Matthew enjoyed going to school and learning new things, participating in new and interesting educational experiences. However, due to family financial constraints and the need for him to help provide for his family, Matthew was pulled out of school in the ninth grade. The cost of clothing, materials and supplies for school, the fact that his school did not have funding assistance for lunches – these conditions and more contributed to the fact that the family saw school as an extravagance and therefore something that was unnecessary and so Matthew's tenure with education came to an end.

Matthew was very reluctant and frustrated that he could not continue in education – something he prided himself in and felt the social connection that allowed him to build his identity at the developmental stages in his personal growth. When he was no longer able to attend school, resentment and bitterness formed toward his situation. Matthew enjoyed the learning experience and the fact that education provided growth and understanding as well as knowledge about the world he lived in and how to be successful in that world.

Matthew began work at a young age in the local factory. His interest in education never subsided – he continued to read all the informational and news items he could find in order to satisfy his interest in knowledge. His factory career also allowed him to gain an understanding of careers available to him. In his position, Matthew worked alongside many

career types – those with business degrees, engineering degrees, management degrees, etc. This allowed him to gain an understanding of what areas of employment are available in a variety of ways in one industry and opened his eyes to the fact that a factory entails many different entities working together in one setting and focused on doing what was necessary to make a quality product. His association with these other "types" provided Matthew with new knowledge in these areas and increased his interest in learning. He forged relationships with many individuals always wanting to understand what role these individuals played in the process of producing a product. These relationships and understandings allowed Matthew to grow and develop as a worker committed to providing to his economic status and to his own personal workplace and community engagement.

A few years after what would have been his designated age to graduate high school, Matthew's desire to get his GED became a major goal. He decided to stop in to the local GED testing site and get some information so that he could gain an understanding of what it would take to accomplish this goal. Along with accomplishing a personal goal, Matthew saw acquiring the GED as a means to show both himself and others that he was not lacking in knowledge or education. Matthew closely associated his sense of personal pride with others' views of what lacking an education meant. He no longer wanted to feel as though others looked down on him due to the fact that he hadn't finished high school. He spoke with individuals at the GED site who guided him in the process of taking the GED test. He took the pre-test and learned that he had quite strong learning skills and a good knowledge base; this very positive outcome from the pretest, along with his strong desire to accomplish a personal goal and gain pride and self-esteem, motivated Matthew to take the GED test, which he successfully passed. This next step of completing his high school diploma equivalency

exam provided not only a boost in his self-esteem, but also gave him the personal insight as to what he can accomplish if he puts his mind to achieving a goal. This boost in self-esteem allowed him to also view his co-workers as peers rather than superiors as he became comfortable and engaged in understanding their job duties and communicating with them on a more knowledgeable level. Matthew also began to take a college class on occasion to enhance his abilities and continue to cater to his educational desires.

When the factory announced that it would be closing, Matthew began to consider his own future and the needs of his family. His employer offered many opportunities for community organizations, colleges, and financial entities to provide information to the employees who no longer had a future at the factory due to the closing. Among those opportunities, college tuition reimbursement from government agencies was something that Matthew considered strongly. Due to his continued strong interest in education, the fact that he had always wanted to increase his knowledge and obtain a degree, and his realization that this was an excellent opportunity that would afford him the ability to establish and reach his goals, he rose to the occasion and enrolled in college.

Matthew did not doubt his abilities to be successful in college – he just needed the opportunity to be provided to him. Along with the awareness that college is a luxury and that not everyone is afforded that opportunity – only the extremely lucky or fortunate individuals who find themselves in the position to be able to have college paid for – Matthew felt obligated to do his best. His biggest frustrations came from observing that others did not feel the same about education; in particular the newly graduated high school students who were just expected to go on to college and were afforded the privilege due to their parents' economic status. Matthew chose his college courses after acquiring his GED, based on the

fact that he knew he might struggle in some areas. He realized that his strengths were in the more "mechanical" or "physical" areas – he had proven himself in those areas in his job duties within his employment. So when he decided that if college would ever be a realizable goal, he knew that there were some areas such as fine arts in which he believed he would not be so sufficient. Therefore, in order to beat those demons, he attempted and successfully completed initial college courses in those areas. The achievement of this goal allowed him to gain additional levels of self-esteem and the personal understanding that when he put his mind to something, he could be successful. When the factory closed and he decided to commit himself full-time to a college degree, Matthew chose areas in which he had believed he had developed strength by observing and working alongside individuals who had college degrees of which he had become familiar. Matthew was well aware of the job duties of these professional coworkers and what degrees were required for these positions. This combined knowledge provided Matthew with a firm belief that he could achieve his college goals. He decided to pursue a degree in management and business administration.

Matthew worked hard on his degrees but also had the understanding that incorporating college requirements and expectations into life can be difficult when one has a family and outside responsibilities. He had to drop a class in finite math due to being overextended by needing to provide for his family and go to college full-time. However, he didn't view dropping the class as a failure; he realized that rather than commit to the exorbitant amount of time studying for the class and knowing that some of that time had to be delegated elsewhere in order to be successful in the other courses and provide for his family, he needed to drop the class in order to maintain his level of success. He knew that he would focus on the math class at another time when he didn't have such a full schedule.

Matthew has successfully completed his associate's degree and sees it not as a final achievement; rather, it is a stepping stone to his next achievement. He is looking forward to finding a job that will allow him to meet the needs of his family in a work environment where he feels productive, knowledgeable and where he can utilize his skills, personality and work ethic to better the work environment he will join. His hopes also include finding employment with an employer who values education and may offer tuition assistance to allow him to reach his next goal of an advanced degree in higher education. Education has enhanced Matthew's self-esteem and guided him through many years of gaining workplace knowledge and experience and using that knowledge, personal insight and growth to reach his life-long goals of gaining self-knowledge, establishing his identity and promoting his own understanding of how he contributes fully to his social, work and personal environments.

Meredith

Textural Description

Education is a sense of security for me; job placement. I have a better possibility of getting a good job if I have an education. My son was my motivation. He's 13. I dropped out of high school when I was 16, and I've always worked. It wasn't a matter of I couldn't find a job, but rather I could have done better. And then I had my son, and I wanted him to be proud of me instead of me being at a job that was not going to get me anywhere in life. So I decided one day, I went in signed up for my GED, took the test, and before I knew it, I was in college. I was 26 at the time. Being responsible for him, I wanted him to look up to me and be proud of me, so maybe his birth even encouraged that. I'm a single mom, and I wanted him to be able to count on me.

There was a difference of a month between the time I got my GED and started college - a month. I got my GED in July, and I started college in August. I signed up the first of July and said I was going to have it so that I could start school in August, and I did it. I don't know. Just something came over me that said I needed to do this. And I just went down there with no hesitation and did it. It wasn't due to loss of a job or anything like that. No…I have a good job, I had a good job. But I could have had a better job.

As for going on to college…I was scared. I was scared to death. I actually went as far as taking my sister with me because I was scared. My first day, I made her go with me. I really honestly thought I was going to fail at it because I'd been out of school for so long that I thought I was going to fail. I had anxiety, I didn't know if I could do it, you know, but I got to campus and she walked me in; she let me know, which sounds really bad because being as old as I was…she, you know we got there, and I got to the front and had no idea where I was going, and everybody there was so calming and helpful, and I went back into the academic achievement center, and I had seen one of the counselors that had helped me with my GED, and she sat me down and just talked to me and it made me feel good. I told her I was so nervous. Yes, I did. And she told me I would be fine and that she would always be there if I needed any help. It was very calming and helped a lot. She was actually there when I graduated with my degree. I had no idea whether I could do this or not. I always knew what I wanted to do with my life, but I just didn't know how to do it. Ever since I was young I knew what I wanted to do - I want to work with kids in the juvenile justice system. I'm majoring in criminal justice. I graduated with my associate's degree in criminal justice, but now I'm going back for human services and chemical dependency. I just started classes again today, actually!

When I first started back to school right after getting my GED, I really didn't know what to do. It was…exhausting, in a word. I mean, I really had no idea what I was doing; the application, what to take, nothing. No, I had no clue. I had my sister there to help me through it all. She also graduated from the community college. She was the only one who helped me as far as outside sources. The community college people were very helpful because I originally started at the downtown campus. The academic advisor down there was wonderful. I had no idea or no clue on how I was going to pay for anything. Even though my sister had gone through the process, I wasn't familiar with it, and so I had a lot of questions and a lot of concerns. As I said, not knowing how to pay for things and how to process the application, that kind of thing.

I did get some comfort – I saw the counselor on the first day and gained some comfort, and that was encouraging, and the people were welcoming. When I got into attending the classes, that experience was nerve-racking. I thought everyone was staring at me the first couple of days because I was older than most of the people, and that really bugged me, and I experienced lots of anxiety again. But you know everyone turned out to be really nice and like in my speech class, I related to a lot of the people. We'd been through a lot of the same things in our past. Even though they were younger than me they'd been through some of the same stuff that I had. There were a lot of single mothers in there. There were others from abusive relationships in there. I don't know. Even though I was so much older, we could still relate. So finding some commonalities with others in classes was so big.

The homework was a lot easier to pick up on once I got started. It was just a matter of balancing my work life, my home life and my school life after I hadn't done it for so long.

That was the worst part; I couldn't seem to get a balance on anything. It took pretty much the whole semester to try to get it. I struggled with that and finally had to learn a pattern of doing that. And I had to learn that I didn't have to do everything all at once. I thought if I did everything at once I could stay caught up and I'd never fall behind, so I exhausted myself. I went through everything at one time versus spanning it out like my one class when we have weeks of assignments. I tried to do them all at one time so I didn't have to do anything for the rest of the semester. I found out this doesn't work. It was very overwhelming.

It took me a while to get a routine down so I wasn't so overwhelmed. I struggled with it. I can't say I didn't because I did. I'm one of those people we don't really ask for help, so I kind of do it on my own. I didn't want anyone to judge me, so I did basically find the balance on my own. I thought about my sister; she's very judgmental, and I was scared of disappointing her. Even though I know she wouldn't be, it was just something I always thought. We're very close, and I just didn't want to disappoint her. As I got closer to getting my degree…once I figured out how to learn and how to do it, and can manage to balance everything a lot better and still have quality time with my son things got a lot better. It was just a matter of getting that balance. And everybody was always very helpful if I needed anything.

I had a tough time regarding my family when I first started back at college. I thought I was taking away time from my son by doing it. I almost stopped because I thought that, but in the long run I knew it was the best thing and that he would understand why I was doing what I was doing. He was seven when I started school. He was young but old enough to understand I wasn't there. It was tough. He really learned to enjoy learning though. He still

does. He used to help me with my psychology books. He loves to read them. Oh, he's great. "Mom, I'll help you study".

I'm not really a first generation student. My dad did go to college, but it was more like a tech school – technical college. My mom never did; she went straight to work for the government out of high school. I have two other sisters. Neither one of them went to college. My oldest sister graduated high school. I'd have to say that wanting to please my sister impacted my education, definitely. I wanted her to be proud. When I saw her go through it I felt that maybe that was something I could do. It took me a lot longer! My mom always said don't force me to do it, I'll do it on my own time. I'm very stubborn. I don't give up that easily. I'm persistent.

I really never brought attention to myself by talking with instructors. Basically, because I didn't want anyone to judge me, I really just paid more attention in class than talking. A lot of the younger kids would ask the questions because they were fresh out of high school, and as an older one, I didn't want anyone to think I didn't know what I was doing. I opened up to the counselor on the first day because she made me feel comfortable. I didn't want my instructors to know I couldn't do this. The counselor…she made me feel comfortable…from the first day I walked in there a nervous wreck. I just remember the day I walked in there to get my GED, and she made me feel welcome. So I felt I could talk to her when I went on to college and saw her there.

Now, since I've finished my degree, I feel I can accomplish anything. I'm really a lot stronger than I thought I was. And now I'm able to pursue the next degree. I see myself working with children. I plan on furthering my education; I want to go all the way, as far as I can. I would like to get my doctorate eventually. I don't see getting older as a hindrance. I

think age is just a matter of I'm more responsible now that I'm older and I can handle it better. I work a full-time job and a part-time job and am taking nine credits, so I'm almost full-time. And I know I can do it. You just don't give up. It might take you six or seven tries to go back and do it. Just don't give up. That's why I never took any breaks away and when I thought about it when I was so worried about my son; because I knew if I did I wouldn't go back.

Structural Description

Meredith dropped out of high school at the age of 16. She didn't complete high school because she didn't see the value of education at the time. Going to school was keeping her from doing other things that she thought were more important and keeping her from enjoying life more fully. At the age of 19, Meredith became a mother to a son. This son afforded her the ability to become more other-focused. She fell in love with the responsibility of taking care of her son as a single mom and providing for him in the best way that she could.

Throughout Meredith's adolescence after dropping out of high school, she experienced working in the workforce through a couple of different jobs. What she gained from this employment were skills, training, and personal insight into what were her own strengths and abilities. She worked her way up in the workforce to a comfortable position that allowed her to provide for her son by meeting the necessities. As her son grew, Meredith was motivated by the fact that not only can she provide for her son, but also with additional training, she could work in a position for which she had some interest at an early age to pursue and the ability to gain an increase in pay in a field that required an advanced degree beyond high school.

Meredith understood at an early age what her interest was in regarding a career. She knew that her interest in juvenile delinquents and in the justice system for these individuals was where her interests lie. Her desire to provide more for her son, coupled with regaining insight into what her own personal career goals had been for quite some time, allowed Meredith to consider pursuing a college degree. She was well aware that this goal of acquiring a degree required completion of her high school equivalency diploma. In order to reach her goal, Meredith studied for, took and passed her GED. When she had set her sights on a college degree, she had made her mind up so quickly that the realization that she would now have to get her GED propelled her to jump into this process without hesitation. However, her fear and uncertainty about her abilities, how others would judge her and whether or not she could get into college caused much trepidation for her initially.

College was not something Meredith had longed for and always had in her mind to accomplish. Rather, the motivation of having her son and wanting him to be proud of her and to provide for him in the best way possible was the crux of the inspiration that guided her forward in her pursuit of a degree in higher education. Realizing that in order to provide for her son, to have her son be proud of her, and to get into the area of interest she had desired for quite some time required getting a degree which prompted Meredith to take the steps to achieve this goal.

Another motivator for Meredith was her sister. She was very connected to her sister who had also decided to acquire a college education. She had two other sisters who did not complete high school as well, but the ability to see one sister pursue her goal of going to college and her desire to please this sister propelled Meredith to an understanding that she, too, can do what she puts her mind to and that she would have the support of the sister who

had attempted college as well. This realization moved Meredith to jump immediately into getting her GED accomplished and moving forward in a very short time to getting enrolled in college.

This time crunch provided much anxiety towards Meredith getting into college. Realizing that she had made a decision to get her GED and begin college within such a short time span was very nerve-wracking for Meredith, and she relied hugely on her sister to provide the insight into how to maneuver through the admissions process and the financial aid procedures.

What was helpful during this time was the response, assistance, and feedback that Meredith received from the individuals who were connected to the GED center and to the community college. When Meredith presented the college individuals with her goal of getting her degree and the fear that encompassed her regarding this procedure, she was met with empathy, understanding and information that allowed Meredith to relax and get comfortable with the unknown. One counselor in particular whom she had met when she was working on her GED was there when Meredith's sister brought her to the community college campus to get admitted to the institution. This empathy and understanding forged a relationship between Meredith and the counselor that allowed her to feel connected and supported - critical needs when beginning a process that is unknown and uncomfortable to an individual. What Meredith learned from this relationship is that she is never alone, and there are people who will assist her if she asks.

Due to the fact that Meredith had dropped out of high school, her positive self-esteem was lacking when she began the college process. She was very fearful and anxious as she had never really proven her academic potential due to dropping out of school. Because she

did not allow herself to be challenged in the academic arena, she had difficulty understanding her abilities and her motivation to be successful. After having her son and experiencing life, her motivation to be there for her son and provide for him allowed her to build her self-esteem and develop her identity. Education, however, was a fearful avenue in which she was neither comfortable nor sure of her abilities. This fear initially provided the basis for her anxiety and lack of self-esteem in regards to her success. However, after connecting with the counselor and the academic achievement staff where she had acquired her GED and having the support of her sister, Meredith began to believe that she could accomplish her goal.

Meredith began the pursuit of her college degree at the age of 26. Although not "old" in relation to her position in the world, Meredith saw it as "old" in regard to college age. She was very uncomfortable with what others would think of her making an attempt to get a college degree at her age. She did not want attention to be focused on her in the classroom. What she soon found out was that even though her peers may have been younger, she connected with them through some similar life experiences. Again, this connection provided a sense of support and motivators to not only inspire others to reach their goals, but assurance that they could assist her in reaching hers.

As Meredith began her educational experience, other fears were realized. She had such a need to be there and support her son that she began to fear that she was cheating him of time spent with her and her ability to be there for her son. This was a contradiction to her value of being supportive and responsible for another human being. It was difficult for her to get past those negative conceptual beliefs that she was letting him down. However, she was able to look at her situation in relation to what it could afford both her and her son in the future – a better income and more of a possibility to reach future goals. She also rationalized

that her son was able to view her as a positive role model in his life – someone who sets goals and works hard to accomplish them.

Due to her lack of understanding of education and how the process would work, Meredith became very overwhelmed early on in her educational pursuits. Her personal intuition was to do as much work as possible up front, and then she would have time to sit back and not have to expend as much time and energy on college work. Instead she could extend that time and energy to her son so that he would not feel deprived of her time and attention. However, this became very exhausting for her, and she was not only unable to get the work completed, but she was also not able to relax and enjoy time with her son due to the exhaustion and mental energies required of the college coursework. She made some changes in both her understanding and expectations and in how she set out to accomplish the coursework. She found balance by working for a designated time on her studies, and then when she had met the required work for the week, she was able to set it aside and spend time with her son. Finding this balance was difficult because she learned through trial and error what needed to be done rather than asking for advice from others. Her fear of others judging her, believing she's not capable of doing the work or simply not smart enough to do the work did not allow her to ask questions of instructors or staff. Therefore, she had to struggle with coming to terms with how to find a means of developing effective study strategies and time management skills on her own. Once she established this balance in her routine, she found the college expectations and requirements much more manageable.

Getting a degree has provided Meredith with an increased sense of self-esteem and self-identity. She believes that she can accomplish anything she puts her mind to and encourages her son to do the same. Her fears that she felt initially regarding education have

completely dissipated, and she is now focused on acquiring her next degree. Her fears regarding her age and how others look at her are dispelled as well. She realizes the value in being older; bringing life experience and development of personal values into the classroom provides for a better learning experience, and students can gain insight into other's experiences for themselves. That age provides the ability to handle situations better because the individual has had some experience with difficulties and developed determination. Identity development has been a major outcome of the educational experience for Meredith – above and beyond her gained knowledge in her chosen career path. She has also expanded her goals to acquire the highest degree in her area of interest; her ultimate goal is to acquire her PhD.

Ronnie

Textural Description

Education is critical to me. We are always learning something new every day, and you can't really put a price on education. It's really that important, and education is basically the best thing out there right now, especially in this economy.

My motivation for going back to school was to help my memory, and as I got better at school with my memory issues I thought, "Hey, I can do this". My grades started getting better and better, and I got more comfortable with it. You have to realize, I worked at Hormel Foods for over 10 years, and it's like I was already making over $50,000 a year. I really didn't need a college education, but after the car wreck it made me think, "Hey, I'm going to need something" so I wanted something to help me with my memory too, and so that's why I decided to go back. The community college was a lot closer to where I lived, and that had a lot to do with me choosing the college. But then yet I wanted to see: If I

couldn't make it at the community college level there was no way I was going to be able to do a four-year.

When I first came in to college, when I first started it was – I mean, I was good in high school. I played football up until my junior year my dad decided to move, so that's why I decided, "You know I'm just going to go ahead and get my GED". I mean, I was good in high school, and I played football so I was kind of cocky, so I really didn't put my whole brain power if you want to say into it, my thought process, but I kept going, and I thought I better kick myself in the butt because I'm going to need this, and I enjoyed a challenge, and I enjoy being busy because I've always been busy my whole life. But my main concern was my brain injury I got from my car wreck. I had a severe brain injury, and I didn't want to be say 20 years from now, 25 years from now, where I'm in my 60's, I didn't want to be sitting there and, you know, basically going goo goo gaga because I didn't use my brain. And that was one of the main goals in going back to school was to keep my mind working because as long as my mind's working, I should be ok. Oh, I can tell you right now with my brain injury, I was awful sluggish, but even when I was older I can remember an appointment a year from now, what time it was. I never had any memory issues with trying to memorize after school, I mean, I could just glance at the pages and I pretty much knew what everything was. But now I have to read chapters two, three or four times over before even half of it will stick, if even half. You know it's like the professors I had; I came straight out and told them I have a few things running against me and one is I had a severe brain injury in my car wreck and the fact that my short term and some of my long term memory aren't good. And another thing is I am getting older, and as we get older our memory is not as strong as it was when we were younger. Basically, school to me right now is what I call candy for my brain. I'm

feeding my brain all this information to keep my brain functioning. And it's like, I love it. I thrive upon it. If something doesn't work out right I keep going till I get it figured out. Actually, I have two things against me – when I'm all done with my school, and by the time I get my master's I'm probably going to be about 49 years old. So right there I have one thing against me and that's age because we all know that a lot of people out there, there's a lot of companies that want younger people. Two, I have had a brain injury. So is somebody going to take a chance on me? That's why I strive so much to keep my GPA up, and they see how hard I work and how many programs I volunteer for at the community college.   You know, I volunteered for student activities council, for anything they needed I did so I kept busy, and I didn't have any issues so you know helping out, doing what they needed like the book fair, helping and even participating in Phi Theta Kappa for when they raise money so they can send their students to competitions and stuff. So I didn't have no problem volunteering for stuff like that, and it kept me busy.

This is basically how I got started on the college process: I had a brain injury, so I had to deal with state people. So basically I got hold of what they call a provider which helps me out when I need help and so forth. So I got to talking to her and said, "You know I don't want to be like this forever," so I think I needed to start thinking about college as I need something to do other than sit around with my head on my chin. So it's like that started the ball rolling. I got on my computer at home, got on line, checked out the college's website, and searched through the information, and I got an email back from an advisor, and then I came in for a meeting, and one thing led to another and the next thing I know I am attending the community college in the fall of 2006. That was 4 years, so I was 40, 41 when I started.

Actually, I was 40 when I first started out. The community college really helped make the process smooth.

Basically, all my classes went great except for trying to relearn math again. And I got frustrated because I was so good at math in high school, in junior high or however you want to say it. So I got frustrated and my math professor, bless his soul, understood my situation. There were times when I would do a test and I would get so flustered – actually it only happened once, and I told myself it would never happen again. I turned in my test and walked out the door. It was like my brain was telling me one thing and then I was doing something else. So it was like I was not focusing my brain power on everything. It was like I knew the problems, but yet the doubt in my mind that was telling me that I cannot do this was overpowering. Basically, I gave in to my second thought process when I actually knew the problems, and when I got home I sent him an email and I told him I balked and it will never happen again, and I went back and said listen I know I'm not going to get credit, but I want you to know I'm still thinking about it, and that helped a lot, and I gave him a promise that I would never do it again, and that's how that went.   I think basically the doubt came from a little mixture of both worry about being older and having the brain injury. But I heard from my family from the beginning of my journey through the community college, "Are you sure you want to do this at your age? Are you sure you want to be in debt at your age like this?" And it's like I told my dad before he passed away I said, "Dad, can you put a price on education? Can you put a price on knowledge?" I said "no, you can't".   I said we're going to be deep in debt until the day we die anyways. Maybe not deep in debt but we're going to be in debt to somebody until the day we die, regardless. And I can't see a much better thing to be in debt with than school.

In my immediate family I am actually the first diploma holder for high school. And I'm the first college graduate in my immediate family. See, my parents, my grandparents, they were farmers. My mom was Blackfoot Indian. I think to be honest with you, even though my dad was highly intelligent, my dad dropped out of high school his senior year. He got bored with it. My dad was very, very smart – stupid for dropping out so soon, but anyway he ended up being a master mechanic for 50 years. My mom I would have to say was probably smart in her own right, but she did not have that knowledge desire I don't think. She was not driven that way. She was driven in other ways. But my problem is I get started on something, I don't stop. Even at my age, I've still got a lot of drive.

To be honest, I have to say that education was not my high priority in high school. I hate to say it, but football was my high priority. I was very good at it; plus I was good at – I mean I worked even when I was younger, you know, and I worked plus I had school plus I had football. I was constantly doing this and I think that helped me become driven. When I got older and went into the workforce it was like I had to constantly be better than anybody at their job. Whatever I did I had to be better than everybody else. When I first started back to college I took a composition class. So basically after my first composition class I thought OK, and this was basically the only time that I had really serious, serious papers. So I got a C+ out of that class or C-, I can't remember what it was, but that's why I decided hey, I've really got to bust my butt or there's no use in me even doing this. So I asked a lot of questions; I went into the library, I practiced and I did this, I did that and I got better at it. In our composition class we were guided to the library, so I already knew about the library and how to go about asking what I needed to ask because we had that library orientation type thing in our class, and we had the librarian explain everything to us and so forth but

basically, though, for writing my papers and setting them up I would ask one of the other students or people in the library you know, that was behind the desk and took some initiative and got help.

I mean, I'm elated at all I've accomplished. Especially dealing with what I had to go through. Walking through the graduation ceremony in itself was amazing because I was supposed to have been a paraplegic when I had my car wreck because I busted my C4 so bad. But anyways, that alone, just walking through that ceremony, it's like I just can't describe the joy I felt. And then knowing that I was going to further my education. See, I could have graduated the community college probably not needing 16 credits – see I needed only 64 or 68 and I have 79 credits; so part of me at that time I did not think I was ready for a 4-year school but yet, you know, the community college became family. I mean, it was like even when I was in school I was probably the third or fourth oldest person in the student body, and everybody there I was basically everybody's friend, and if they needed to talk to somebody they always came up and talked to me if they had a question or they didn't feel comfortable talking to the teacher. So I basically did not want to let go of the community college experience. Because I mean it was like all my instructors, all my advisors and all the students I felt like was my family. Students who are fresh out of high school are going to have doubts come in their mind, and I'm pretty good at reading other people's feelings and all that kind of stuff, so it's like a lot of stress. We had one gentleman who was going to a university in the fall term, and I knew he was going to have an issue with one of the classes I was in – my psychology class. I said, "Dude, if you need help, or if you need someone to study with, hey, I'm available, so don't hesitate to ask". And that's when I decided – you know, let's just form some study groups and go for it there. We kind of did that a couple of

times in my earlier math classes. But all the people at different times had odd hours, you

know they either had to be at work or doing this or doing that so that kind of made it a little

bit harder, plus you know a lot of the students would say just you know, I'll get by and just

left it at that. You know, I can honestly tell you that I got a lot of the mentoring process from

the academic achievement center. One teacher was excellent, and there was another

gentleman in there, and it was like I knew that if I needed help all I needed to do was go there

and I would get the help I needed. They would not just show me how, no, they would not

just give me the answer; they broke it down for me to figure out how to do it. It's like I knew

I had that structure there and they knew my first and second terms I was in there constantly,

and I got comfortable, and then I wasn't in there as much.

I got connected to the achievement center when one of the students just said, "Hey, if

you have questions just go on in and talk to somebody in the academic achievement center".

Plus, I think a little bit of all the bulletin boards up, you know and advertising about it.

I'll be honest with you. That first year of school I struggled with my issues. Even

though I passed the classes I still struggled because I was having issues of how one instructor

had a different view than another, and I wasn't used to how all the professors did things.

When I was in high school, it was pretty much the same for every class. I think the learning

curve of coming back to school at first was basically like a curve ball. Instead of a straight

fast ball, it threw a curve at me. Because I figured since I was so good this wasn't going to be

a problem and just because I had a brain injury but then once I started going I was going, "Oh

crap, this is tougher than I thought it would be". So it was good because it kept my brain

focused, you know, and it put me back in that enjoyment mode. I lost that mode for basically

four years because I started believing basically what my doctors were telling me and what

my family were saying that you should be just lucky enough that you're breathing and walking because there for a while I could read a book five times and still not really remember everything, and now it's like, granted, I still may have to read a chapter maybe two times, but it's better than what it was. My neurologist told me that the best thing that would help my brain and memory issues would be constantly reading and reading so then I took that initiative on myself to go back to school.

My beliefs that I hold for myself is that I can accomplish anything that I set my mind to. I'm a very highly driven person, almost to the fact that I am OCD about it. It's like education actually means more to me now than it did my first year back at school when I came to the community college and that helped me. I'm not saying that in a bad way. I was driven then, but I'm more driven now because the college and all the professors and all the instructors, they didn't give up on me. And it's like in my best classes even in high school and in junior high and everything was always science and history, and it's like my history professor seen it. She would say "Ronnie, are you sure you've had a brain injury?" "Yes, why?" "Because you remember more stuff than I do!" I said, "You don't understand. It's more my short term memory. What I'm learning now in this book I got to read two or three times over again just so I'll remember for the test". You know, the knowledge of history I don't have a problem with, and if there's certain areas of history that I really didn't pay no attention to then I could care less at that time, but she helped me get better at it, and she never gave up on me basically. I got better at it because she didn't give up on me so…

My first term at the community college, I thought about quitting really hard; I really did. But then I thought I've never been a quitter. I'm not going to quit. I mean I felt bad enough that I had my GED when I could have had my diploma, no problem. My main factor

was that after my mom and dad got divorced, it was like we were moving back and forth, back and forth, and when I hurt both my knees playing football, I needed that. It's not like I'm a genius, but back in high school football was the most important thing to me. And I was very, very good and it, and when I blew both my knees out it was like depression set in if you want to say it that way. Even though I wasn't on any medication, I know that's what it was. You know, that poor pitiful me stuff. Well, then my dad decided we're going to move, and I thought I don't want to go to another school because I went through this in junior high, and my only really stable lifetime was in high school and I thought, "Dad, I'm just going to get my GED because I'm not going to go to another high school". And that's when I sit down and started studying and taking all my GED courses. I was 18 when I got my GED- when I took all my tests I was 17. As a matter of fact, 1982 was my last year of high school, and that was my junior year, and that's when I started my GED so I was probably 18 when I finished. Because then I was married at 19. But going back to thinking of quitting: the frustrations that first term, I knew I knew it. I knew I could do it, but yet some of my first early tests were telling me, "Oh my God you're an idiot", you know, in my mind. It was like I sat there and then I talked to a couple of my professors, and they said, "Ronnie, don't give up", and "You can do this" – and it helped. And of course the spring of 2007 when I found out my mom had pancreatic cancer I almost left and – to go down to Texas – and I needed to wait till the summer to go down. Because my one professor, he goes, "Ronnie, you're doing so good. Wait until summer to go down and see your mom then" and it was like I told the professor, "I don't know if my mom's going to be around until summer". Yes, granted she was but I did not know and I said now I don't know how I can handle school on top of my mom dying, you know, and actually I finished, and then I went down to Texas to be with my mom but that

was probably about the only time that in that first term and even in the second term. The second term was different. It wasn't because I was frustrated with school. It was because of personal reasons with my mom. I ended up dealing with all of that with my mom. Of course it was all that a son or daughter would go through with a parent, so I took that year off and then I refocused and went back to school, and I actually did better.

I didn't stop going to school because I couldn't handle it. It wasn't because of the college or anything like that it was my own personal process that I knew I was going to go back but I had to get all these – I don't want to say demons because it wasn't demons – but it was more like I needed to get rid of all the depression …plus you've got to realize I was still on a lot of medications back then, you know because of my brain injury and my neck as I ended up breaking my neck and all that, and it's like to give you more of an example, you might not want to use it but anyways you know how like a baby can get shaken baby syndrome? That's how my brain was from my car wreck. It wasn't just one side of my brain that was injured; it was my whole brain. So I had a lot of things to deal with plus I was trying to get off all my medications. So yeah, I had a lot of things to work on with me before I decided to go back and really try this school. And I accomplished that. I think to be honest with you that no matter how good you are you still have a little doubt because sometimes you just do, but I got better at pushing that doubt out. I had a history professor who had difficult tests; she had things on the test that were totally different than even the book described it. It was how she described it. So that made me be aware that, "Hey, I can get this at all directions, at all levels, so I better not be cocky anymore," and I never allowed it again. This community college helped me become a better individual and also helped make me become aware that I can achieve anything that I set my mind to. And it goes right from the provost all

the way down. Without all the instructors there, without all the certain professors and all the students that I was with I don't think I could have achieved everything that I have achieved. Other than my kids being born, going to the community college is one of the best decisions I've ever made in my life. It's like I told my advisor if there were more certain classes that I wanted, I'd still be at the community college getting them.

My main goal is that I want to deal with children and adults that had brain injuries. I want to help them realize that you're not stuck where you're at during this particular moment in time. It may take a little more time to get out of that phase in your life, but you can help yourself become better by being educated and pushing yourself. Yes, granted, there are people out there that have suffered major brain injuries like I have that never come out of it – that I totally understand. But there are people out there that just basically had injuries to their brain but that I think lose focus and have doubt in themselves that they can do something, and I think with that extra push they can achieve whatever they want to achieve.

Four and a half years ago that would never have come out of my mouth. I'm being honest with you. The community college and all that it has to offer - all the professors, all the instructors and the student body itself – I couldn't have achieved anything without all their help as well. I had that backbone to me. It pushed me and they kept me going forward. They're the ones that even though I had a smile on my face all the time, they're the ones who helped put that smile on my face.

When I started school my kids were grown adults on their own and their own individuals. My youngest is now 20, and my oldest will be 23 in March. But I was on my own. I was taking care of my dad because my dad was going through some medical issues himself, but other than that, I was pretty much on my own.

I think to be honest with you that my boys – because I was so driven they knew I would do my best, so I had no doubt that they believed in their dad. I think a lot of my family members had doubts. As a matter of fact, I'd probably say 80% of them; only reason why is because they doubt themselves. I don't want to say I have a lazy family, but yet I do. Other than my dad; my dad was very driven. I'm driven in all aspects of my life. Whether it's going to the gym or going fishing or whatever I'm attempting. It's not like I need to out catch everyone. If I don't out catch everyone, I'm not bothered but we're only here for a short period of time if you really want to think about it. So I want to grasp it, enjoy it and love life.

A high quality life is very important. I don't thrive on drama. I know we all have drama in our lives, but I don't let it consume me. I don't like taking charity. I don't like sitting there and having someone talk down about people or whatever. I don't care how old you are. You're going to have doubts come into your mind on certain subjects. And my only doubt I had in my mind with all my short term was all the different formulas in my math classes. But yet I did not avoid taking math classes. It challenged me and I grew with it. I took my math classes and thought about taking calculus, so I asked my math teacher what he thought. He said, "You know there are a lot of formulas in it," but he said, "You know what, try it". School challenges I'm fine with. Sometimes life challenges are what throw me a lot of curveballs. The community college experience was the best experience of my life. My math instructor really allowed me to be a part of his life and introduced me to his family. We had a lot of things in common other than school. It was totally amazing. And it's that right there that makes me take all the classes I can take. In general, all the professors at the college are unbelievable. The ones that I took classes with. And even the ones that I didn't have

classes with…they're always polite and nice. Overall, in general, the community college opens their arms to every student out there. They do not care who you are meaning no matter what color you are or what country you're from, they want to teach you, they want you to grasp everything that they lay out on the table for you. And if you have issues, they want you to come either to the professors themselves or to the academic achievement center or take the initiative to sign up for a tutor or a fellow student or be in a study group. So there are so many variables out there that can help you be a better student that it's attainable if you want it bad enough.

Structural Description

Ronnie has always felt adept at education. His high school academic success was based on the fact that he enjoyed playing football and knew he would have to keep his grades up in order to participate. He stresses the fact that he had a great memory in high school and didn't need to do much to be able to memorize something and retrieve it in the classroom or for a testing situation.

Ronnie received his GED at the age of 18. His parents had divorced, and he was moved around quite a bit when he was younger. His most stable years were his high school years until his junior year when his father decided to move again. Ronnie decided that he did not want to endure reorienting himself to another location, another group of friends, etc., so he decided to get his GED instead. Knowing that he wasn't a quitter and wouldn't leave high school unfinished, Ronnie tested for and successfully completed his GED.

However, later in life, Ronnie lived through a car accident which left him with a traumatic brain injury. After talking with doctors about his abilities after the accident – both long-term and short-term abilities – Ronnie became fearful that unless he used his mind

actively, he would not be able to function in his later years. The doctors stressed that using his mind in the form of reading and learning new information would be the most beneficial thing he could do to keep his brain functioning optimally. This desire to remain intelligent and keep his brain functioning at the most optimal level was his motivator to return to college at the age of 40.

Ronnie's family was not the most supportive when he returned to school. He was questioned as to reasoning for wanting to go to college. He had a good paying job, and he was 40 years old. When Ronnie introduced this goal to his family, they were resistant to his endeavor as they were concerned that he would not be successful and that he would only experience frustration and possibly failure at this point in his life. This criticism toward his new venture actually increased Ronnie's desire to attend college. Not only was he wanting to prove to himself that he could be successful at something he put his mind to, but he would also prove to those negative naysayers in his family that he was going to attempt and be successful at his next goal! Ronnie was a first generation college student; his parents were both farmers and came from a long line of farmers. Therefore, there was a lack of understanding in the family as to the importance and value of a college education. The fact that Ronnie was making good money at his current job and would have to go into debt to achieve his college education was another aspect of his goal that his family believed to be a negative. Why go into debt at his age when he can continue to build his financial future at a good paying job? It didn't make sense to the family. However, for Ronnie, the understanding that he would always be in debt for something (house, kids' education, bills, etc.) allowed him to prioritize his debt issue. He would rather be in debt and "accrue" a better mind than to accrue more income and have his mind deteriorate. Ronnie's own

children were grown when he attempted to go back to college. He wanted to be a role model to them to demonstrate that no matter what happens in life, when you put your mind to it and are determined, you can reach any goal you set out to pursue. Ronnie's drive and determination has always been evident to his family members, and seeing him pursue such a goal with integrity and desire allowed his sons to see their dad as they had always seen him even before the accident – as someone who accomplishes what he desires.

Ronnie approached college with the same fervor as he approached football in high school: he would give his best effort in every way to be successful. Football provided his motivation in high school to show others he was something – not just a product of a divorced family. A college education provided the motivation for Ronnie to be the successful adult; just because he had experienced a major setback in his health, he would not allow anyone to suggest to him that he wasn't going to overcome this obstacle in his life and excel at what he put his mind to.

Ronnie chose the community college due to its proximity – it was close to home for him. Another reason he chose the community college was because of his uncertainty as to whether or not he had the skills initially to be successful in college. After his accident, he was doubtful of his capabilities. He believed that if he struggled at the community college he would not be able to be successful at the four-year university. He needed to "prove" himself first at a location that was convenient, affordable, and, for him, suitable as proving grounds to his academic success.

Ronnie's acclimation to college did not come easy. It was difficult for him to begin to learn to "train" his brain to think along certain paths once again. His short-term memory was compromised with the accident, and he had lost some of his long-term memory. He

began college by taking a composition class and found that doing the minimum, as he had done in high school, was not going to work in college. He would need to perform as a college student. He would need to seek out resources for assistance and listened to and recruited assistance from his peers in his classes to be successful. His composition class instructor introduced the library and its resources to him in the class. He listened when other students mentioned resources such as the academic achievement center as assistance measures. Gradually, Ronnie became aware of and sought out the resources needed because he realized that with his self-professed deficits of a brain injury and being an older student he would need to increase his efforts to supplement his abilities in order to be successful.

Once acclimated to college, however, Ronnie proceeded to integrate many methods to assist him on his academic path. He formed study groups with others so that he could reap the benefit of others' insight and intelligence. He utilized the academic achievement center to review his papers before turning them in. He consulted with instructors on optimal methods of completing homework and taking tests. These strategies paid off for him in his good grades as well as building his repertoire of support. His classmates and instructors, librarians and staff all became like family to Ronnie to provide the support that he lacked within his own family of origin. Because Ronnie interacted with his instructors and turned to them for guidance, he constantly found motivation and inspiration from them ("Ronnie, don't give up"). This connection and sense of family also provided the foundation for increasing his self-esteem and his identity. He became very involved in organizations on campus and provided leadership within these roles. College had become Ronnie's means of developing himself as a confident, supportive and self-aware adult at a time in his life when his doctors and family were increasing his negativity and self-doubt.

During Ronnie's educational tenure, he had some critical life issues which impacted his determination and motivation. His mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and his focus turned from college coursework to concerns and fears for his mother and whether or not he would be able to see her before she died because she lived out of state. He also had some major depression issues as a result of his accident, and he struggled with the ability to stay on task with his educational requirements. The intensity of these personal struggles culminated with Ronnie taking a year off to conquer some issues he had going on in his life at the time. He spent some quality time with his mother prior to her death. He weaned himself off of some of his medications so that he could acquire better focus and become clearer in his mind as to his desires and ultimate goals. He then returned to college with his goal of completing his degree in the forefront and with clear focus.

Ronnie gained insight throughout his educational process regarding both himself and his career goals. He will profess the fact that he has always had drive and motivation but that he lost some of that when he had his accident and experienced the traumatic brain injury. The community college instructors and staff inspired him and motivated him to push onward and commit to himself and his goals because "they didn't give up on me". He desires to help those much like himself – individuals who have experienced a traumatic brain injury and to be to those what others in his educational experience were to him: a motivator, a source of inspiration and a cheerleader to someone who needs the inspiration and example to push themselves forward through difficult life circumstances.

Caleb

Textural Description

Education, right now, means more than anything. Twenty four years ago it didn't mean anything – it was just a piece of paper. I didn't think I needed it, didn't want it. But now I've seen what it does for me, and it's a completely different atmosphere now. My motivation for going back to school was so I didn't have to go on disability. When I hurt myself three years ago, they were ready to put me on disability. And I said I've still got a brain. That was my cue to go back to school and better myself. I didn't even have my GED at that time. So it was get over it and get on with it. Here I was without even a high school education because I had dropped out of school and didn't think I needed that until I got hurt and then couldn't even do the manual labor that wouldn't need an education. So I thought well, I better find something to do. And that's when I decided that I had to go back to school and get my GED and then community college. Back then, I didn't think I had it in me. I didn't think I had the drive or the smarts or whatever to do it. But I proved myself wrong. I proved a lot of people wrong.

I chose to go back to the community college because…well, it was just one of those things where I knew I couldn't go to the university. I knew I wasn't going to do the four years. I just needed an education to get me started was the only reason I chose the community college. It wasn't necessarily that it was closer or more convenient; it just had what I needed. See, twenty-four years ago when I was at high school and was in a program out there, they sent me to the community college technical program to get my degree then, while I was going to high school. And I didn't, you know, at that time I didn't want anything and thought "why do I want this?" And I dropped out of the community college technical

school, too. So twenty-four years ago I was enrolled at the college in mechanical drafting.

At that time it was known as mechanical drafting which is now computer aided drafting and

design. So at the time I was getting that degree anyway, but at the time I didn't want to. So

that was my one term at the community college. So I dropped out of school and went to

work. My thought, when I started thinking about going back was, "Am I smart enough to do

this?" You know, I couldn't do it the first time. What made me think I was going to be able

to do it the second time. So I thought am I going to be able to do it? Is this just a waste of

time? Do I need this, and why do I want to do this? And I didn't know then how I was even

able to do it. I had lots of doubts, lot of self doubts.   A lot of fear of, 'How do I think I can

do this now if I didn't do it before?"

So I decided to go back to school because I didn't want to go on disability – never.

So my wife had been through college, so she knew how to do a lot of that. A lot of it was just

setting down and doing it. Some of the girls that were over at the campus helped me and

walked me through it. They took care of me and showed me how to do it and that kind of

thing. So that's what a lot of it was - just trying to find my way through it, you know. Once

I made up my mind I needed to do something, I did it.

I just came up with it on my own. I was going to drive a school bus, and then I was

like, "Why do I want to drive a school bus?"; "Why do I want to just find a job?" That's

when I realized I wanted to better myself, and that's when I went to the college to see about

getting into school and getting my GED, and I sat down and took the test, and they said,

"You know what, all you have to do is just sit down and take the GED test," and then I took

them, and I thought, "You know what? That isn't that hard." And that's when I decided to

enroll and see what I can do. At that time I thought let's just try it, what's it going to hurt? I had to get over that fear - fear of failing.

When I realized I could probably do school I still wasn't prepared for what was expected. My philosophy on homework was I'll get to it whenever. So I had to learn how to do it. That was my biggest thing, getting back into the swing of things; wanting to do the homework, wanting to be on top of it. Otherwise it was, "Whatever, I'll come home and do it whenever". That was my biggest fear was doing the homework and getting to where I'd have time to do everything and want to do it. The fact that I didn't want to go on disability forced me to do it. I didn't want to fight them. Do I really want to fight to get disability or did I just want to continue on? I wanted to give myself a chance to make my life better in more ways than one. Do I want to stay at home and not do anything for half my life, or do I want to go out and better myself? I've still got a brain, and I don't need to ruin that was the biggest thing. It wasn't like I was just thriving for education - nothing special. There wasn't anything there; I just didn't want to be on disability. Even though the homework was something I had to get a hold on, the teachers were ok. That wasn't an issue. The instructors were great. None of the instructors looked at me like, "You're older than most". I have the work experience. I have the drive; I'm not going to sit around and let someone else do my work for me like these kids who expect someone to hand them everything. I'm not going to do that, and that's the way I work. I earn my living for a reason; I go out and do what I have to do. I've always been that kind of person; I earn what I get. And it was the same way when I had to train new drivers. You know, it was like just go out and sit in the truck and teach them how to do their job but I don't want you teaching them any more about it. I don't want you to do anything, but if I went out to a job site and there was stuff to do, I was going

to do it. I don't care if it was my job or not; my job was to go out and get your job done, and come back and you don't make that person go and sit in the truck and make him run out in the heat or in the cold busting your ass and doing what I'm supposed to be teaching you? No, I'm going to go out and I'm going to help you, and then we'll get the job done better and a little bit quicker. And they didn't like that. They didn't like the fact that I was willing to do that. They wanted me to just sit there in that truck and not do anything. I couldn't do it. I've always been motivated to do my best at whatever job I have. I really needed to do something, and setting on my ass wasting company money wasn't working for me. I just can't do that. I try to have good strong morals and values, but I would work with people now that don't have any, you know. They'll sit there for 8 hours a day and not do anything and then complain because someone said something to them, you know, when they had to answer the phone. Well, your job is to answer the phone.

When I went back to school then, and took my first classes, well, I realized I could do it. I just needed to set my mind to it, you know. I am one of those people that if I set my mind to it I am going to do it. Don't tell me that I can't, I'm going to show you that I can. And that's what I had to do was get to that point in my mind where I can do this. This isn't too hard, just buck up and do it. So that's what I had to do. There were some things that were difficult. I'm not one of those who find math easy. It was something I had to work on. It was just a matter of I needed to buck up and do it. When I did make myself do it, I found out that I was able to do it. Twenty-four years ago I didn't think I was able to do it. You know, didn't want to do it, and didn't have the drive, so it taught me that there is a drive there, that I am smart enough to do it, and I have the ability to do it if I wanted to. I just need to put my mind to it because I'm already motivated. That was the biggest motivation – not

wanting to be on disability for the rest of my life. I was never one to sit around and not do anything or want a free handout. I'm not that type. I want to work for my living; I want to do it myself. You know, I've got a family to support. I want to do what I have to in order to make my family happy. My family was a big motivator. They were telling me that I could do it; they were behind me - they were proud of me. They were happy that I was doing it because I had preached to my kids that education was important, and here I had no education and was preaching to them! It was like walking the talk; I had to step up to that plate as well. If you say you're going to do something, you follow through and you give the best shot that you can. Give them 100%. I will always give 100%. I didn't do that in school at all before. In high school I was all for the party, and it's not that I couldn't do it. I've always been the type that if you want me to show you what I can do then I'll show you. You know, I'll show you what I can do, and I'm pretty good at it, but you've got to give me that charge and that was the biggest thing. Once I show you, I don't need that piece of paper. If someone had challenged me back in the day, maybe I…back then it was do whatever you want to do, you'll live. That was my philosophy – whatever. I didn't really have a care – whatever. I'll do it later. Because I didn't have the charge in me, I didn't have that reason, I didn't have that desire.

Now I'm a first generation college student. My sister is a beautician, but other than that nobody in my immediate family other than her has got a college degree. College wasn't necessarily spoken about, and when I went to elementary school and high school it wasn't the main plan that you were going to go to college. That wasn't there at all. We were blue collar, and you work in the factory. That was what I was going to do. Now that I've

completed my degree, I'm glad I did it. Kind of glad I stepped up to the plate and wanted to do it. And I know now that put a challenge in front of me, and I'll do it.

It's increased my belief about me and my self-confidence. I'm hoping I can use my degree! I just need to get to that point to get out and working and hopefully I can design the houses and remodel jobs that are out there, whatever. I graduated in May and then enrolled again in May. Got my degree in graphic technology and now I'm going for architectural. Once I get done with this, I'm done. Once I get out of this one, I don't think I'll continue on. I need to get back in the workforce. I've been that high school and college student long enough. It's been three years!

Structural Description

School was not a high priority for Caleb in high school. He enjoyed the social aspect of high school but did little in trying to excel at the high school level. Displaying what some would determine to be the "typical adolescent mind-set" regarding high school, Caleb didn't see importance in an education; he would rather be working and bringing in an income to support his interest of cars and other things young adolescents deem to be the cornerstones of life. Unfortunately, Caleb experienced an accident later in his life that left him with a brain injury and the prospect of living on disability for the rest of his life. One of the personality aspects that Caleb did possess is determination – a mindset that "I can do anything that I put my mind to". After the accident, when Caleb was faced with not being able to even accomplish manual labor tasks, he was faced with a future that was not what he imagined for himself. Caleb is a driven, determined, and passionate individual who takes life as it comes, generally. As a young man he was a free-spirited, easygoing individual who enjoyed the social aspects of life and living life to its fullest. At the same time, he viewed himself as

moderately intelligent, mainly due to the fact that he didn't have an interest in school and had therefore never put forth the effort it may have required for him to be a successful student.

Caleb had dually registered as a high school student with the local technical center for drafting classes when he dropped out of high school. Although he would have received a chance for learning a trade skill free of charge through his high school coop agreement, he didn't have any interest and could not see the long-term impact and benefits of this education. When faced with a future in which he may have to rely on assistance from a government agency to provide him disability pensions, Caleb began to consider the options he might have available to him. He began to consider getting an education in a trade or field that would interest him rather than just settle for the next job available with his limited abilities due to his injuries. Considering his options caused him to reflect on his previous educational experience. A lot of self doubt arose. He began to reflect on his abilities as a student when he was in high school. Due to his previous mindset regarding education and the lack of a desire to commit to it, Caleb had serious doubts about his ability to be successful in gaining his GED or even beginning or completing college. His previous educational experiences had not been the most rewarding, and his grades did not reflect his true knowledge due to his lack of motivation and desire to complete high school. Serious doubts crept into his considerations – was he going to be able to do this? Was he smart enough? These questions lingered as he decided to first attempt his GED and determine if that course of action was even an option.

After taking the initial GED pre-test, Caleb realized that he had potential in the educational arena. He decided to take the official GED exam and passed. This led to an increase in his self-esteem and in his personal belief that he could possibly attempt college

and be successful. Fortunately, Caleb also had the support of his family. His wife had been a college student, and due to his maturity gained through life experience, he realized how important education really was in regard to finding a position in life that affords an individual personal satisfaction and happiness. He was constantly relating to his children that getting an education would provide options in life and lead to happiness. When he realized after his accident that he would have to consider education – as he had always "preached" to his children – the fear of not being successful in his children's eyes was very daunting to him. He had to find the courage to take the step and deliver some actions that would coincide with his own expressed beliefs and demonstrate to his family that he could follow through on his own advice.

When Caleb enrolled in college, he found it to be very rewarding in the sense that he was setting out to conquer a goal and at the same time be a positive role model to his family and be able to provide for them once again in the future. What he didn't expect was the responsibility, accountability, and commitment level that it took to learn the information in the coursework. He initially began to tackle his homework as he had in high school. He saw it as something that needed to be completed but that he would complete it on his own terms – when he found the time to fit it in to his schedule. He soon learned that this method of addressing the issues to be successful was not going to work. He states that he still did not see education as this exciting, interesting area. What he saw education to be was his way out of living on disability for the rest of his life and as a means of proving himself – both to himself and to others. With this personal understanding of what education could provide for him, he attached more value to the experience. With this realization, he saw the opportunity

to not only conquer a personal fear of failure but also to comprehend a more promising future for himself and his family.

One reason for Caleb's choice of the community college was directly related to the fact that he struggled with the idea that he could be successful. He didn't want to waste his money at a more expensive four-year institution if he was not able to do the required work and pass the classes. The other reason for choosing the community college was due to the fact that Caleb knew what occupation he wanted to attempt to work in, and it did not require a four-year bachelor's degree. He didn't see any value in attempting a four-year when he could reach his new goal of getting a job in the development and construction of new houses and remodeling jobs with a two-year associate's degree. Caleb clearly was involved in the decision-making process of defining his own future after the injury that did not allow him to continue in his former job. He seriously and consciously reviewed his situation and his thoughts concerning his predicament and conducted a holistic consideration of his life at the time. He took into consideration his desires, his future earnings prospects, his needs regarding providing for his family while he completed his college education, and above all, his personal identity needs. Who did he want to be when this was all over? A man of his word who accomplishes what he sets out to do? Was he up to the challenge? These questions and more were very serious considerations for Caleb as he began the process of redefining himself personally and professionally.

Caleb's educational transformation in relation to relearning *how* to study began with his receptiveness to the instructors at the community college. A major aspect of Caleb's identity is his determination to prove to others that no matter what they may think about him negatively, he can show them that he can handle whatever challenge he may be presented

with. When he began college, he approached it with this same determination. In the community college environment, he realized that he was a respected individual and did not feel intimidated by the staff and faculty in regards to his age or competency. He felt very welcomed and was able to ask for assistance and not feel embarrassed. This led to a major increase in his motivation and desire to be successful.

His motivation and drive to accept the challenge and go on to college after getting his GED were not only increased by his interactions and support from the staff and faculty at the community college, but also largely by his family support. Caleb's wife had attended college and was familiar with the process and the expectations; his children were inspired by watching Caleb as he began college as he provided a reinforcement of the importance of education through his own actions. Caleb has very strong ethical considerations regarding doing the best that he can and accepting any challenge that comes along, and he demonstrated this value through his perseverance toward enrolling in college, attending his courses and completing his college degree.

Caleb's willingness, desire, and drive to move past his GED and complete a college degree have provided him with additional growth and insight into his own character and personality. When he first began even the GED attempt, he wasn't sure of whether or not he could be successful; he had never challenged himself academically in his past educational experiences. When he realized that he would either need to remain on disability for the rest of his life or attempt to find another career in which he could gain employment and enjoy his duration as an employee in a field that he found interesting, he knew that he would have to make some changes and face some challenges. These challenges and accomplishments gave him insight into just how motivated, inspired and diligent he could be about achieving his

goals. The process of gaining a higher education degree afforded him the ability to gain self-confidence and newfound respect in his abilities. He has become increasingly assured that he will be able to be a productive member of society – providing expertise relating to house design and remodel and enjoying the benefit of helping others while he spends the duration of his life in employment that he is proud of and through which he can provide for and meet the financial needs of his family.

Although Caleb has gained monumentally from his educational experience, he also is strongly aware that he needs to be gainfully employed and can't continue on his educational adventure indefinitely. His goal is to finish a final certificate after his degree and begin looking for employment. The rewards and benefits of education to him are that he can now be employed in a field he enjoys rather than settle for a job to minimally pay the bills. Now that he has realized and nearly achieved his educational goals, he has no further desire to continue in the educational arena for the sake of education. His next dream of becoming employed in his chosen field is now his motivator; once he completes his final certificate, he is hoping to move into employment and satisfaction from completing a job for which he is well educated and where he knows he can gain personal and financial success.

Composite Textural-Structural Synthesis: Essential Themes and Invariant Structures

The process of initiating, proceeding through and completing an education affords the potential for a tremendous amount of growth; it is nearly impossible for an individual to experience the decision making procedure and process of transitioning through an unknown occurrence without the result of ultimate and intimate change. The purpose of this study was to define the essence of the experience of the participants of this research study who had completed a GED and gone on to accomplish a college degree. The transition experience for

each participant in this research study was one that allowed for tremendous growth. These areas of growth included aspects relating to both personal and socio-economic understandings. Their individual views on the varying aspects of the transition experience allowed for both congruence and difference on the individual themes which emerged within this research. An analysis of the participant's descriptions of their transition experiences revealed the interactions as a thematic structure composed of unique insight into individual personal growth. The personal insights into the area of growth through transition were impacted by substructures that were comprised of unique characteristics which contributed to the experience's overall understanding of both personal and professional development. Analysis of the participant's narrated experiences defined the following substructures as those which contributed to the transition experience: (a) regard for education, (b) personal levels of motivation, (c) persistence and self-efficacy stance, and (d) perceived quality of life.

Regard for education. The importance that each participant placed on acquiring a college education directly impacted the desire for each of these participants to begin their college experience after completing their GED. Although many individuals who complete their GED believe that they have reached their highest educational aspirations, others have a desire to go on and achieve a college degree due to their beliefs that a college education opens more doors and provides the potential for greater economic status and stability. For each of these participants, the belief that a college education would provide a better life for both themselves and their family was a significant motivator to decide to transition into the community college. Each of these who had high regard for education had an understanding that knowledge is power and that with an increase in knowledge, there would be better pay and that they in turn could provide better for their families and be working in an area of

expertise of which they were comfortable and enjoyed their career of choice. Participants

described their thoughts concerning education and how it impacted their decisions to alter

their lives and begin a college education.

> Sierra: Education is very important to be successful in life. That refers to everything, because you have to have an education to be successful in everything that you do, to advance in your job, but also to learn more about yourself.

> Belinda: Education to me means more knowledge, getting further ahead in life. I want to be able to make money and work.

> Matthew: Education to me is something that was taken away at a young age. I was only allowed to go to grade 9 so it's something very important. What I want to say is that education is extremely important because it's so important to the understanding what's going on, your ability to cope with the world, your ability to land a job. It's about learning. Learning is something everybody should want to do. You don't want to become stagnant. I've always wanted to be a lifelong learner…

> Meredith: Education is a sense of security for me; job placement. I have a better possibility of getting a good job if I have an education. I plan on furthering my education; I want to go all the way, as far as I can. I would like to get my doctorate eventually.

> Ronnie: Education is critical to me. We are always learning something new every day and you can't really put a price on education. It's really that important and education is basically the best thing out there right now, especially in the economy.

> Caleb: Education, right now, means more than anything. Twenty four years ago it didn't mean anything – it was just a piece of paper. I didn't think I needed it; didn't want it. But now I've seen what it does for me and it's a completely different atmosphere now.

Each of the participants placed a high value on education based on what their

life experiences had led them to believe. An increased level of motivation directly

correlated with the high value placed on acquiring a college degree. Even though

most of them did not receive their degree until their later adult years, they all, with the

exception of one, had the desire when they completed their GED to make an immediate transition into the community college setting. Those who had some major life altercations stressed how important the college degree was to not only their self-esteem but to their value as an employee or future contributor to society. They each had an understanding that the college degree would place them at a higher earning status and that they would not need to struggle as much financially once they complete their degree. For some it was truly a matter of seeing the value in being employed in a field that you enjoyed and experiencing a career rather than just meeting basic needs for themselves and for their families. For most of these participants, once they received their GED, they were immediately evaluating the avenue by which they would pursue higher education. For the majority of the participants, gaining their college degree by choosing the community college was simply due to proximity, cost and goals.

> Sierra: …it was more because it was close and the classes were easier to get to. And they just worked around my schedule. I wasn't familiar with college, so I chose to go to the one I heard the most about that was close and I could try to afford.

> Matthew: I chose to go to the community college first and foremost due to cost. It was extremely expensive of course to go to a university, and you know I didn't want to have to get into taking out a bunch of student loans. The retraining programs that were allowed for us had limited funds, and the community college was about the only route available that would go up to two years of schooling and be able to pay for the college completely without having any money come out of our own pockets. So I had funding. We were allowed to have two years of unemployment and two years of schooling. They paid for the tuition, they paid for the books, and they paid us gas money. Plus we got unemployment for two years. So I ended up getting a free ride to college and having enough income to survive anyway.

Ronnie: This is basically how I got started on the college process: I had a brain injury, so I had to deal with state people. So basically I got hold of what they call a provider which helps me out when I need help and so forth. So I got to talking to her and said, "You know, I don't want to be like this forever, so I need to start thinking about college as I need something to do other than sit around with my head on my chin." So it's like that started the ball rolling. I got on the computer at home, got on line, checked out the college's website, and searched through the information, and I got an email back from an advisor, and then I came in for a meeting, and one thing led to another, and the next thing I know I am attending the community college in the fall of 2006. The community college really helped make the process smooth.

Caleb: I chose to go to the community college because…well, it was just one of those things where I knew I couldn't go on to the university. I knew I wasn't going to do the four years, I just needed an education to get me started was the only reason I chose the community college. It wasn't necessarily that it was closer or more convenient; it was just what I needed.

The participants each had a reason for selecting the community college as their choice for beginning their education – whether it was out of fear that they would not be successful at a four- year, or that they just needed the two-year degree to meet their goals; that the community college provided the least expensive means of gaining a college degree or that it was the closest to accommodate family and job; each of these participants realized that the community college offered them the possibility of the realization of a dream.

Personal levels of motivation. Participants described their levels of motivation in regard to even being able to attempt or begin the college process. Each of the participants stressed the fact that they were very motivated once they had decided to attempt college. For a variety of reasons, each of the participants knew that with the understanding that education was important, they were at a time in their lives where they needed to make a change, and that time was now. The motivation factor came from several areas, both internally and

externally. For some, their family was their motivator; for others, their own desire to better themselves or to provide an avenue for enrichment of their minds was the central motivator.

> Sierra: I wanted to be a leader for my children because I wanted them to go to school and not have to have, you know, the suffering you have to go through when you don't have an education and are trying to get a job. You just want them to be successful, and if I can do it then they can do it. My husband had cancer and then soon after that my son had brain surgery, a brain tumor, so we had gone through all that personal stuff, and I was in the health care field and was ready to do something different. So I thought if I can go through that then I can go and learn some new skills to do something else.

> Belinda: I was determined because I had four kids and didn't want them to see me have to go through school like my parents did or how I had to see my parents. My kids are three and one, and so they're not going to remember me going through RN school; they're not going to remember me being gone all the time and the late hours and not getting to go see their recitals or games or whatever because I finished now. Not interfering with being able to live our lives. I remember that with my parents and how they missed times in my life.

> Matthew: Since I had to drop out, I just really wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. I have always had to prove myself to everybody because, you know, sometimes people look down on those who don't have a high school diploma, stuff like that. So I decided when the plant closed that I wanted to go back to school.

> Meredith: There was a difference of about a month between the time I got my GED and started college. Just something came over me that said I needed to do this. And I just went down there with no hesitation and did it. It wasn't due to a loss of job or anything like that. No…I have a good job, I had a good job. But I could have a better job.

> Ronnie: My motivation for going back to school was to help my memory, and as I got better at school with my memory issues, I thought, "Hey, I can do this".

> Caleb: My motivation for going back to school was so I didn't have to go on disability. When I hurt myself three years ago, they were ready to put me on disability, and I said, "I've still got a brain". That was my cue to go back to school and better myself.

These associate degree completers decided that getting a college education would allow them to reach their prospective dreams. The meaning behind gaining the degree was very unique for each individual, as is true of most college graduates. For many who aspire to gain a college degree, it is a natural flow after high school. However, for these GED graduates who decided to further pursue higher education, the acquisition of a college degree meant a deep influence of growth within them that allowed them – in their own personal beliefs – to be better individuals and provide better for those significant individuals in their lives.

Persistence. It is important to identify goals in order to determine the necessary requirements for achieving those goals. When individuals have a high level of efficacy for acquiring the things they deem important in their lives, they believe that no matter what they face or what difficulties cross their paths, they are going to overcome the struggles and move forward toward their much desired goal. Persistence is a key tool for moving forward with their high levels of self-efficacy and achieving the goals they have formulated.   For most of the GED completers who decided to continue on for a college degree, persistence was a key factor in their success. The ability to persist through difficult situations when they added a course load and commitment to attending classes, homework, and study time was evident for each of the participants interviewed in this study. Each had overcome difficult struggles in their lives prior to attending college, and quite possibly these struggles had prepared them for the rigor and responsibility that is necessary to pursue a college degree. These participants had proceeded through the college experience with commitment, accountability, and a strong desire to be successful – in other words, high levels of self-efficacy. They each had to find within themselves something that would push them forward – to persevere.

Sierra: I didn't doubt myself or my capabilities when I did decide to go back because before I went back to school I went through a lot of…just a lot, and I figured if I can go through that, then I can go through anything so I might as well go back to school. My husband had cancer and then soon after that my son had brain surgery, a brain tumor, so we had gone through personal stuff, and I was in the health care field, and I was ready to do something different. So I thought if we can go through that then I can go and learn some new skills to do something else.

Belinda: When I went through [college] I actually finished my RN up here, and when I was going through [I thought] I've never failed at anything. You know, I had to feel equipped for…and I'd have to push it harder. I'd think, "Oh, my gosh," and I've never failed at anything so I'm not going to this time. It was really challenging, and I would study like crazy. As I said, I've never failed at anything, and I'm not going to this time. And so I put in the work and all those long hours before and after class and staying up late at night all that and got it done. I guess I just used my determination.

Matthew: When I started college, I mean, I knew I could handle anything like that – everybody has little doubts come to mind…Well, I knew I would be really good at the physical components, but I knew I wouldn't be very good at things like art and music. So…I took a couple classes after my GED and got hooked and wanted to take more classes. I had loved school. Since I had to drop out, I just really wanted to prove to myself and prove to everybody else that I could do it.

Meredith: I had no idea whether I could do this or not. I always knew what I wanted to do with my life, but I just didn't know how to do it. I had a tough time regarding my family when I first started back at college. I thought I was taking time away from my son by doing it. I almost stopped because I thought that, but in the long run, I knew it was the best thing and that he would understand why I was doing what I was doing. I'd have to say that wanting to please my sister impacted my education. Definitely, I wanted her to be proud. When I saw her go through it, I felt that maybe that was something I could do. I'm very stubborn. I don't give up easily. I'm persistent.

Ronnie: My first term at the community college, I thought about quitting really hard. I really did. But then I thought I've never been a quitter I'm not going to quit; I mean, I felt bad enough I only had my GED when I could have had my diploma.

Caleb: My philosophy on homework was, "I'll get to it whenever". That was my biggest fear was doing the homework and getting to where

I'd have time to do everything and want to do it. The fact that I didn't
want to go on disability forced me to do it. I didn't want to fight them –
do I really want to fight to get disability, or did I just want to continue
on? I wanted to give myself a chance to make my life better in more
ways than one. Do I want to stay at home and not do anything half my
life? Or do I want to go out and better myself? I've still got a brain,
and I don't need to ruin that was the biggest thing. This isn't too hard;
just buck up and do it.

These participants found it within themselves to persevere – whether it was due to

previous struggle that had given them some experience with how to deal with difficulties, or

a sense of beating failure when staring it in the face. Each of the participants demonstrated a

strong desire to begin the process, and an even stronger desire, once placed in the situation of

achieving their educational goals, to come out on the other side successfully. Many of the

participants realized their own strength and ability to commit and persevere when they found

themselves meeting deadlines, taking exams, and finding resources on campus that would

allow them to reach their goals.   The high levels of self-efficacy and commitment to

persevere within these individuals were so elevated when they began that it moved them

through the process and on to reaching their goal of acquiring a degree from the community

college. Motivation and desire along with an understanding of each individual's self-efficacy

levels and persistence commitments were key elements that helped to inspire each of these

individuals to decide to pursue college. They each personally had to come to an

understanding of these traits within themselves to allow them to make that commitment to

education and ultimately, a better quality of life. For some, the understanding had been

inherent for a length of time; for others, it was acquired through life experiences that left

them pondering their futures and their personal characteristics. For all, these were the

integral components required for changing their lives for their ultimate personal gratification

and satisfaction.

Perceived quality of life. Each of the individuals within this study came to the realization

and understanding at some point when considering higher education that a college degree

would provide a better quality of life for themselves and their families. They each had an

expressed awareness that if they could continue their education, they would be able to be a

positive role model for their families and that, in turn, their families would realize that

education is important and a key to a life with less struggles and better quality. Two of the

participants were working in jobs that they considered to be average and providing for

meeting the needs of their families; however, both of these participants believed that if they

would pursue higher education, they would be able to provide an even higher quality of life

for themselves and/or their families.

> Ronnie: You have to realize, I worked at Hormel Foods for over ten years
> and it's like I was already making over $50,000 a year. I really didn't need
> a college education, but after the car wreck it made me think, "Hey, I'm
> going to need something," so I wanted something to help me with my
> memory too, and so that's why I decided to go back.

> Meredith: [Going to college] wasn't a matter of I couldn't find a job, but
> rather I could have done better. And then I had my son, and I wanted him
> to be proud of me instead of me being at a job that was not going to get me
> anywhere in life. So I decided one day, I went in and signed up for my
> GED, took the test and before I knew it, I was in college. I don't know,
> something just came over me that said I needed to do this. And I just went
> down there and did it. It wasn't due to loss of a job or anything like that.
> No…I have a good job; I had a good job. But I could have had a better job.

Other participants came to the realization that college was important through a major

life crisis or job loss. However, as discussed previously, these individuals had high levels of

self-efficacy and perseverance that allowed them to even consider taking on the challenge of

higher education. Major health crises of two individuals challenged their character and

integrity and provoked them to face the health challenges and make a major decision that

would impact the future of themselves and their families. Each of these participants arrived

at the understanding of their own personal integrity and challenged themselves to meet the

requirements and rigor of attempting college and acquiring a degree. One participant even

experienced some resistance from family members as he evaluated his need for an education

and for what it could provide for himself in his future. However, his need to feel more

confident and gain more from life had overridden the negative ideation that his family

provided, and he decided to commit to a future of living rather than just settling.

> Ronnie: [Going to college] was good because it kept my brain focused, you
> know, and it put me back in that enjoyment mode. I lost that mode for
> basically four years because I started to believe basically what my doctors
> were telling me and what my family were saying that, "You should just be
> lucky that you're breathing and walking," because there for a while I could
> read a book five times and still not remember everything…My neurologist
> told me the that the best thing that would help my brain and my memory
> issues would be constantly reading and reading, so then I took the initiative
> to go back to school.

Another participant, Caleb, decided to pursue college after a major health issue as well and

had the full support of his family to encourage him to meet the challenges and pursue his

educational goals for a higher quality of life.

> Caleb: When I hurt myself three years ago, they were ready to put me on
> disability, and I said, "I've still got a brain." That was my cue to go back
> to school and better myself. I didn't even have a GED at the time. So it
> was get over it and get on with it. Here I was without even a high school
> education. Because I had dropped out of school and didn't think I needed
> that until I got hurt and then couldn't even do the manual labor that didn't
> need an education. So I thought well, I better find something to do. Once I
> made up my mind I needed to do something, I did it. I just came up with it
> on my own. I was going to drive a school bus, and then I was like, "Why
> do I want to drive a school bus? Why do I just want to find a job?" That's

when I realized I wanted to better myself, and that's when I went to the college to see about getting into school and getting my GED.

For several of the participants, education was something they had valued from an early age, but for a variety of reasons they each had believed that they could not attempt or commit to college after what would have been the completion of their high school years because of their life situations at the time. These individuals had kept the notion that school was important and would gain them both economic and personal sustenance. Only once they had come to the realization that now was the time that they could commit did they finally take the steps to make their goals a reality.

> Matthew: What I want to say is education is extremely important because it's so important to the understanding what's going on, your ability to cope with the world, your ability to land a job. It's about learning. Learning is something everybody should want to do. You don't want to become stagnant. I've always wanted to be a lifelong learner, even when I had gone to work at Maytag which kind of eliminated the possibility of going to college. When I worked the swing-shift which at the time then I couldn't really go to college because they didn't have online classes or anything like that. So when we got to the situation where they were closing the plant down, we were offered retraining benefits, and I ended up going into a job that totally paid GED, and no real background in factory work and custodial work are actually not that great and acquiring anything decent as far as wages and as far as, you know, finding something that I really enjoy. So I decided when the plant closed that I wanted to go back to school.

> Sierra: I really decided to go to college just because I wanted to learn more skills because all the jobs ask for computer skills at the very least and wanted you to have computer skills on all the applications, and I didn't, and I knew I needed help in that department. I know I started out just wanting to learn so much and to do something better with my life, but it's kind of switched to more of a lifelong learning process…I want to keep going! I want to get a job that I can be at long-term and maybe retire from. And when I was in nursing before there was a lot of lifting, and I didn't want to do lifting for the rest of my life. I wanted to do something else.

Realizing that education would provide a better life for the participants as well as their families, they chose to take the time at the moment in their lives when they were at a crossroads and take the leap of courage that is necessary to commit to something as rigorous as college.

Invariant Structures

The assumption that an essence, or invariant constituents, exists within the lived experiences of those who have progressed through a similar situation is the foundation of phenomenological research. Although each of the individual participants had some variation with their experiences when considered in relation to all, their narrations revealed common themes throughout the structure of their transition experience. These themes were repeated in the substructures and were viewed in terms of personal growth and development within the transition experience. The themes were: (a) participant's desire for personal growth, (b) participant's ability to feel engaged, (c) participant's fear of failure and disappointing family and society, and (d) participant's increase in levels of self-efficacy. This researcher analyzed each of these interrelated themes and gleaned from them the essence or invariant structures of the transition experience. The invariant structures that emerged from this research study and the analysis of the narratives was the interrelationship among the research constituents of the desire for personal growth, feeling engaged and valued at the institution, the fear of failure, and an ultimate increase in their own professed levels of self-efficacy.

Personal growth. Life experiences provide an excellent venue for individual personal growth. For many, working through difficult life transitions can be a platform for building self-esteem levels and increasing understanding of individual human potential. The basis for positive psychology stresses that it is vitally important to focus on our strengths and positive

outcomes of difficult life situations and transitions, allowing us to reach optimal functioning and increase our quality of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Research shows that many individuals demonstrate tenacious resilience in the aftermath of adversity, and the result of this is tremendous personal growth (Schaefer & Moos, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Growth enhances both personal resources, such as increased self-esteem, more connectedness with social resources and development of new coping skills, as well as changes in life philosophies including deeper levels of spirituality, redefined priorities and a greater appreciation of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For the participants in this research study, going to college after acquiring a GED was a perceived difficult life transition experience. These participants had little guidance from others as most of these individuals were first-generation college students in their families. With the exception of one whose parent attended a technical school and another whose parents went on to college while she was a child, the majority of these participants had neither experienced nor been explained to the process or expectations of the higher education environment. Therefore, the difficulty of this transition experience created some adverse issues that they had to overcome in order to complete their degrees. For many of the participants, learning how to study, how to complete homework, how to manage time effectively and efficiently and how to interact with the educational environment were very critical learning curves for which they had to adjust. As they maneuvered through the educational environment, each of the participants discussed how this process had uniquely changed them. This is not an uncommon experience, as most who proceed through a transition where they are challenged and must re-evaluate their initial purposes to accommodate the process often feel that these difficulties challenged the individual, and ultimately, they experienced growth, improvement of self, and simply

becoming "better individuals" through these life experiences (King, 2001; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Recently, in psychological literature, maturity has been suggested as a positive approach to handling difficult life transitions (King & Hicks, 2007). For most of these participants, maturity might certainly be a critical aspect in defining their goals and developing the stamina, strength and courage to place higher education in their lives in order for them to acquire a better sense of self and experience personal growth.

Ryff and Keyes (1995) theorize that personal growth is a key requisite that defines optimal thriving, along with self-acceptance and positive interactions with others, an increase in autonomy, mastery of an individual's own environment and a foundation for a purposeful life. Ryff (1989) conceptualizes that personal growth reflects specific key engagement in continual development, an openness towards new or novel events and people, and an effortful expansion within individual improvement, with a goal of reaching and acquiring one's highest potential. Each of the participants in this study had fully engaged within their educational environment; this had to also extend into their personal lives and interrelations with their families and other supportive individuals. When they were faced with the challenges of the new, unique educational experience, they had to experience growth in maturation in the immediate areas of coping, critical thinking, and evaluation of their life circumstances at those integral points.   Learning to turn to others for support, ask critical questions and gain new understanding of how to accomplish tasks within a determined amount of time permitted the implementation and adaptation of new coping strategies for these individuals that allowed for growth and expansion in their previous thought processing lending, to new areas of maturation and intellectual development of personal growth.

Engagement. The ability to feel connected to an institution and therefore valued within an individual's environment can increase the potential for personal growth and cultivate the desire for success. McInnis and James (1995) expanded this notion of 'connectedness' to formulate into an understanding of engagement which they see as a vital component to overcoming obstacles hindering transition and integration. Student engagement is considered to be one of the more significant indicators of learning and personal development. In 2001, Kuh coined the most widely used definition of student engagement:

> Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices. (Kuh et al., 2008, 542)

Zhao and Kuh (2004) emphasize this notion with the awareness that generation of knowledge is actively constructing and assimilating content understanding through a process that is reciprocal among the student, teacher and peers and that "as a result the learning is deeper, more personally relevant and becomes a part of who the student is, not something the student has" (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, 116).

Corno and Mandinach (1983) were among the first to define and provide an example for cognitive student engagement. These researchers proposed that when a student maintained prolonged attention to a difficult task that was mentally challenging and this intense attention resulted in authentic learning and increased levels of higher order thinking, the student was considered engaged in the process. Conrad and Donaldson (2004) maintain that a result of high levels of student engagement is critical thinking, which allows the student to learn effectively and maintain high levels of cognition. Students who get involved with the information

and manipulate the information in such a way that it is integrated into their cognitions through their personal learning style will be able to recall the information easily. The participants in this study talked extensively about the methods which they had to employ in order to retain the information they were learning in their coursework. The more engaged they were the better their grades and, ultimately, their personal development due to an increase in knowledge. Richardson and Newby (2006) defined cognitive engagement as integrating and utilizing students' motivations and personal learning strategies throughout the course of their learning. As students become more involved in the process of learning, whether it is through independent study skills or through interactions with instructors who demonstrate empathy and effective teaching strategies, the students gain more knowledge and retain that knowledge extensively. Many of the participants related that they had purposefully sought out instructors who were more student-friendly and had comfortable mannerisms that demonstrated empathy and caring. The students also wanted to do the best they could in those classes to clearly show the instructors that they were intelligent and capable individuals. When these students perceived that the instructors believed in them and that they believed their abilities were high, they tended to excel in their educational pursuits. Hidi and Renninger (2006) state that initial interest in learning is thought to be triggered by the individual student's personal relevance he or she places on the learning, and that continued interest is sustained by personal involvement and the meaning the student places on the task. If students find the task meaningful and purposeful, they are inclined to maintain interest and develop their intelligence. It appears that these significant areas are the

two critical aspects that maintain engagement of the student over time (Mitchell, 1993). Students who are more involved in the educational process - seeking out specific instruction from teachers and manipulating the information according to their learning style – develop more understanding and knowledge. The more students receive feedback and recognition from instructors on their educational development, the more adept they will become (Kuh, 2003). With the exception of one, each of the participants in this study relayed that they consistently interacted with instructors during their time in the higher education environment. This reinforcement allowed them to believe that they had the abilities, the determination necessary, and that they were proceeding on the right track to their success. The instructors and staff at the community college had provided these participants with valuable feedback that impacted their understanding of what was required and allowed them to feel both engaged and valued in their educational endeavors. When summarizing their experiences at the community college, each of the participants relayed that the instructors and staff at the community college had become like family. For most, ending their time at the community college and graduating with their degree was a very melancholy occasion for them as they had fully integrated the staff and instructors and the learning experience into their lives. Knowing that these individuals who had supported them and connected with them on a profound level as they transitioned through a major life experience would no longer be a part of their daily lives was disheartening and brought about a sense of sadness and loss – opposing sentiments to the feelings of excitement and accomplishment they were experiencing as they were graduating with a college degree.

Fear of failure. Realizing that the opposite of success is failure is many times a responsiveness that keeps individuals from pursuing and reaching their goals. Research supports the suggestion that the intense fear of failure leads an individual to adopt avoidance-achievement goals (Conroy & Elliot, 2004). Avoidance-achievement goals have been linked to an array of undesirable consequences which include increased negative physical symptoms, inferior performance, and overall negative or nonexistent engagement in a task (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Murray (1938) initially coined the term *infavoidance* and defined it as a need for college-aged individuals to avoid failure. Classic achievement motivation researchers expanded on this approach and defined the fear of failure as a motive (Elliot, 1997).

Inauguration of a new adventure that is foreign in many avenues can cause an individual to question his or her abilities and simply establish a separation from their initial identity. Goffman (1952) states that becoming disengaged from the familiar in a particular social situation or identity can occur in several ways. Within this variety of means, it is the involuntary loss that critically damages the self-esteem, and from this loss an individual may experience an ultimate and "profound embarrassment" (p. 461). In relation to an individual deciding to expand his or her current life situation and begin to devise a future in which the individual can achieve goals and experience success, Gottman (1952) states that:

> acquiring a new social status or commitment requires commitment to a new
> self-concept. New transitions such as these compose a common social story:
> A person moves into a new social position and redefines him or herself as
> worthy of that role. A person may desire to relinquish the position and
> therefore "lose" the associated identity. But it is the involuntary loss that

poses the greatest risk. Once a person makes a commitment to a self-concept

then proves to be unqualified, he has defined himself as possessing a certain

set of qualities and then proven to himself that he is miserably lacking in

them. This is a process of self-destruction of the self. (p. 452)

Failure is deemed by many to be the ultimate painful vulnerability that one can

expose to another. Many individuals may experience failure in their lifetimes, and the result

of these experiences is lowered self-esteem, decrease in their own beliefs of self-worth and

may lead - many times – ultimately to catastrophic thought processing and a resolution to

relinquish goals or pursuits. The participants in this study unanimously exclaimed that the

fear of failure was both a potential hindrance and a motivator when deciding to pursue a

college degree after obtaining their GED.   This fear of failure may have been what initially

kept some of the participants from both completing their high school education and pursuing

a college degree. All of the participants proclaimed that the word "failure" has an extremely

negative connotation to each of them personally. Each of the participants in this study

expressed a quintessential fear of failure, and many articulated that failure was something

they simply would not accept. These proclamations of the negative effects of failure in

regard to the participants can be understood to be a major motivator for each of them to be

successful. For them, failure was simply not an option and they pursued higher education

with such a vengeance that there was little room for self-reservations and negativity. When

these negative thoughts crept into their cognitions, the participants relied on personal

strengths and newly developed insights into the college expectations to guide them through

the difficult experiences. When they struggled with coursework or acquired less than

adequate results on a test, these individuals consulted with staff and faculty, re-evaluated their study strategies and worked with others to strengthen this area, and ultimately revised their methods in order to achieve the desired results. Experiencing these minute "failures" motivated them to alter their performances in a more positive direction and ultimately avoid overall failure.

Self-efficacy: Research shows that when individuals set specific, challenging, and achievable goals and have high levels of self-efficacy, they can expect to have high levels of success within their tasks. After completing such tasks, individuals will evaluate their performance against the initially set goal to determine the level of success of the task (Locke & Latham, 1990). For many, the achievement of a goal or performance of a task is directly related to their previous levels of success and performance. When an individual has either previously experienced a negative result, or has had no experience with the impending task, there may be doubt and fear of failure as a result, which can impede the success of the task or goal. Goals that are specific and challenging and in which the individual believes success can be attained may contribute to higher levels of task performance if the commitment is sustained (Locke & Latham, 2002). Self-efficacy – or one's beliefs in their own abilities to successfully perform a necessary task for a specific purpose - has been found to directly relate to task performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Research shows that the level of persistence and amount of effort that an individual is willing to invest in a task is directly related to the level of self-efficacy an individual possesses; therefore, those with increased levels of self-efficacy perform tasks with a higher level of task related performance success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Early research performed by Bandura (1982) on self-efficacy revealed that individuals who reported higher levels of self-efficacy led to the prediction of

more successful task performance outcomes. Individuals develop their personal beliefs regarding their abilities based on past experiences and responses to specific task situations. Those who have had positive experiences in the past tend to be reassured of their abilities and possess high self-efficacy in regard to believed task outcomes. Hall and Foster (1977) propose that individuals who have experienced success in previous goal attainment are more likely to achieve success in their future goals. Conversely, those who have experienced failure when attempting to reach particular goals may be predisposed to more negative beliefs about their abilities and less confident about task performance and therefore may lack commitment to any similar future goals.

With the exception of one, the participants in this study had each proclaimed that they had negative experiences with education in regard to getting their GED. For the one exception, school had been a very exciting, interesting and motivational experience. However, due to his family financial situation, he was forced to drop out of school and help support his family of origin. This was very devastating for him as the love for education and knowledge was perpetually instilled in him. For some, the secondary educational institution was threatening in regards to their feelings of inclusion. For these individuals, their families chose to relocate for one reason or another and the participant believed that there would be minimal connection with others at such a point in life. Two of these participants did not want to get involved in the effort it would take to make new friends and maneuver through the process of fitting in with a new group of individuals. One participant found herself pregnant and had no desire to continue her education in the familiar high school setting when she believed she would be unable to conform simply due to her situation. For another participant in the study, high school was simply "too immature" for the individual. Life was more about

earning an income and supporting himself rather than trying to continue with others in an educational environment that was, to him, immature and demeaning. Only one of the individuals in the study had concerns with his educational *abilities*. He was more concerned with life in general than with completing his high school education, and therefore, he had opted to not continue to pursue his high school diploma. Because of this, he had no interest in school and did not perform to his ultimate abilities. He decided to drop out of high school and begin his employment as an adult. After a life threatening accident that did not allow him to continue in his previous career field, he decided to again pursue his GED and then college. His thoughts, based on his previous experience with education, were negative in regards to his ability to succeed. He realized, after thoughtful reflection, that he really had not employed the effort and considerations needed in order to be successful when he was in high school. In his employment as an adult, he continuously stressed throughout the interview that he was good at what he did and that he knew that when he put his mind to it, he could accomplish his goals successfully. Without exception, this was the thought process that permeated throughout the interviews. Whether it was based on previous educational experience ("I knew I could do well because I had done well in high school. It's just that we moved that I didn't want to continue at a new school") or life experience ("I had made it through some very difficult health situations in my family, and I knew that if I could do that, I could do anything"), each participant had currently high levels of self-efficacy beliefs in that they could accomplish whatever they set their minds to. Ultimately, for each of the participants, the beliefs in themselves and their abilities after going through the post-secondary experience and completing a college degree led to an overwhelmingly universal belief that they could accomplish anything. Each participant professed that now they knew

they could set goals and ultimately achieve them and that they would continue to set goals in life; education opened that door for them occupationally and the educational experience had provided boundless opportunities for them in their increasingly developed positive beliefs in their own self-efficacy.

Discussion

The invariant structures of the transition experience of the GED completers into the community college was an interrelated, inseparable experience among the participants in the constituents of personal growth, college engagement, fear of failure and growth in self-efficacy. These elements permeated all of the participants' revelations in regard to their transition experiences from the GED through the community college experience. Participants defined their levels of personal growth in conjunction with their increased self-efficacy. Because they had grown so much throughout the experience, these individuals had a new-found belief that they could accomplish whatever they put their minds to. Due to their commitments to broadening their horizons, whether it was due to a health crisis, job loss, personal commitment, or a combination of these, all participants totally immersed themselves into the community college experience and committed themselves to engaging in their present in order to develop their future.

For these participants, who were familiar with failures' defects and its structural diminishment of hope, their individual committed goals of implementing positive change in their lives afforded them the ability to overcome their fear of failure – an element that each had overcome in a variety of ways in their lives. As a result of prevailing through overwhelming odds and defeating the construct of failure, the participants each incorporated

increased awareness in themselves and their abilities and positively enhanced their own self-efficacy beliefs.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Summary of the Study

This phenomenological study of the transition experience of GED completers into the

community college was conducted to allow some insight into the experience of the individual

who obtained a GED and who chose to pursue higher education at the community college

and to provide future direction by gaining valuable insight in determining the needs and

expectations of individuals who chose to enter into postsecondary education. Through semi-

structured interviews and open-ended questioning techniques, the participants were able to

present information which the researcher analyzed to determine the complex understandings

that these participants had about their transition experiences into the community college once

they had obtained a GED. Through analysis of the themes and substructures of this research

study, conclusive evidence may support the need to establish future programming that will

provide GED completers the necessary tools to enable them to self-evaluate what the

educational process means to them and therefore, provide the individual with the ability to

make the educational experience a valuable tool toward self-development and personal and

occupational success.

Findings

The findings of this research study supported the assertion that internal and external

factors affect the adult learner who decides to pursue higher education and that there are a

number of challenges that adults must overcome in negotiating the transition into higher

education (Bamber & Tett, 2000). This includes the tenet that for many adults, the higher

education arena is viewed as a method of maximizing and fulfilling an individual's full

potential (Reay, 2002). If students can maneuver through their own personal barriers to

higher education, they may successfully reach their goal of attaining a college degree. These barriers may be negative ideations created from a lack of previous educational success (Ramsay, 2004) construed from personal learning identities which are contradictory, volatile and fragile (Gallacher & Merrill, 2003). This research study revealed several substructures which had a significant impact on how the participants experienced the transition and ultimately their own evaluation of the experience. These substructures were consistent aspects of each participant's framework or structure and were relayed in the composite textural-structural analysis as the individual's (a) regard for education, (b) intrinsic or personal levels of motivation, (c) persistence and self-efficacy stance, and (d) perceived quality of life. Each structure both enabled and supported the individual's transition experience and abilities to pursue higher education and experience success. The essence of the phenomenon of the holistic transition experience of the GED completers into the community college is comprised of four invariant structures: (1) participant's desire for personal growth, (2) participant's ability to feel engaged in the educational process, (3) participant's fear of failure and disappointing family and society, and (4) participant's increase in levels of self-efficacy.

Participants in this study began the transition experience into the community college based on the firm belief that education is integral to personal and professional advancement. Each of the participants identified education as the next step (or missing link) to better opportunities in both educational and personal growth. This substructure is a notion that coincides with the findings of labor market studies which indicate that earning an advanced credential provides a substantial earnings boost for adults (Bailey, Kienzl, & Marcotte, in press: Grubb, 2002; Kienzl, 2004). The participants in this study had either experienced the

negative job or occupational consequence of a health crisis or had decided that their current occupational environment was not meeting their personal needs and they desired to increase their earning potential in order to afford a more highly valued life style. They each spoke of their misgivings with the economy and with their own personal educational backgrounds that did not afford them the ability to pursue jobs with a more lucrative salary. Each of them expressed their own personal understandings that without an education, there would be no advancement into a more beneficial career position. Their frustrations were evident in that they had to make a major life change and personal commitment to increase their employment value and enter into a higher socioeconomic status.

In order to commit to pursuing higher education, each of the participants had to determine their level of motivation. Ormrod (2008) defines motivation in relation to the student as an internal state that arouses learners, steering them in particular directions and allowing for engagement in their educational pursuits. Motivation is typically the indicator of whether and to what extent a student will complete an educational task, especially if what is required for learning is under a student's own control and is voluntary. Motivation is largely responsible if a student continues to perform the task successfully once achieving success initially (Ormrod, 2008). The participants in this study revealed intense levels of motivation which were both internal and external. They each relayed personal motivators that allowed them to find small successes within their ventures and to retain the momentum from these small successes to initiate and propel them through more major successes; for each participant the ultimate goal was completing a college degree. The small successes they fostered included passing tests, completing homework successfully, and getting a passing grade in a course. For some, the successes that fostered their increasing motivation were

realizing that they could juggle a variety of obligations while working on a more monumental goal. These extrinsic motivators allowed participants the ability to find personal or intrinsic motivation. In all instances with these participants, success bred success.

The motivation acknowledged by each of these participants seemed to be fed by the basic personality trait of persistence or their own understanding of their personal self-efficacy – the faith one has in his or her abilities. Pajares (2001) conveys the motivational construct of self-efficacy:

> Self-efficacy beliefs help determine how much effort individuals will expend
>
> on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles and
>
> how resilient they will be in the face of adverse situations. The higher the
>
> sense of self-efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience. (p. 6)

Each of these participants began their educational pursuits with varying levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has been found to directly impact levels of motivation and influence task performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). When an individual has a high belief that he or she will be successful in a task, the chances of that task being performed to completion and at a high level of performance is highly likely. Each of the participants interviewed relayed that once they completed one step successfully, they gained positively in their self-efficacy beliefs. For those who were fearful of the educational arena, once they had completed the initial process, they had gained an increase in motivation to pursue the next step. Several of the participants mentioned that the admissions, financial aid, and registration processes at the community college were very difficult and frustrating. These individuals asked for assistance from someone, either a family member who was familiar with the educational process or from a staff member at the community college. Each of the

participants stated that once they had maneuvered through the difficult situation, either aided or unaided, they learned that they could conquer their fears and frustrations and move on toward their ultimate goal. These increases in self-efficacy provided the assuredness they needed to be successful with the next goal or process. Once an individual determines a goal to be possible, the motivation and persistence levels increase to propel this individual to success.

<div align="center">Delimitations and Limitations</div>

In order to obtain an understanding of the transition experience, the semi-structured questions were developed as a means of defining this lived experience. This was not a study of a particular institution, specific programming or curriculum or academic disciplines. The interest and motivation for this researcher was to understand the adult GED completer and his or her perceptions of the experience of making a transition in their lives – one that would impact every facet of life – adding education to already burgeoning life roles. The findings of this study were based on each individual's recollections of the transition into college and therefore, all the limitations of any self-reported data are comingled in this research study. There were six respondents to this study – an equal representation of males and females. This equality in gender did not render any interesting data regarding strengths in persistence or value in education. All respondents were very similar in these areas. Regarding limitations, this study was conducted at only one institution – a large Midwestern community college. It may be possible that if similar research were conducted at a smaller institution, the individuals may relay their experiences quite differently. Evaluating experiences from other geographical regions and smaller community colleges would continue to triangulate the

research. There also may be major differences when examining the transition experience of GED completers into the four-year university or college rather than the community college.

The lack of literature regarding self-efficacy estimates in those who attend college, in particular the community college, demonstrates the overall deficiencies in the studies of areas such as these that provide insight into retention strategies and positive educational and personal development. There is very little research on the success of the GED completer who decides to continue into higher education. The community college knows little about the needs of the GED completer and what is required to be in place for the completer to become successful. A higher number of participants who could have relayed their stories regarding their educational process from GED completer to successful community college graduate would have benefitted this study. As stated earlier, it takes a monumental commitment of time and staffing to commit to determining the needs of individuals who walk through the doors of the community college and then to cater to those needs with programming and assistive developmental strategies. Time, however, is not on the side of the community college. The mission and philosophy of the community college is to meet the needs of the many diverse learners who choose this avenue to pursue higher education. Although this diversity is honored at the community college, striving to be all-inclusive and to determine each and every individual need is impossible to meet as an institution; rather, it is left on the shoulders of the committed staff and faculty who place a high value on altruism and guiding others to their ultimate potential. Due to the limitations of this study, the information garnered here should serve as an impetus to explore more areas of personal development that are required for individuals to fathom the concept of the value of education and its importance toward overall societal enhancement.

Implications and Recommendations

The insights and understandings gained from this research have tremendous educational value for institutions of higher education and the overall educational and societal arenas. Specifically, this study indicates the following outcomes and implications: 1). Establishing the "value" of education with each individual or potential student. Each of the participants in this study indicated that they had come to value education, even if they had not held the same value in the past. This self-declared value for the educational system and what it could afford each individual was a critical motivator. Many students attend college immediately after high school because it is "expected" of them. The student gains this understanding from parents or from society. If the desire to attend college is just a natural progression after graduation from high school, the value of education within the individual may not intrinsically exist. It would be a beneficial aspect to both the student and the post-secondary educational institution if there was some literature or other means of getting the knowledge to the potential student regarding the statistics of what an education can provide in respect to socioeconomic factors, personal factors, and individual contributions to society. At times, this may be evident to the incoming, traditional-aged college student; however, many times – as these GED graduates who decided that college was important indicate – it may take some life to be lived for individuals to evaluate themselves and their lives and place a high value on education.

Gottlieb and Fogarty (2003) state that individuals who successfully participate in higher education generate many benefits; among them an increase in income and improvement to quality of life. In this current era of rising costs in higher education and high unemployment rates, it is vital that individuals, including high school students and adults

alike, realize the monetary and nonmonetary benefits of higher education for individuals and society as a whole. Literature that expresses these benefits can be provided to GED completers once they have met their goal in achieving the GED to encourage them to continue to college to pursue a higher credential.

2). Understanding and establishing the importance of motivation in academic achievement. Banks (1988) declares that motivation is related to how individuals perceive their action and its consequences. The substructures of motivation and self-efficacy are directly related and allowed for the participants to remain persistent with their goals and ultimately achieve success. This seemed to be a prevalent construct within each individual. The ability to develop a goal and then to determine the motivation necessary to achieve the goal was essential. Participants had to define their own motivators: wanting a better life for themselves and/or their children/families. The discernment of their own personal values directly connected them to their motivators. For some participants, their cognitive health was their motivator. Two of the participants believed that they needed to keep their minds active and therefore chose to pursue higher education. Both of the participants made the claim "I still have a brain" and that no one could take that away, but they did have to decide that they wanted to cultivate their minds and expand their knowledge base in order to motivate them to pursue a college degree. For three of the participants, it was essential for them to be able to be a better role model for their children and to ultimately provide for them in the best way possible. Family was a strong motivator for these individuals, and this high value they placed on family propelled them to achieve their ultimate goal of a college degree.

How does an institution discern what motivates the individual so that there can be programming implemented to enhance this motivation and propel a student toward an

educationally obtainable goal? This would be an important aspect to consider. Determining

what personally motivates each individual takes time and trained individuals. Counselors are

educationally trained to understand student development and help individuals determine this

through personal evaluations and professional assessments. Focusing on the motivational

aspect of student learning would be a critical piece in higher education and lead to better

retention statistics as well as producing an educational and developmentally holistic

individual. A personal survey or assessment instrument could be implemented into the

orientation process at the community college to determine the motivators of these individuals

upon initiation of the college experience, and to use this information in ways that would

allow the individual to constantly be cognizant of their motivators.

3). Increasing levels of self-efficacy in college students. Many individuals who attempt

college are unaware of their own potential and abilities. It is increasingly evident in the

college student population that critical thinking and independent learning are qualities

lacking in many incoming college adult learners. Many students complete high school with

minimal awareness of what it takes to be a successful college student. For those who had

difficulties in high school, believing that they can be successful in college is a very difficult

notion to grasp. Developing a student-centered curriculum that assists students in identifying

their strengths and developing their abilities would be beneficial to implement in a first-year

experience/orientation course. For the community college, this can be difficult. Most

community college students, like those who participated in this research study, have little

time outside of getting their required coursework for their degree completed. They cannot

justify taking courses that do not meet program requirements, either for the time commitment

or the expense involved. Furthermore, being such a transient student population and living

and working off campus, it can be difficult to find the time for any extra-curricular

programming that might be developed to assist an individual in the aspect of student

development. Therefore, it may mean implementing student development content into

traditional coursework. The conflict for this notion comes from the faculty who teach the

coursework; they already have a burgeoning syllabus with their content alone. Implementing

additional student development content into a traditional course such as history would be

extremely difficult and would certainly raise opposition. College counselors who are

proficient in student development needs and the psychological understandings of individual

human growth would be ideal candidates for developing, initiating and implementing college

campus programming that speaks to the student's developmental needs regarding self-

efficacy and life transitions. Helping the adult learner navigate the college environment and

work alongside the individual who is experiencing growth through transitions is one role of

the college counselor. However, the college counselor has many roles regarding students

including educational advising, providing an understanding of financial aid, working with

academic struggles and difficulties, assisting with guiding the students to referral resources

and providing career counseling; the sheer multitude of these roles as well as the magnitude

of the student to counselor ratio on a community college campus leaves little time for the

community college counselor to meet with each individual student to provide individual

growth and development assistance and knowledge expertise. The community college would

benefit from hiring additional advisors to do the advising currently delegated to college

counselors allowing the community college counselor to plan an educational piece relating

directly to establishing goals, increasing awareness and development of self-efficacy, and

assisting the student in the transition experience initially and throughout the community college experience.

4). Establish opportunities to increase the potential for student engagement at the community college. Each of the participants in this research study indicated that one of the reasons they were successful in the community college was due to finding those individuals who they could ask questions of and with whom they made a connection. For most of them, it was connecting with faculty of the classes they had or staff in the academic achievement centers where they studied when they found the time. One participant expressed that she initially felt older than most of the students and felt as though she was an outsider and therefore disconnected until she learned from other students that she shared some commonalities, and this provided her the connection to engagement. None of the participants claimed to have gone through the experience totally alone. Each of the individuals expressed building relationships with students and instructors, and ultimately, all of the participants stated that they were a little melancholy when they thought of nearing graduation and leaving behind the community college staff, faculty and environment. They had all benefitted by fully engaging with the experience. These results speak volumes to the benefit of the community college and its student-centered environment. Small classroom sizes where the students can not only connect with each other but also interact with faculty are highly beneficial in student development and establishment of identity for the community college student. Knowing that someone can relate to the student – be it staff or another student – provides a basis for a relationship that may assist in increasing the individual's self-worth and empathetic awareness. The community college has expanded on this by adding learning communities to its curriculum to help establish this engagement and foundation for individual growth.

Learning communities provide opportunities for students to become connected to individuals who are experiencing some of the same growth and development issues while attending college. Instructors teach across the curriculum, making it a much more holistic educational experience.

All of the participants related that their non-traditional age was not a hindrance in the community college setting. In fact, those who were older than the traditional aged student expressed that they held value in that they could role model to the younger students on issues relating to time management, study techniques, test-taking strategies, etc. Two of the participants stated that even though they initially were frustrated with some of the methods and behaviors the more traditional aged students were exhibiting, the non-traditional student felt the need to "take the young students under their wings" and provide guidance to those who were struggling. Implementing study groups, providing the younger student with advising tips the older student had learned through experience, and offering wisdom from life experiences were some ways that the participants expressed engagement with others at the community college. A couple of the participants stated that they had become emotionally connected to faculty and were invited to their homes to visit with them and their families, or that they would meet the faculty between classes and have insightful and extremely rewarding conversations with them because they could relate to similar life or family experience. This engagement with others along with the education gained was truly a holistic growth experience for the participant in educational, psychological and spiritual avenues.

This research study provided some very critical insights regarding the transition experience of those who chose to get a GED to complete their high school experience and

then decided to attend the community college to further their education. These participants

relegated important information through their interviews to this researcher about their

experience and what they had garnered from choosing to participate in higher education.

Each had experienced tremendous amounts of growth, not only educationally but also in their

own individual personas. These individuals had quite possibly benefitted more from

education than any other experience in their adult lives. They each had gathered the courage,

established the commitment and value to education and pursued their degrees with a

vengeance. Their persistence, coupled with their elevated levels of awareness in their own

self-efficacy and their abilities to reach out and connect to others who could offer assistance

and to whom they could reciprocate were extremely critical attributes which catered to their

success. The insight garnered regarding this experience provides very critical knowledge

that can be utilized to develop educational as well as holistic developmentally sound

programming at the community college that can assist both the individual and the college in

reaching their civic potentials.

APPENDIX A: Sample Recruitment Email

Christina Carpenter

Email to prospective participants:

Hello and congratulations! It is my understanding that you have completed your program at DMACC and are ready to graduate this May or Summer 2010. As a doctoral student at Iowa State University in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program, I am developing a study of graduating students who began DMACC with a GED certificate. I would like to interview an average of 8 students for this study and would appreciate your input! This study is being developed to determine the transition experience for the GED completer into the community college. Your participation is completely voluntary and the ethics of confidentiality will be adhered to in the strictest means possible.
Please let me know by responding to this email or giving me a call at 515-964-6436 as to your willingness to participate in this study. Thanks so much for your consideration. Please let me know by June 10 of your availability.

Congratulations again and thanks for your consideration!

Tina Carpenter
Des Moines Area Community College
2006 S. Ankeny Blvd.
Ankeny, IA 50023
515-964-6436
cmcarpenter1@dmacc.edu

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Document

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: **Understanding the Transition Experience from GED completer to Community College Graduate**

Investigators: Christina "Tina" Carpenter

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to learn more of an understanding of factors that influence a GED completer to be successful throughout his/her community college educational experience while seeking a degree. You are being invited to participate in this study because you successfully completed your GED and are now ready to graduate with a DMACC degree.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to be willing to be interviewed on your experience with the transition from the GED completion to the community college completion and asked to complete an essay asking you to personally interpret this experience. The interview will include open ended questions that are asked to determine your personal reflection of the transition process for you. You will be interviewed and recorded on audio tapes. This will require approximately 2 interviews at a length of up to two hours for each. You will also be asked for permission to obtain your DMACC transcripts for use as data for this study. This signed consent form will provide permission for this researcher to obtain this data.

RISKS

While participating in this study, the goal is to potentially experience no risks. However, if your experience was negative or you had some negative personal experiences during this time, it may bring those issues into the present again causing some emotional discomfort. As a counselor who is experienced in interviewing and listening skills, I will do my utmost to keep this at an extreme minimum.

BENEFITS

Participants will not directly benefit from this experience.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: Identifiers will be kept separate from the data, names will be changed in the report to maintain confidentiality. During the study, records and documentation will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the research developer's home address. Audio tapes will be destroyed after completion of the study or no later than December 30, 2010. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Christina Carpenter at 515-964-6436 or email: cmcarpenter1@dmacc.edu or Dr. Larry Ebbers at 515-294-8067 or email: lebbers@iastate.edu.

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

****
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

_____   _____
        (Participant's Signature)   (Date)

APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

Essay Question:

Please submit a short essay on your personal feelings toward the transition experience you completed from GED completer into the community college. Think back to when you first began the process of becoming a college student. What were your thoughts, concerns, ideas, goals, etc. When you were going through the process of attending classes, submitting homework, working with instructors what was your experience? As you are finishing your degree what are your thoughts concerning the experience?

Interview Questions:

1. What does education mean to you?

2. What was your motivation to continue your education at the community college?

3. What beliefs did you hold about yourself at the beginning of your transition experience?

4. Describe your admissions experience.

5. Discuss your experience including attending classes, completing homework, communicating with faculty, etc.

6. Describe your feelings as you processed through your education and upon your nearing completion of your degree.

7. What beliefs do you hold about yourself as you complete your degree?

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