

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Cheryl R. Falk for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on February 17, 1995. Title: GED Graduates: Case Studies of Six At-Risk Students Who Have Persisted at a Community College.

Abstract approved: Redacted for Privacy

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This interpretive study sought to understand how six GED graduates who dropped out of high school came to be enrolled at a rural community college, and what factors they perceived promoted or impeded their academic persistence and success. Specifically the study focused on student backgrounds, reasons for dropping out of high school, return motivations, and persistence factors influencing retention. Participants were selected based upon the following characteristics:

- over the age of 21
- enrolled both fall quarter, 1993 and winter quarter, 1994
- studied for and took the GED at Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC)
- received the GED after the test was revised in 1988
- had earned at least 20 credits at YVCC by the end of fall quarter, 1993

In-depth student interviews and examination of student records provided data for the development of case records. Data analysis resulted in the generation of seven hypotheses. Among them were hypotheses that suggest that the GED was the key to accessing further education for returning adult high school dropouts, and that a primary benefit of passing the GED Tests was an increase in the self-confidence students needed to continue their education.

The study also found that GED graduates recognized they may lack academic survival skills due to dropping out of high school, and that they were inclined to use college services for remediation. Four academic integration factors--the accessibility of a sequence of developmental classes, the existence of study skills or freshman orientation classes, the availability of tutoring, and supportive advising--contributed to the persistence and success of GED graduates.

Two factors--the drive to become self sufficient, and the ability of students to develop a strong commitment to college through their faith in education to promote life changes--enabled students to persist and succeed. Participants provided evidence that GED graduates can succeed in community college as well as other students who have earned traditional high school degrees when certain academic conditions are in place. Finally, the study demonstrated the positive effect education can have in breaking the cycle of negative family attitudes toward schooling for the next generation.

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GED Graduates: Case Studies of Six At-Risk Students  
Who Have Persisted at a Community College

by

Cheryl R. Falk

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
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# **GED Graduates: Case Studies of Six At-Risk Students Who Have Persisted at a Community College**

## **CHAPTER I THE PROBLEM**

### Introduction

The Tests of General Educational Development (GED) were established in 1942 to provide World War II veterans who had not graduated from high school an opportunity to receive an alternative high school level educational credential. A GED diploma is earned by passing a battery of five subject-area tests that are normed on the academic performance of current high school graduates in the United States. Though the test was originally conceived as a means to enable veterans to demonstrate knowledge equivalent to that of a high school education, the GED slowly became a national equivalency test for civilians (Quigley, 1991). By 1959, the number of non-veterans exceeded the number of veterans taking the tests (Toby & Armor, 1992).

A GED diploma may enable recipients to qualify for jobs, to gain job promotions based upon high school degree requirements, and to access post-secondary education (Behal, 1983; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hayes, 1991). According to the GED Testing Service's 1991 Statistical Report, more than 12 million adults have obtained GED diplomas since the inception of the program. In 1993, the number of GED credentials awarded in the United States and Canada grew to 488,838. Compared to high school graduates, the number of GED graduates has increased to the point where nearly one of every seven high school diplomas issued in the United States is a GED diploma (American Council on Education, 1994).

Differences of opinion about the degree to which earning a GED diploma represents adequate preparation for students to succeed academically in college have existed since the degree's inception (Andrew, 1951; Bledsoe, 1953; Callis & Wren, 1947; Dressel & Schmid, 1950; Mumma, 1950). Since the certificate verifies that GED graduates have demonstrated mastery of the skills and concepts associated with a traditional high school program of study, the tests are normed periodically to confirm that they are measuring skills equivalent to the achievement of a representative sample of high school seniors. Each spring a number of high schools from across the United States are asked to administer the GED Tests to a randomly selected group of graduating seniors. The requirements of the tests are set so that approximately 30% of those graduating high school seniors will not pass them. Additionally, by comparing high school student performance over time, GEDTS is able to evaluate whether a review of test specifications is needed (Auchter, 1993).

Enger and Howerton (1988) conducted two administrations of the GED Tests. The first was a norming study, using a population sample of 34,548 graduating high school seniors. The second study was based on 55,154 test item sets administered to adult examinees who had taken the GED Tests for equivalency purposes. Both groups performed similarly on all sections of the GED Tests, and no significant differences were found between the high school seniors and the adults who passed the GED. Although results such as these support the use of the GED Tests for awarding an alternative high school diploma, questions still arise regarding the use of a GED credential as a criterion for admission into post-secondary education (Bigby, 1989; Klein & Grise, 1987; McLawhorn, 1981; Wilson, 1982).

In 1989, more than one in five candidates (22%) took the GED Tests to be admitted to post-secondary education. By 1993, the number of candidates

who planned further study had grown to 60% (American Council on Education, 1994). More candidates planned to enroll in community colleges than in any other type of educational institution (Baldwin, 1991). Based upon figures published by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (WSBCTC) (1994), that figure is even higher in Washington, with 70% of the state's GED candidates planning further education. A recent report concerning GED and high school completion students in that same state indicated that approximately 20% of those who took GED classes at community colleges transitioned into college-level classes (classes numbered 101 or above) and another 2% into developmental classes (classes numbered below 101) within two years of their initial enrollment (WSBCTC, 1993).

### Statement of the Problem

Research that examines the GED Tests' predictive value for academic success in college began to be published in the late 1940s, a few years after the GED was established as an alternate route to a high school diploma (Andrew, 1951; Callis & Wren, 1947; Dressel & Schmid, 1950; Roeber, 1950). Numerous studies have compared high school graduate success with GED graduate success in both two- and four-year institutions by identifying GED freshmen and comparing them with a sample of high school graduates in the same entering class (D'Amico & Schmid, 1957; Bigby, 1989; Grady, 1983; Rogers, 1977; Willett, 1982). These studies have sought to determine whether the GED Tests evaluate students' academic readiness for college as well as a high school diploma, and whether a GED certificate should be accepted for college entrance.

Nearly all of the studies have employed a quantitative design (Ayers, 1978; Beltzer, 1985; Bigby, 1989; Hannah, 1972; Wolf, 1980), using grade point averages, attrition rates, number of credits attempted and completed, and graduation rates to define academic success for both high school completers and GED graduates. One problem that arises when these factors are equated with success is that many students do not enter college, especially community college, with a specific degree or graduation as a goal (Voorhees, 1987). After nearly 50 years of researching the question of the predictive validity of the GED in post-secondary education, there is still no consensus about how well the GED Tests evaluate students for college work. Nor is there enough knowledge about factors which contribute to the successful transition of GED graduates into post-secondary education. Knowledge of this kind could provide community colleges with information that is needed to increase the success of these students.

GED graduates who enroll in community college programs are often regarded as being "at-risk" because they have earned an alternative diploma rather than a traditional one (Ayers, 1978; McElroy, 1990; Scales, 1990; Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980). At-risk students are described as students who are not only underprepared for college, but who may be working 30 or more hours a week, who may have little support from family members, who may be first-generation college attenders, and who may have a history of academic failure as they begin their post-secondary experiences (Roueche & Roueche, 1993).

As the number of GED graduates increases, it is likely that more students with GED certificates will enroll in post-secondary education--especially in the open door community colleges. Retaining students is an important concern at all levels of education, but it is a major challenge for community colleges with their open door admissions policies (Roueche, Baker, & Roueche, 1987).

Earlier retention studies (Andrew, 1951; Callis & Wren, 1947; Dressel & Schmid, 1950; Roeber, 1950) focused on traditional students who were attending four-year institutions. Because two-year institutions create a different student environment than four year colleges and universities do, most of earlier retention research is not directly applicable to this study. Recent retention research (Feldman, 1993; Fischbach, 1990; Grosset, 1989; Voorhees, 1987), however, that considers non-traditional students in two-year institutions does provide an appropriate theoretical framework through which to explore the perceptions and experiences of GED graduates enrolled at a rural community college.

#### Central Research Question

What is it about the experiences of GED graduates that promotes or impedes their persistence and success in a community college setting?

#### Rationale for the Study

Previous research that has investigated the academic success of GED graduates in post-secondary education has been inconsistent, and of little help to post-secondary institutions that use the GED as an entrance requirement. A number of studies (Ayers, 1978; Hannah, 1972; Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980; Willett, 1982) have used credit completion, grade point averages or graduation rates to define student success. In most studies reviewed, (Ayers, 1978; Clark, 1987; Hannah, 1972; Scales, 1990; Willett, 1982) researchers have attempted to compare a group of high school completers with a group of GED graduates using those same parameters. Four of 17 studies that investigated predictability and academic success concluded that GED graduates do not succeed as well

in post-secondary education as high school graduates and that the GED Tests may not be useful predictors of academic success for further education (Bigby, 1989; Klein & Grise, 1987; McLawhorn, 1981; Wilson, 1982). Thirteen studies using many of the same procedures and methods reached opposing conclusions.

Studies such as those described above may be worthwhile internal institutional reports because they provide data for programmatic consideration, but they do not provide answers about how and why GED students are or are not succeeding in post-secondary education. Nor do they provide insight into what success might be for such students. A multiple-case study approach using in-depth interviews enabled me to explore the experiences of six GED graduates who have persisted in their community college programs.

There are several reasons why I chose an interpretive research approach--and particularly a case study strategy--as the design for this study. Yin (1989) suggests that a case study approach be used when a researcher wants to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident, and when multiple sources of evidence are used. The contemporary phenomenon I wanted to investigate was the persistence of adult GED graduates in the context of a community college setting. I also wanted to use student words, student records and informal conversations with college instructors as evidence for my investigation.

Although previous persistence research has identified a number of variables that appear to influence persistence, no previous persistence research has focused specifically on GED graduates enrolled in community college programs. Metzner and Bean (1987) and Tinto (1993) describe student persistence as a complex topic, and as one for which separate analyses using



different population sub-groups is recommended. This study proposed to explore and describe such variables through the use of in-depth interviews with GED graduates enrolled in a rural community college.

Erickson (1986) characterizes interpretive inquiry as having a "central research interest in human meaning in social life and in its elucidation and exposition by the researcher" (p.119). Using a case study approach, I examined the backgrounds of six GED graduates, what the effects of dropping out of school have been, what their motivations for enrolling in a community college were, what has happened to them since they enrolled, where they have turned for support, and what factors within and outside of the community college system have helped or hindered them in reaching their goals. Rather than testing hypotheses, the intent of this study was to develop hypotheses that could lead to further research and understanding.

### Significance of the Study

Retention and student success are major concerns for community colleges (Grosset, 1989; Feldman, 1993; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Because of their open door policy, community colleges accept many students who have not been successful in high school and who lack basic skills and study skills. This open door policy necessitates the development of student support mechanisms to help non-traditional and high risk students succeed in the academic arena. State legislatures and other governmental agencies are applying increased pressure on community colleges to close the revolving door and to become more accountable for their outcomes (Cohen & Brawer, 1991; Parnell, 1990; Roueche & Roueche, 1993). To underline the importance of outcomes assessment for community colleges, the Commission on the Future of

Community Colleges (1988) presented five recommendations for the assessment of student outcomes and institutional effectiveness in its report *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century*.

This study may help GED programs respond to the needs--both academic and advising--of GED students who plan to transition into community college programs. Additionally, this research may help community college counselors, teachers, and staff better understand a growing segment of students, which could lead to improved advising, teaching and learning conditions. Information from this study could be used within student services and learning assistance divisions to improve the quality and range of student support programs, which could contribute to the success and retention of GED graduates.

From a systems standpoint, this research could assist the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges to develop policy aimed at improved student learning and student retention. Finally, this study could add to the knowledge base about how GED graduates succeed in college, a topic about which little research has been conducted.

### Limitations

1. The population in this study was confined to GED graduates enrolled in a rural community college in the state of Washington.
2. The sample population was small and non-representative of all community college students.
3. Conclusions from the study are only applicable to GED graduates enrolled in rural community college programs, and cannot be generalized to other populations.

### Definition of Terms

The following definitions clarify terms which are used in the study:

Grade Point Average (GPA): The mean of a student's course grades based on the following scale of points: A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, and F or W = 0.

General Education Development (GED): An alternative high school diploma awarded upon completion of a battery of nationally normed and scored tests that include writing, social studies, science, reading and mathematics.

At-risk students: A term used to describe a diverse group of students, which could include recent high school graduates, dropouts, illiterate adults, immigrants, students with limited English abilities, or returning adults, and who may have weak self-concepts, uncertain or unrealistic goals, poor academic backgrounds and/or economic and family problems.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter I presents the introduction, problem statement, research questions, rationale, significance, and definitions of the study. Chapter II is a review of the literature related to the use of the Tests of General Educational Development for predicting student success in post-secondary education and of recent literature that examines student retention at two-year, public community colleges. The research design and methodology of the study are discussed in Chapter III. Chapter IV presents the case studies and cross-case comparisons, and Chapter V summarizes hypotheses derived from the data, and suggests implications based upon those hypotheses.

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

This study investigated the experiences of a selected group of GED graduates who were enrolled in a rural community college. Through in-depth interviews, student words were elicited to learn about their backgrounds, their reasons for dropping out of high school, their motivations for returning to obtain a GED, and their college enrollment. The goal was to identify factors which may have influenced this group of students to persist or not persist with their community college education.

The review of literature focuses on two areas: on educational outcomes and success in community colleges for GED graduates, and on persistence studies of students who attend public two-year institutions. The first group of studies, which considers the outcomes of GED attainment and the predictive validity of the GED for success in community college studies, spans approximately 20 years. The second group of studies, which reviews research about student persistence at public, open-door community colleges, has been conducted mostly during the last ten years.

Formal research studies that considered the GED Tests' predictive value for academic success in post-secondary education began to appear in the literature in the late 1940s, a few years after the GED was established as an alternate route to a high school diploma. However, most of these early studies were conducted with four-year college and university students (Andrew, 1951; Bledsoe, 1953; Callis & Wren, 1947; D'Amico & Schmid, 1957; Dressel & Schmid, 1950; Mumma, 1950; Roeber, 1950), and arrived at conflicting conclusions.

In the ensuing decades, other researchers who sought to discover whether the GED Tests prepare students to succeed academically in four-year colleges and universities also arrived at differing conclusions (Colert, 1983; Fugate, 1972; Pipho, 1965; Quinn, 1986; Rogers, 1977; Rogers, 1987; Swarm, 1981). These studies have not been included in this literature review because they focused on GED graduates who matriculated into four-year colleges and universities rather than into community colleges.

The research reviewed in this chapter which has addressed the issue of GED graduate success and persistence in community colleges can be classified into the following categories: (a) studies which survey general outcomes of earning a GED certificate, and which include educational attainment as a specific outcome; (b) studies which conclude that GED graduates are not as academically successful as high school graduates, and that the GED is not a good predictor of academic success; (c) studies that conclude that GED holders do as well as high school graduates and that the GED is a good predictor of academic success; (d) studies that investigate the academic self-perceptions of GED graduates who enroll in community college coursework; and (e) studies that examine both pre-and post-enrollment factors that influence persistence and retention at public community colleges.

### GED Outcomes Survey Studies

Numerous surveys (Behal, 1983; Cervero, 1983; Gaskin, 1982; Hayes, 1991) have been conducted locally, regionally and nationally to determine the benefits that accrue to students who receive a GED. The outcomes studies reviewed in this chapter investigated educational attainment as a specific

outcome, and have been included to establish evidence that many GED graduates use GED certification as a way to access post-secondary education.

Nelson (1975) and Gaskin (1982) conducted studies to evaluate the effects of community college GED programs by surveying successful GED graduates to assess the impact of passing the GED. McClung (1977), Reed (1984), Thompson and Jimmerson (1986), Valentine and Darkenwald (1986), and Hayes (1991) undertook studies to measure the benefits of attaining the GED, and the impact of state adult high school equivalency programs in Iowa, Maryland, Washington, New Jersey and Wisconsin, respectively. Behal (1983) and Cervero (1983) each conducted national studies which focused on educational and employment outcomes for GED graduates.

Findings from these outcomes studies have provided a wealth of details about GED student demographics, reasons for taking the GED, and perceived benefits from graduation. Most studies (Behal, 1983; Nelson, 1975; Thompson & Jimmerson, 1986; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986) concluded that students regard the attainment of a GED to be highly positive, to improve employment opportunities, and to remove barriers for further education and training.

Personal satisfaction and improved self-image from earning an equivalency diploma were major outcomes in several studies (Gaskin, 1982; Hayes, 1991; McClung, 1977; Nelson, 1975; Thompson & Jimmerson, 1986). According to Nelson, the attainment of a GED caused students to become more aware of their potential. As he states:

Examinees had proved to themselves that they had the ability, via this nontraditional method, of obtaining high school completion certification and qualifying for post-secondary schools. An overwhelming number stated that they were very strongly influenced to continue educational pursuits and that their GED grades were the contributing factor. (p. 25)

Respondents to Gaskin's study (1982) provided 261 different answers about ways the GED had changed their lives; however, 77% of the graduates claimed increased self-confidence as the major effect.

Behal (1983) and Reed (1984) each examined the educational activities of GED graduates. Behal was interested in determining which GED graduates enrolled in post-secondary programs and which types of programs were being selected. Student status was reported by 49% of the respondents at some time during the two years following receipt of the GED. Reed wanted to determine the employment and educational activities of Maryland GED graduates in order to strengthen support for adult high school credential programs in the state. She found that 25% of the GED recipients who responded to her survey had presented their credential for employment or educational purposes within one week of receiving it. Nearly 75% of the respondents expected that taking the tests would help them gain admittance to a college or university. At the time of the study, nearly 60% of the graduates had participated in some type of post-secondary education or training, with 35% of them enrolling at community colleges.

Hayes (1991) investigated broader outcomes for GED graduates in the areas of occupational, educational, personal and social benefits. Results suggested that graduates' adult roles and responsibilities had an impact on the benefits they experienced from obtaining the GED credential. Intangible benefits, such as life satisfaction, higher aspirations, and improved self-image, were most widely reported. Almost half of those with further education as a primary goal had enrolled in a college degree program within two years of GED certification.

Cervero (1983) found that candidate expectations from passing the GED were higher than actual benefits; however, numerous educational benefits were

achieved by respondents. Candidates were positive about their GED experience--95% reported that they would take the tests again if they were starting over. Nearly 50% had been students in some type of educational program during the 18 months following the initial survey; community colleges were the institutions where they were most likely to enroll. More than 75% planned to attend some sort of educational program in the future.

In sharp contrast to Cervero's educational enrollment figures, Thompson and Jimmerson (1983) found that only 25% of the GED graduates in their survey had completed a significant step in education (diploma, vocational certificate or one year of college), although 63% had indicated further education as their primary goal for earning a GED. The difference between Cervero's and Thompson and Jimmerson's studies in the educational attainment area may be attributed to the fact that Thompson and Jimmerson asked for responses to significant achievement in education, not just for educational enrollment.

Although the survey studies mentioned above have provided interesting information about GED graduates and perceived benefits from earning a GED, several of the studies (Cervero, 1983; McClung, 1977; Nelson, 1975) are seriously flawed by low response rates. Adjusted response rates for these three studies ranged from a low of 24% in Nelson (1975) to a high of 37% in McClung's study (1977). The other four studies achieved adjusted response rates from 43% (Thompson & Jimmerson, 1986) to 57% (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). In all cases, the studies had problems of respondent attrition due to the mobility of the GED population. The low response rates may raise questions about study results and about the generalizability of findings.

While general outcomes studies do not examine the academic success of GED graduates in community colleges, they do reveal the perceived benefits expressed by students who earn their GEDs. These studies also support the



fact that many graduates use the GED as a means through which to access further education.

### Negative Studies of Academic Success

A number of studies that have considered the academic performance of GED graduates as compared to high school graduates in colleges and universities have concluded that GED graduates do not perform as well as high school graduates in post-secondary education (Andrew, 1951; D'Amico & Schmid, 1957; Mumma, 1950; Quinn, 1986; Rogers, 1987). Because these studies were conducted at four-year institutions, they will not be reviewed in this chapter.

The following four studies (Bigby, 1989; Klein & Grise, 1987; McLawhorn, 1981; Wilson, 1982) examined the academic performance of GED graduates at community colleges and reached negative, or somewhat negative findings. These studies question the equivalency of a GED certificate to a high school diploma by concluding that GED graduates do not succeed as well as high school graduates who enroll in college coursework. In these studies, success is defined by the researchers as comparative grade point averages, number of courses attempted and completed, number of continuous quarters enrolled, and graduation rates. Student definitions of success and student goals are not considered.

McLawhorn (1981) compared the educational performances and personal goal attainments of Adult High School Diploma (AHS) graduates with GED graduates enrolled at one institution. Data were collected for grade point averages, average number of quarter hours, and types of programs entered by both types of graduates. The AHS students earned a grade point average of

2.58 during the period of the study; the mean grade point average of the GED graduate was 2.21.

Wilson (1982) and Bigby (1989) both investigated whether students who entered their respective community colleges with a GED certificate were competing successfully with students who entered with a high school diploma. Wilson's research considered first semester grade point average, rates of attrition, and hours attempted and completed. Additionally, the study compared the background of the two groups to determine if there were any differences with regard to age, sex, marital status, stated educational goals, educational objectives or time of attendance. Bigby's study attempted to determine if there were any significant differences in grade point averages between high school graduates and GED graduates who had earned at least five college credits. He additionally wanted to determine if community college grade point averages could be predicted from GED test scores.

Both researchers concluded that GED students earned lower community college grade point averages than high school graduates. Wilson additionally concluded that GED graduates completed a smaller percentage of classes during their first semester in college. Bigby determined that students' community college grade point averages could be predicted by students' GED scores, and that the prediction could be improved when considered with the student's age. He suggested that wide differences among GED graduates in variables such as maturity, last year completed in high school, reason for leaving high school, and reason for taking the GED, suggest that the predictive power of the GED is best explained by some combination of these factors. Finally, Bigby recommended that GED subtest scores be examined by college counselors in planning a course of study for any GED graduate, and that a

norming study of the GED Tests be conducted in order to determine if minimum scores should be required for college entrance.

Klein and Grise (1987) compared the success of GED and traditional high school graduates in Florida's community colleges. Data from 28 community colleges indicated that GED holders made up about 7.5% of the community college population. While 49% of traditional high school graduates completed a degree program, only 26% of the individuals with a GED completed degree programs and graduated from Florida's community colleges. No difference was found between the amount of time it took for a GED holder and a high school diploma holder to complete a degree program.

High school graduates had, on average, a slightly higher grade point average. Although the grade point averages were similar, the 13% difference in completion/graduation rates between the two groups of students raises questions about what happens to GED graduates once they are enrolled in community college programs.

All four studies (Bigby, 1989; Klein & Grise, 1987; McLawhorn, 1981; Wilson, 1982) have suggested that GED graduates earn lower grades in post-secondary educational settings than students with traditional high school diplomas, but there are several problems with this research. The method of selecting all GED freshmen from a registrar's list and comparing them with a sample of high school graduates in the same entering class ignores the possibility that one small group of GED graduates entering a particular college may be very unlike another small group of GED graduates entering another institution with respect to age, gender, number of years of high school completed, and motivation for enrolling in college coursework. Additionally, like much of the other quantitative research that considers the success of GED graduates in post-secondary education, two of these studies suffer from

extremely small sample sizes (Bigby, 1989; McLawhorn, 1981). Finally, the studies define academic success rather narrowly and do not take into consideration student goals or student definitions of success.

### Positive Studies of Academic Success

The majority of studies that have been found that consider the experiences of GED graduates in community colleges conclude that, for the most part, such students do as well as high school graduates. These studies also tend to support the GED Tests as good predictors of academic success in post-secondary education (Ayers, 1978; Beltzer, 1985; Grady, 1983; Hannah, 1972; Scales, 1990).

In one of the earliest studies that included community colleges, Sharon (1972a) attempted to determine the validity of the GED battery as an instrument of admission for non-high school graduates to a variety of institutions (12 two-year and 28 four-year) of higher education. He concluded that the use of GED scores for prediction in two-year colleges was uniformly better than for four-year colleges. Sharon's study was important not only because it involved multiple campuses and large numbers of students, but because he generated a profile of college-enrolled GED recipients.

The average subject was a 28-year-old male veteran, who had completed 10th grade, and who became aware of the GED program in the military. Most students had little or no trouble adjusting to college. The most common goal was to graduate with a bachelor's degree and to begin a career in business. College grades of GED students were found to be only slightly lower than those of traditional students. The primary effect of having taken the

GED by the nontraditional student was the elimination of a barrier to enrollment in formal higher education.

Five studies (Ayers, 1978; Clark, 1987; McElroy, 1990; Scales, 1990; Wolf, 1980) examined the grade point averages of small groups of high school graduates and GED graduates at their various institutions. Sample populations were chosen in a variety of ways. Ayers compared the transcripts of all 37 GED graduates with the transcripts of 37 randomly-selected high school graduates who were first-year enrollees. McElroy randomly-selected 50 students from a sub-population of 126 GED graduates and 50 students from 1,825 high school graduates for the purpose of comparing the college grade point averages of students after one year of community college work.

Wolf gathered first semester grade point data for 100 high school graduates, 100 high school non-graduates who had completed the GED, and 100 high school non-graduates without a GED for a period of three years. Scales identified all GED graduates who had enrolled in Alabama's two-year institutions and compared their grade point averages to the same number of randomly-selected high school graduates enrolled in the same institutions. Finally, Clark compared the grade point averages of both high school graduates and GED graduates who graduated from a single institution during 1985-86.

Findings from all five studies were quite similar. Clark, Wolf, and Scales found that there were no significant differences in grade point averages between high school graduates and GED graduates. Clark, however, indicated that there may be differences after one semester or after one year, but that those differences were not significant at graduation. Wolf additionally found that the GED held some predictive validity for first semester grades. Predictive validity was significantly improved when the variables of student age and number of high school grades completed were added as predictors. Ayers determined

that although the mean GPA for high school graduates was higher than for GED graduates, the difference was not significant. McElroy actually found that GED graduates had higher GPAs than high school graduates after one year.

Another group of studies that compared the academic success of GED graduates with high school graduates not only considered the grade point averages of the two groups, but also persistence and graduation rates (Grady, 1983; Hannah, 1972; Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980; Willett, 1982).

Hannah (1972) collected data on students admitted to three junior colleges from 1965 through 1971. Registrars' records identified 1,745 GED students and 35,797 high school graduates from which random samples of 300 from each group were selected. Data analysis demonstrated no significant difference between the two groups' mean grade point averages when compared at the end of one year. Interestingly, the proportion of high school graduates who dropped out of school (.60) by the end of the first year was significantly higher than that of the GED students (.47). At the end of two years, the grade point averages of GED students were significantly higher than those of the high school graduates.

Wilson, Davis and Davis (1980) found nearly the same results in a study of high school and GED graduates enrolled in community college vocational courses. Their study showed that GED students earned a higher college grade point average than did the diploma students--2.80 and 2.56 respectively. Completion rates were 63% for GED students and 60% for high school graduates.

Grady (1983), Spillar (1982) and Willett (1982) all attempted to determine if a student obtaining a GED was as well prepared for post-secondary educational experiences as the student who completed a regular high school program and received a diploma. Unlike several of the previous studies that

only considered first semester or first year enrollment (Ayers, 1978; McElroy, 1990; Wilson, 1982), these three researchers conducted their studies longitudinally.

Grady took all GED entrants and selected a random sample of high school diploma entrants, matching them to the GED entrants for age, sex, and race, and examining such variables as enrollment and subsequent grades in remedial courses along with GPAs and persistence during three years. GED entrants showed a considerably greater incidence of voluntary remedial enrollment than did high school diploma entrants. This characteristic may indicate that the GED students were more realistic about their entering skill levels, that they lacked self-confidence, or that they took the advice of their academic advisors.

Spillar compared scores on a standardized admission test, freshman English grades, and GPA and persistence over three years. Willett considered grade point averages, graduation rates, re-enrollment frequency and earned credit hours over a five-year period. There were no significant differences between high school and GED graduates in any of the comparisons.

Beltzer (1985) used a questionnaire to test the predictive validity of the Tinto model, a conceptual model of college attrition, to identify dropouts and persisters. He also compared the persistence of GED students with high school graduates enrolled in a community college. Results supported the predictive validity of the Tinto model in identifying potential dropouts among GED examinees as well as for a comparison group of traditional high school graduates.

The researcher concluded that first-year grade point average was the most important predictor of persistence for GED examinees and that institutional commitment was the predictor of persistence for traditional high

school graduates. There was no statistically significant difference between the GED examinees and the traditional high school graduates in the rate of persistence.

A slightly different approach to validating the GED Tests for college entrance was taken by Smith and Goetz (1988). They investigated whether GED scores could be used to determine appropriate placement in English and reading courses. When examining whether the GED predicted success in English courses, correlations showed that the GED predicted as well as, or better than, the ACT. The researchers recommended that cut-off scores for placement in college-level freshman composition be established. The high positive correlation ( $r = .80$ ) between the ACT Composite score and the GED total indicated the two tests were measuring the same construct and that the GED could be used for placement decisions and other uses similar to the current role of the ACT.

Research that supports the role of the GED Tests as predictors of academic success in post-secondary education contains some of the same flaws that research that has reached contradictory conclusions does. Many of the studies base their results on extremely small samples (Ayers, 1978; Clark, 1987; Willett, 1982; Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980). Small groups of GED graduates may be very unlike one another, raising questions about generalization to any other population. Finally, some studies follow students for only one semester or one year (Ayers, 1978; McElroy, 1990; Wolf, 1980), which ignores the attendance patterns of many community college students, who tend to stop out and re-enroll for a variety of reasons.



### Perceptions of GED Students Enrolled in Post-secondary Education

Three studies (Gillespie, 1987; Sharon, 1972b; Turner, 1990) either surveyed or used a combination of interviews and surveys to ask GED graduates about their experiences as community college students. Their research used some of the same methods that have been used for general outcomes studies, but focused more specifically on the topic of academic success for GED recipients in post-secondary education.

Sharon (1972b) followed up his questionnaire survey of college-enrolled GED recipients by conducting structured interviews with 30 college students in order to determine what the experience of entering college with a GED was like for these students. A few students mentioned academic problems in college which were related to withdrawal from high school. Some students felt they lacked the high school background knowledge that was required at their colleges, while others felt that they had to study harder than high school graduates. Mathematics knowledge was mentioned most often as an area of weakness. Sharon's study appears to be the first one to go directly to college-enrolled GED graduates to find some answers about their college experiences.

Gillespie (1987) surveyed 300 GED graduates who participated in a preparatory program to measure their academic self-perceptions. Data was analyzed to determine if earning the GED certificate increased the academic self-perceptions of high school graduates. Follow-up surveys indicated that the academic self-perceptions of dropouts who successfully completed the GED examination were improved as a result of the GED experience. Neither age, sex, nor marital status were significantly related to academic self-perception; however, amount of formal education prior to receiving the GED was significant to such perception. GED graduates who pursued post-GED education had

more positive academic self-perceptions than did those who did not pursue further education.

Turner (1990) conducted two surveys to collect and analyze data pertaining to the success of GED recipients who had enrolled in community college courses. The first survey was sent to GED students who had attended more than one semester of college; the second to faculty members. A total of 87 students (54.4%) and 18 faculty members (100%) responded to their respective surveys. The student survey asked for background information, reasons why students enrolled in the GED program, post-GED college experiences, and suggestions for the college. The second survey elicited information about faculty perceptions of GED student success.

Data analysis indicated that GED recipients matriculated and earned above average cumulative grade point averages in college. Significant factors in the GED graduates' success included: self-motivation; referral and support of family, friends, and college staff; consistent contact with one program advisor; and the use of college services. Turner also concluded that participation in a formal GED preparation program and formal completion of at least the 10th grade facilitated success in college, but that students with higher GED test scores did not necessarily go on to earn higher cumulative grade point averages. Finally, age was not a significant determinant of success. Turner's study makes a positive contribution to the literature because it goes beyond previous research that merely compared high school graduates with GED recipients in terms of several academic criteria.

By directly approaching GED recipients who enrolled in post-secondary education to learn about their experiences and perceptions, these three studies began to identify reasons why some GED graduates succeed academically and persist in community college programs while others do not, and what can be

done by an institution to promote success for such students. The research conducted by Sharon (1972b), Gillespie (1987), and Turner (1990) forms a bridge between previous studies and the research conducted for this dissertation by eliciting the views of GED graduates directly from them.

### Community College Persistence Studies

Student persistence is a topic that has received attention by researchers in post-secondary education for a number of years; however, most of the research has been focused on traditional students in residential, four-year college settings. Studies have tended to consider pre-enrollment variables, post-enrollment variables, or the process of interaction of both types of variables (Grosset, 1989). During the last decade, a number of studies have been published that specifically explore the persistence behavior of two-year college students (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Feldman, 1993; Fischbach, 1990; Grosset, 1989; Halpin, 1989; Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1986; Voorhees, 1987). A review of these studies and of the theoretical models upon which retention research is based provides a framework within which to examine the perceptions and experiences of the six community college persisters in the current study.

Much of the community college persistence research is derived from the Tinto model (1975), which is a widely-cited persistence model originally intended for use at four-year schools (Feldman, 1993). Tinto's model was based on Durkheim's analysis of the social factors involved in suicide (1951). Spady (1970) first suggested the application of Durkheim's suicide theory to the analysis of student attrition (Halpin, 1989). Tinto later refined and broadened the model (1975, 1987). It assumes that persistence and attrition is largely

determined by a student's integration into the social and academic systems of the institution.

According to the Tinto model, students enter college with varying backgrounds and experiences, and with certain expectations and commitments. Intentions are represented by educational and occupational goals. Commitments represent important aspects of personality which incline students toward task completion. Students interact with the college environment, which is comprised of the academic system and the social system.

Elements of the academic system include grade performance and intellectual development. The social system is comprised of interactions with peers and faculty members and involvement with campus clubs and activities. Interactions over time, of backgrounds, commitments, and expectations result in varying degrees of social and academic integration, which may lead to persistence or attrition (Halpin, 1989). The concept of student-institutional fit is one that is central to this model.

Factors that contribute to persistence or withdrawal from college--factors such as consistent values and strong relationships with other people--are considered to be similar to the factors that Durkheim suggested led to suicide or persistence in society. The more integrated an individual becomes in society, the more likely that individual is to choose to persist.

One of the earlier studies that used Tinto's model, and that considered the long-term persistence of two-year college students was done by Pascarella, Smart and Ethington (1986). These researchers tracked 825 students enrolled in 85 different two-year colleges over nine years. Their study supported the predictive validity of Tinto's model and the importance of the two basic concepts of academic and social integration for the retention of two-year college students.

In 1987, Voorhees conducted a community college persistence study that included 369 new, continuing, full- and part-time students. The goal of this research was to trace conceptual connections between models developed for four-year colleges and universities and research findings for community college persistence. In order to control for the number of factors, Voorhees examined two factors at a time and tested four models.

Gender was paired with full-time/part-time status; purpose for enrolling with ethnicity; intent to return with institutional satisfaction; and finally, grade-point average with weekly study hours and informal faculty interactions. His conclusion was that the only factors related to persistence were intent to return, gender, and purpose for enrolling. Higher persistence was related to being female, having an intent to return, seeking transfer, or planning for an associate degree. Other explanatory variables that proved to be nonsignificant were full-time /part-time enrollment, minority status, and a general satisfaction with the institution. Number of informal interactions with faculty outside class, grade-point average, and number of hours spent studying each week, were also shown to be independent of persistence.

Halpin (1989) used Tinto's retention model to discover if it would have predictive validity when applied to the analysis of student persistence and withdrawal for freshmen at an open-door, nonresidential comprehensive community college. The population for the study consisted of all first-time, full-time freshmen enrolled in academic degree programs at a nonresidential community college. A questionnaire similar to ones used in Tinto's studies was administered to freshmen in the freshmen composition class. Results from this survey indicated that Tinto's model is a useful one to use with this population group.

Varying levels of integration were shown to be significant predictors of persistence when the effects of background and environmental factors were controlled. Academic integration was found to have a greater influence on persistence than social integration, a finding that should not be surprising based upon the commuter characteristics of many community college students. The factors that explained 74.5% of the variance were faculty concern for teaching and student development, academic and intellectual development, and interaction with faculty.

Grosset (1989) presented a review and critique of recent retention research, most of which has been guided by Tinto's model. From Grosset's point of view, Tinto's retention model has not explained retention very well at commuter colleges, and has been less effective when applied at community colleges. In several studies (Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Voorhees, 1987), social integration, a major aspect of Tinto's model, was not substantiated for community college students. Grosset summarized research that addressed retention, but no statistical tests were mentioned. In that research, ethnicity, public versus private high school and admission test scores were associated with persistence. Goals, financial aid need, and remediation need were not predictive of retention, nor of persistence.

An alternative to Tinto's persistence model that has also been influential in the college persistence field is Bean's Student Attrition Model (1982). Bean (1983) proposed that student attrition is similar to turnover in work organizations, stressing the importance of behavioral intentions to stay or to leave as predictors of persistence behavior. Beliefs shape attitudes, which in turn influence behavior. Beliefs are viewed as being affected by a student's experiences with the various components of an institution, such as institutional quality, courses and friends. This model also recognizes that external factors--

such as family approval and encouragement from friends to continue enrollment play an important part in influencing persistence behavior while a student is enrolled in college.

A variation of the Student Attrition Model was put forth by Bean and Metzner in 1985 to conceptually explain the attrition of nontraditional undergraduate students. The researchers proposed that the main difference between the persistence of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by their external environment than by the social integration variables that affect traditional students. In other words, external variables such as family responsibilities would have more effect on nontraditional student persistence than college social integration variables such as peer friendships, interactions outside of class with faculty, and participation in campus activities. Bean and Metzner suggested that their model be used to identify variables at individual institutions and that it be modified for use with different subgroups in various institutional settings.

Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993) chose to examine the extent that the two major models of persistence, Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975), and Bean's Student Attrition Model (1985) could be merged to increase insight into the processes that affect students' decisions to persist or drop out of college. In their opinion, a major gap in Tinto's theory has been an explanation of the role of external factors in shaping commitments, preferences and perceptions. Building on previous research results, the researchers constructed a path model that incorporated both Tinto's and Bean's theoretical frameworks.

A group of 2,459 first-time, unmarried freshmen under the age of twenty-four were given attitudinal survey questionnaires twice during the 1988-89 academic year, which yielded 466 usable surveys. Chi square analysis of an integrated model accounted for 45% of the variance observed in persistence

and 42% of the variance observed in intent to persist. Results supported the propositions incorporated in the hypothesized integrated model, which found that the largest total effect on persistence was accounted for by intent to persist, followed by GPA, institutional commitment, encouragement from friends and family, goal commitment, academic integration, finance attitudes and social integration.

Structural relationships among academic and social integration factors as well as those among commitment factors were consistent with both Tinto's and Bean's theoretical frameworks. Additional support was found for the presumed role of external factors on academic integration, along with the effect of encouragement from friends and family on commitments to the institution. The researchers concluded that a better understanding of the persistence process can be gained by combining the two major theories of college persistence. Though this research was conducted at a two-year institution, the study subjects were not representative of nontraditional community college students due to the age and marital status limitations of the study.

Feldman (1993) sought to evaluate pre-enrollment variables as predictors of one-year retention of first-year community college students. The stated purpose of the study was to use information that is generally available about students as they enroll in college and to determine if this information could help identify students who might be at high risk of dropping out. If these risk factors could be identified early enough, an institution could put into place retention programs to reduce the risk. Feldman's assumption was that there are certain pre-existing factors that may characterize students who have a greater risk of dropping out, and that those factors can be identified.

Unlike previous studies in this review, this research only looked at pre-enrollment variables. The sample size was large--5,300 students. Student



records were compared for persisters--students who had been enrolled for one year, and dropouts--students who had enrolled at the same time as the persisters, but who were no longer enrolled one year later. The two groups of students were compared for high school grade point averages, gender, age, ethnicity, goals, full-time/part-time status, and basic skill need. Both chi square analysis and logistic regression were used to analyze the data. Four factors were found to be significant predictors of attrition: high school GPA, students in the age range of 20-24, minorities other than Asian, and part-time students. The strongest predictor was high school GPA.

Fischbach (1990) conducted a study to identify both pre-and post-enrollment variables that could serve as predictors of student persistence and to compare persistence between vocational and academic program students. She studied 150 full-time first-time degree-seeking students. Stepwise linear regression was used to test the influence of race, age, high school percentile, gender, intent and ACT score. Among pre-enrollment variables, the only significant predictor was high school percentile. In fact, only 25% of persistence could be accounted for by the stated pre-enrollment factors. Grade point average and course withdrawal rates were the only significant post-enrollment variables.

### Conclusions

Twenty-nine studies conducted from 1972 to 1991 that investigated the outcomes of obtaining a GED and the academic performance of GED graduates in community colleges were reviewed in this chapter. A related review of seven additional studies considered recent research on community college retention and persistence. Research was grouped into the following sections:

(a) educational outcomes of earning a GED certificate, (b) negative studies of academic success, (c) positive studies of academic success, (d) academic self-perceptions of GED graduates enrolled in community colleges and (e) studies of student persistence at public, open-door, comprehensive community colleges.

Findings from outcomes studies have provided a wealth of descriptive details about GED student demographics, reasons for taking the GED, and perceived benefits of graduation. Response rates for many of these studies were low--21 to 37%--but most have concluded that students regard the attainment of a GED to be highly positive, to improve employment opportunities or job advancement, and to remove barriers for further education and training. Although there are large differences in actual reported enrollments in further education and training that range from 25% in Thompson and Jimmerson (1986) to nearly 50% in Cervero's (1983) study, some of that variation can be explained by the time lapse between receiving a GED and participating in a follow-up study. More research needs to be conducted that actually follows cohorts of GED graduates for longer periods of time to learn what their post-secondary enrollment patterns really are.

Does educational enrollment for GED graduates mirror the 25-60% self-reports from studies such as those mentioned above? The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (1993) followed a cohort of GED and high school completion students who entered the community college system in Washington in 1991, and found that 22% of them had transitioned to either developmental or college-level instruction during the two years of the study. Of course some students take the GED Tests without ever enrolling in a GED preparation program at a community college, and subsequently enroll in community college classes, a factor that would increase the 22% enrollment

figure. Other GED graduates may enroll directly into four-year institutions, into private technical schools, or into job training programs.

While general outcomes studies do not examine the academic success of GED graduates in community colleges, they do reveal the perceived benefits expressed by students who earn their GEDs. These studies also support the fact that many graduates use the GED as a means through which to access further education.

Studies that have examined the academic success of GED students and the ability of the GED Tests to predict academic success in community college programs have reached somewhat contradictory conclusions. Four of the 17 studies that investigated the academic success of GED graduates in community colleges and/or the validity of the GED as a community college admissions tool concluded that GED graduates do not succeed in post-secondary education as well as high school graduates. These same studies also intimate that the GED Tests may not be useful predictors of academic success for further education. Thirteen other studies using many of the same procedures and methods reached opposing conclusions. These latter studies concluded that GED graduates perform academically as well as or better than their high school counterparts in community college coursework and that the GED Tests are valid admissions tools.

The procedures used for many of the post-secondary academic success studies selected all enrolled GED graduates and compared their first semester's or first year's academic performance with that of a sample of high school graduates (Ayers, 1978; Bigby, 1989; Scales, 1990; Wolf, 1980). Using a research design that compared the academic performance of GED graduates with high school graduates over a longer time period (Clark, 1987; McElroy,

1990; Willett, 1982; Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980) would seem to be a more appropriate way of comparing the two groups of students.

Extremely small sample sizes which ranged from 27 (Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980) to 100 (Wolf, 1980) may be responsible for the contradictory results from study to study--results that appear to be unreliable. One small group of GED graduates entering a particular college may be very unlike another small group of GED graduates entering another institution. Such students may vary in gender, age, number of years of high school completed, socio-economic level, motivation and reasons for enrolling in community college coursework. Hannah's study (1972) and Grady's research (1983), using sample sizes of 300 and 458 GED and high school graduates respectively, are exceptions to the small sample problem.

Another problem with many of the quantitative studies reviewed in this study is the selection of variables that researchers used in their research designs to compare GED graduates with high school graduates. The use of numbers of credits attempted, graduation rates, or retention rates as the only measures of success may not be applicable to many students who enter community colleges with the intent to take a few classes before transferring, looking for a job, or entering a training program. Students may behave very differently once they are admitted to an institution with regard to the number of remedial courses taken, the number of classes taken per quarter, the number of hours employed outside of school, and the intent to re-enroll for additional quarters. In order to know if a student was successful, a researcher would have to know what that student's goals were.

Quantitative approaches have not clearly answered questions about GED students' academic success in post-secondary education. Descriptive studies have provided internal information for institutions, but they have not

provided answers about how and why GED students are or are not succeeding. Nor do they provide answers about what success might be for such students.

Studies that have examined the perceptions of GED graduates in community colleges have gone directly to students to ask them about their post-secondary educational experiences. These studies use student words to help community college staff understand which factors contribute to increased student success.

Finally, persistence research has provided additional information about student retention and attrition in community colleges. Most of the persistence research reviewed considered the interaction of various pre-enrollment factors such as high school grade point averages, entering test scores, gender, age, ethnicity, and goals with selected post-enrollment variables such as college grade point, financial aid need, weekly study hours, and faculty interaction. Tinto's retention model has been shown to have some usefulness with open-door, public community colleges; however, social integration, one of Tinto's major variables, seems to have little effect on community college retention (Feldman, 1993; Fischbach, 1990; Grosset, 1989; Halpin, 1989; Pascarella, Smart & Ethington, 1986; Voorhees, 1987).

Although the specific combination of factors that contribute to retention appears to vary from institution to institution, research based upon Tinto's Model of Student Integration (1975) and Bean's Model of Student Attrition (1982) does identify retention and persistence variables that can be applied to the community college setting. For purposes of this study, community college retention research provided a theoretical framework within which to analyze the research data, defining a number of pre-and post-enrollment factors that helped the researcher develop interview questions, concepts, and categories.

Because the current study focused on older, non-traditional students, it is important to discuss two pre-enrollment variables that have been identified in retention studies: age and high school GPAs. Three of the reviewed studies considered age as a pre-enrollment variable. Bean & Metzner (1985) concluded that age per se was not a major variable, but that some correlates to age, such as hours of employment and family responsibility might be associated with attrition. In a later study conducted with non-traditional (commuter and part-time) undergraduate students, Metzner and Bean (1987) found that older students were less likely to intend to leave and earned higher grade point averages than younger students (students under the age of 25), but that they did not drop out at a significantly different rate.

The researchers suggested that environmental factors such as family responsibilities, job conflict, health and other personal problems may be significant for *older* non-traditional students as opposed to non-traditional students of any age. Since this study was conducted at a four-year institution, it is difficult to interpret the results for two-year institutions. Feldman (1993) identified age as a predictor both alone and in competition with other predictors for community college retention, finding that students over the age of 25 were less likely than other students to drop out. There does not be a clear picture regarding the effect of age on student persistence in two-year institutions based upon the studies reviewed.

High school GPA was identified as a the most important pre-enrollment predictor of retention in both Fischbach (1990) and Feldman's (1993) studies. Because many GED graduates drop out of high school before they can establish a high school GPA, it would be difficult to use that variable as a retention predictor. Two studies (Bigby, 1989; Smith & Goetz, 1988) suggested a connection between the scores on GED Tests and academic success, with

higher test scores contributing to subsequent student success, but more research would have to be conducted to establish a direct connection between the two variables.

As Tinto (1993) and Bean (Bean & Metzner, 1985) have stated, the external lives of many community college students, consisting of family commitments, long-established friendships, work, civic responsibilities and church activities, influence the character of these students' lives more than internal campus events. These external roles may have little or nothing to do with their roles as community college students. The need to seek and create a sense of community for an individual who leaves family and friends to live in a residence hall and to study in a new environment as many university students do, does not exist in the same way for community college students who may drop into an institution for classes, but who leave campus as soon as classes are over.

If social integration is not as important as academic integration for non-traditional community college students, personal commitments to educational goals and specific institutional factors may influence persistence to a greater degree. Tinto (1993) writes about commuter and two-year institutions:

It is not surprising, therefore, that social congruency and social isolation appear not to be as important to the question of persistence and departure as they might be among residential institutions, and that prior intentions, commitments, academic performance, and external forces appear to be relatively more determinate of individual decisions to withdraw (p. 78).

As the number of GED graduates who enroll in post-secondary education increases, it becomes imperative that community colleges learn more about these students and the factors that contribute to their success in the community college environment. Only through a better understanding of GED graduates'

needs will community colleges be able to respond with appropriate institutional services that promote the success of this growing group of students.



## CHAPTER III RESEARCH DESIGN

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of a selected group of GED graduates as they enrolled into and matriculated through courses at a rural community college. An interpretive approach using a multiple-case strategy was chosen to understand how a group of six GED graduates perceived their community college experiences. Specifically the study focused on student backgrounds, reasons for dropping out of high school, return motivations and persistence factors influencing student retention.

The literature review summarized the research on recent community college retention. It also highlighted some of the limitations of quantitative studies which have focused on the academic success of GED graduates in such institutions. Quantitative studies have provided numerical data that describe the number of GED graduates enrolled in post-secondary education, their GPAs, and their graduation rates compared to high school graduates. However, quantitative studies have not provided answers about why these students enroll and how their background characteristics and current experiences influence what happens to them once they are enrolled. By using research on community college persistence as a context for the development of interview questions for GED graduates who had transitioned to college courses, I hoped to more fully understand the experience of a specific group of students.

I chose an interpretive design to help me develop an understanding of the experiences of the participants from their points of view. I used two main methods of data collection during the study: in-depth interviews and an examination of student records. Observations of students as they informally

interacted with staff and other students, and short conversations with faculty and staff provided additional information. Data collection took place from February to December of 1994, at Yakima Valley Community College in Yakima, Washington. I chose to analyze and report the data as individual case studies with cross-case comparisons.

This chapter describes the research design and methods, the researcher's background, the participants, data collection, data analysis procedures and ethical considerations for the study.

### Rationale for Interpretive Research

In determining whether to use an experimental or an interpretive research design, the nature of the problem being investigated, the amount of control over variables, and the desired end result need to be considered (Merriam, 1988). I wanted to explore the community college experiences of a group of GED graduates in order to describe factors that have contributed to their persistence. Since little research had been conducted that asked questions about how GED graduates transition to and succeed in community college programs, I decided to use in-depth interviews to identify persistence variables that could form the basis for the development of hypotheses. The nature of the problem being investigated was one of a contemporary phenomenon (the college enrollment and academic persistence of GED graduates) in a real-life context (a community college).

The nature of the problem being investigated, which concerned personal choices and life events that affected student persistence and attrition, could not be controlled. This study proposed to investigate the backgrounds, motivations and experiences of GED graduates who were enrolled in the community

college, and to use case studies to describe that reality as much as possible from the students' perspective, using their actual words. The desired end result was a generating of hypotheses, rather than a testing of hypotheses.

Erickson (1986) presents a set of guidelines for using interpretive techniques. He states that such methods are most appropriate when we need to learn about:

1. The specific structure of occurrences rather than their general character and overall distribution. . . .
2. The meaning-perspectives of the particular actors in the particular events. . . .
3. The location of naturally occurring points of contrast that can be observed as natural experiments when we are unable logistically or ethically to meet experimental conditions of intervention and of control over other influences of the setting. . . .
4. The identification of specific causal linkages that were not identified by experimental methods, and the development of new theories about causes and other influences on the patterns that are identified in survey data or experiments. (p. 121)

Specifically, I wondered what happened to individual GED graduates once they enrolled in community college classes? How did these graduates make sense of their experiences within the setting of the community college? What life events, personal characteristics, academic experiences, and institutional policies affected GED graduates in this setting? As Ragin (1987) explains, a case-oriented inquiry "engenders an extensive dialogue between the investigator's ideas and the data" (p. 49). I chose to use an interpretive case study approach with the hope that it might provide information that could influence college policy and generate hypotheses that might be investigated in future research.

### The Researcher

An interpretive research design uses the researcher as the principal data collection "instrument." My personal background, experiences, and commitments--the tacit knowledge I hold about community colleges and GED students--necessarily impacted and interacted with my research. In order for the reader to understand my perspective about the study and how my relationships with the participants affected the research, a description of my background and experience is presented.

#### Background and Experience

I completed my undergraduate training at the University of Washington, a large, metropolitan university in Seattle. I majored in Spanish, minored in history, and earned a secondary teaching certificate after a fifth year of study. My first permanent teaching experience took place in Selma, Alabama. As a fifth grade teacher, I helped to integrate a rural black school. This experience taught me the importance of literacy, introduced me to a different culture, and led me to pursue a master's degree in elementary education with a reading emphasis. My next teaching experience was in Guam, where I team-taught third grade in a multi-cultural setting which included students from Korea, the Philippines, Japan, Guam and the United States. Teaching in an environment where so many cultures were represented helped me develop some insight about cultural misunderstanding and conflict. I earned my master's degree from the University of Guam and conducted a special research project on Yap, investigating the school system of that group of islands.

After returning to the United States, I was hired by a rural community college to establish an adult education outreach site. I have worked for

eighteen years in adult literacy, English as a second language, and GED preparation at the same community college in which this study was conducted. During that time, I taught and worked with hundreds of students who studied for and obtained GED certificates. I value the concept of the GED, which gives students the opportunity to obtain the equivalent of a high school diploma. I have seen student lives changed by this achievement. Most students gain a greater sense of self-confidence from the process of passing their GED Tests; many students pursue further education, training, or jobs.

After teaching and directing ABE/GED programs for many years, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Education. Once my coursework was completed, I returned to a new assignment at my institution, as an instructional dean, a position which included responsibility for ABE/GED studies. My perception had been that many GED graduates matriculate into college-level classes and eventually graduate or achieve their goals; however, the research I read that considered GED graduates' success at the post-secondary level had not completely supported my perception.

Nearly all of the studies that followed GED graduates into post-secondary education considered quantitative factors such as grade point averages, credits attempted and completed, and graduation rates. However, very little about student experiences, perceptions and goals could be learned from those studies. I was curious whether GED graduates who enrolled in community college classes were prepared for college-level work. I wondered if they demonstrated similar characteristics to other high-risk students, and if certain institutional practices influenced their persistence.

For purposes of this study, I had to constantly remind myself of my bias about the positive value of the GED experience in order to try to understand what was happening from the students' points of view rather than from my own

assumptions. Erickson (1986) indicates that this is a process designed to "make the familiar strange" (p. 121), an attempt to look at familiar surroundings and interactions as though they were new and unfamiliar. At times during the interviews I found myself leading students toward answers I expected to hear about their motivations or attitudes. I had to consciously re-phrase questions to make them open-ended. As Patton (1990) states,

the investigator's commitment is to understand the world as it is, to be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and to be balanced in reporting both confirming and disconfirming evidence. (p. 55)

Though I tried to be balanced in conducting this research, I cannot ignore the fact that my history with the GED influenced the processes of data gathering and data analysis. In this study, the words of the informants were interpreted through my own biases and experiences.

### Theoretical Beliefs

My beliefs support an interpretive research design. These beliefs include the following: a) that reality is socially constructed and ever-changing; b) that multiple realities exist and are constructed through interactions with others; and c) that humans communicate what they know through symbols, the most common of which is language. My goal was to gain entry into the conceptual world of the participants. I believed that the best way to explore the phenomenon being investigated was to ask GED graduates about their perceptions and to listen to their responses.

## The Participants

### Key Informants

I selected six GED graduates enrolled in a rural community college as the study population. Interpretive inquiry often focuses in depth on a relatively small number of participants, selected purposefully (Patton, 1990). In fact, Ragin (1987) maintains that because case-oriented strategies are holistic, they become more difficult to use as the number of cases increases. Because case-oriented methods compare cases with each other and consider the absence and presence of combinations of conditions, the volume of analysis increases geometrically with the addition of even a single case.

The choice to obtain a GED and to enroll in a community college was made by the students before they became participants in this study, so I used a convenience sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) to choose the participants who came from an identified group of GED graduates enrolled at Yakima Valley Community College during the time of the study.

The list I requested from the registrar's office of all GED graduates at the institution identified 637 GED graduates who were enrolled fall quarter, 1993. This number was much larger than I expected. In order to narrow the sample down to a manageable number, I identified student characteristics that would help focus the study. The characteristics that were used were as follows:

- over the age of 21
- enrolled both fall quarter, 1993 and winter quarter, 1994
- studied for and took the GED at Yakima Valley Community College
- received the GED after the test was revised in 1988
- had earned at least 20 credits at YVCC by the end of fall quarter, 1993

Since the study was to involve only six participants, I further narrowed the registrar's list by identifying each student's ethnicity, deciding that the sample should reflect the gender and ethnic balance of students enrolled at the institution. Thus, the target sample was three women and three men, two Hispanics, one Native American and three Caucasian students.

Participants were not selected based upon their chosen majors or programs of study. Ideally, however, I wanted students from both vocational and academic transfer programs. As it turned out, one student was a pre-nursing student, and one was earning a two-year degree in business and accounting. Three students were working on associate degrees with the intent to transfer to four-year institutions. The sixth student's intent was an associate degree, but he had actually not determined a major nor a purpose for his enrollment beyond earning a two-year degree.

### Entree

Gaining entree to the research setting was not difficult. My institution provided the means by which to access GED graduates who had enrolled to take college coursework because the administration was eager to understand what happens to GED graduates after they start taking college classes. I perceived that maintaining long-term accessibility to GED graduates might be a potential problem due to the predicted persistence and attrition patterns of community college students, who often enroll, stop or drop out, and perhaps return at a later time, but access did not prove to be a problem because of the persistence of the participants in this study.



## Data Collection

### Interviews

Data collection initially took place through two phases of open-ended interviews. A third interview toward the end of my study gave participants an opportunity to respond to their individual case studies and to my findings. In-depth interviews were used as the primary method to collect information about participants' perceptions about their backgrounds, reasons for dropping out of school, their motivations to return, and their experiences as community college students.

In order to give me a chance to answer preliminary questions and to arrange for interview times, I contacted students by telephone. Interviews took place in my office, which was located in the same building as the Adult Basic Education/GED preparation programs, next to two college tutoring programs. All of the participants in the study either had taken GED classes or had used tutoring services there, so they were familiar with the location.

Each of the first two interviews with participants lasted for about an hour, with some lasting somewhat longer. The third interview tended to be shorter, and less open-ended, because students were responding to their case studies and to study findings. Interview guides served as checklists to ensure that relevant topics were discussed and that as much data as possible could be gathered from participants (see Appendix C). I attempted to use a variety of questions that elicited opinions, perceptions, reactions, background and feelings. The open-ended format allowed for freedom and flexibility within each interview, enabling me to modify and adapt questions based upon what happened within the context of each interview.

Because of my position with the institution, I exerted extra effort to make participants feel comfortable and at ease. I also realized that the use of a tape recorder might initially inhibit the informants. At the beginning of each of the first set of interviews, I introduced myself, talked about my background, discussed the study, and answered any participant questions. This part of each initial interview, which lasted for 15 to 20 minutes, was not taped. Participants were also given time to read and sign the letter of consent (see Appendix A). At this point I turned on the tape recorder and the interview began. The audiotaped interviews were later transcribed verbatim (see Appendix D) and converted to separate files in *Ethnograph*, which is a text-based data analysis program designed for qualitative studies.

The first interviews focused on student backgrounds, early educational experiences, reasons for dropping out, motivations to return, and passing the GED. The second interview examined the decision to enroll in community college classes, campus experiences and involvement, support systems, barriers to success and long term goals. I gave participants typed transcripts of their first interviews shortly after the interviews took place. They were asked to read them and to note any confusion or misunderstanding that seemed to exist in the transcript. In each case, participants were given a chance to respond to their transcripts at the beginning of the second interview. None of the participants asked for changes to be made with their transcripts. The final interview with each participant elicited responses to their individual case studies and to the patterns I shared within the cross-case comparisons. One participant wanted to re-write some of his verbal responses to make them sound more formal, but I convinced him that his words could stand as they were.

I did not undertake a pilot study. Because of the length of time it took to obtain the list of GED graduates from the registrar's office and to select and

contact participants, it became necessary to start the interview process almost immediately in order to ensure that there would be time before the academic year ended to interview each student twice. Instead, I showed a preliminary question protocol to GED instructors and to several GED students in order to receive feedback about the appropriateness of questions and about questions that should be added or deleted. As a result of these conversations, I made several modifications to the interview guide.

### Document Review

Student enrollment records from the computerized Student Information System (SIS) provided demographic data about GED graduates. I used information related to gender, ethnicity, age, entering basic skills test scores, academic goals, coursework attempted and completed, and grade point averages from the SIS to learn more about the participants.

### Informal Conversations and Observations

Informal observations of students as they interacted with staff and other students, and short conversations with faculty and staff provided additional data about each student. I provided faculty and staff with a consent form (see Appendix B), which they read and signed before any conversations took place. Because of the proximity of classrooms and other campus facilities, I was also able to observe participants as they talked with other students and attended class.

Data collection, including both interviews, document review, and informal conversations and observations took place from February to December, 1994. The length of the study gave me an opportunity to develop and test emerging

ideas against additional data as it was gathered. The goal of data collection was the acquisition of a body of narratives which described how a small group of GED graduates initially dropped out of high school, returned to earn their GEDs, and enrolled and persisted in a rural community college.

### Data Analysis

In interpretive research, data collection and analysis is typically a simultaneous process since analysis helps determine further data collection decisions (Merriam, 1988). Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method of constant comparison for data analysis was used in this study. According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993),

This means that as social phenomena are recorded and classified, they also are compared across categories. Thus the discovery of relationships, or hypothesis generation begins with the analysis of initial observations, undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process, and continuously feeds back into the process of category coding. As events are constantly compared with previous events, new typological dimensions as well as new relationships may be discovered. (p. 256)

Data analysis began after the transcription of the first interview. I read and reread the transcripts, searching for coding categories and patterns, trying to understand what had been stated and what had not been said. I listened to the tapes over and over again, listening to words, to pauses, to laughter, and to vocal inflections. New perspectives and insights gained from this analysis helped fashion the next set of interviews. For example, after the first three interviews, I noticed that each of the informants had mentioned that they reached a point in time when they committed themselves to returning to school.

I needed to make sure that the second interview explored how that commitment came about and why a return to school was the outcome.

I also found that it was possible to generate conclusions prematurely based on just one interview, and that subsequent interviews gave me an opportunity to clarify misconceptions. During the first interview one of the informants told me that he lived with his parents while he attended college. I concluded from the interview that he was single, and that he had no family of his own. Later, he told me that he actually had a girlfriend and two young children. Both he and his girlfriend had moved back into their respective homes so that they could afford to attend college. They planned to live together as a family once they graduated.

As the interview transcripts were analyzed, lists of coding categories were developed, which were later revised. The preliminary list of categories resulted from numerous readings of the transcripts, and were much too detailed. For example, there appeared to be eight chronological time periods that each of the informants passed through, lasting varying amounts of time for each informant. I labeled these time frames growing up, school departure, post-drop-out years, returning to school, the GED experience, transition to college, the college experience, and the future. Within each time frame, there were four or five sub-categories of data. Subcategories within the growing up time frame included family background, school experiences and expectations, work, family demands, family support and attitudes toward education.

As I re-read and thought about the transcripts, I concluded that various topics were either too specific, or overlapping. I was able to combine 50 topics into 21 categories. The transcripts were then hand-coded using the 21 categories that had emerged from the data. The hand-coding process

demonstrated to me that I probably could have eliminated three or four additional categories.

Chronologically there appeared to be five broad events: background, dropping out, returning to school, the community college experience, and future orientation. Background, dropping out, and returning to school became coding categories. The community college experience was too broad, and needed to be broken up into eight other coding categories. Future orientation was also too broad. Other categories such as success, self and attitude had elements of future orientation within them. The 21 existing codes were entered into *Ethnograph*, which then searched and sorted each file for similarly coded segments, eliminating the need for color-coding, cutting, photocopying or pasting.

Coded sections from each file were printed using the coding categories to sort the information alphabetically. Thus, if I wanted to look for family information that I had coded under the "family" category for any of the six informants, I could find that heading within the sorted transcript selections and use the data for the writing of an individual case or for cross-case comparison. If a selection from an informant crossed several coding categories, the data was labeled with each of the codes and printed under each code word.

Case records, comprised of hand-coded interview transcripts, field notes, written documents, and coded output from *Ethnograph* were compiled for each participant in preparation for the development of individual case studies. The rationale for case study development is to "gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (Merriam, 1988, p. xii). I wanted to hear each individual's story, to write separate case studies for each participant, and to

develop a cross-case comparison that would draw the participants' experiences back together for analysis.

The writing of the case studies helped me organize the data into similar chronological time segments, which further aided me as I used cross-case comparison to identify commonalities and patterns among cases. For example, I had become aware during the interviews and the subsequent data analysis phase that several of the informants realized that by dropping out of school they had missed the acquisition of certain academic skills. In comparing each of the case records, I realized that this was a theme that occurred throughout the data, and that it might form the basis for a working hypothesis. This hypothesis became: GED graduates perceive that they need to acquire the academic survival skills they missed by dropping out of high school and are inclined to use college services to remediate these skills. Other patterns within the data emerged that led to the other hypotheses presented in Chapter V of this study.

### Validity and Reliability

Internal validity is concerned with the question of how close one's findings are to reality, and whether researchers are observing what they think they are seeing. Within interpretive research, the researcher will always be interpreting the reality that is presented, which is the informants' perception of reality as they see it. In experimental research design, if a study is to be reliable, another investigator should be able to conduct the same study over again and arrive at the same findings. However, considering the changeability and complexity of human behavior, reliability becomes more problematic with interpretive research.

Since the goal of reliability is to minimize biases and errors in the study, increasing the effectiveness of the human instrument's data gathering and analysis should improve reliability. Merriam (1988) suggests several strategies for ensuring internal validity and reliability as they apply to interpretive or qualitative research: triangulation, member checks, long-term or repeated observation, peer debriefing, participatory research modes, and the clarification of the researcher's assumptions and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study. These strategies were used to strengthen the validity and reliability of this study.

Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of information to verify the accuracy of data that has been gathered. Conversations with faculty and staff, and student records were used to triangulate sources of information. As the study progressed, I cross-checked information gleaned from participant interviews with information from interviews and conversations with faculty and staff who knew the key informants. I also compared information from participants regarding course completion and grade point averages with reports of academic progress from the Student Information System.

I asked participants to read their first interview transcripts before the second interview took place, and to let me know about inaccuracies. Participants were given two additional opportunities to respond to the study's data. I sent transcripts of their second interviews and their case studies to them for response, and also asked them to meet with me for a third time several months later to discuss their cases and my findings. There was little participant response to the interview transcripts, but respondents were verbally supportive of the case studies and of the findings I shared with them. One participant replied, "When you described the patterns you came up with, it sounded like you were just describing me, not a whole group of people."



I conducted the interviews over three academic quarters, which enabled me to build trust and establish rapport with the participants. By the time I asked for their responses to my findings and to their case studies, I had known the participants for eight or nine months. Genuine relationships developed between the student participants and me that promoted the data-gathering process. The participants were central to this study; their words and perspectives formed the basis for the generating of hypotheses.

In order to increase the dependability of this study's results, I kept a study journal, notes, and case files to describe how data were collected, and how decisions were made throughout the study.

### Ethical Considerations

The purpose of the research and the privacy of the participants were considered both before and during the study. I informed participants about the possible purposes and activities of the research, and also about any benefits or risks that were involved with their participation. GED graduates and non-student informants who agreed to participate in this study were provided with consent forms (Appendices A & B) that I discussed individually with each informant prior to any data collection. Secondly, I maintained confidentiality by changing informants' names in order to protect them from any psychological or social risk, and by keeping coded records in a locked file in my office at home.

## CHAPTER IV FINDINGS

### Introduction

In-depth interviews with a selected group of GED graduates who have persisted at a rural community college were conducted to understand how students perceived their community college experiences. The study focused on factors that have influenced these students to persist with their education. Each of the interviews, along with student records and demographic data formed the case records of the six individuals who were participants in this study.

Interview transcripts, which had initially been word-processed using *WordPerfect*, were converted to files in *Ethnograph*, a text-based data analysis program, and hand coded. The codes were entered into *Ethnograph*, which then searched each file for similarly coded segments. I compiled case records, which consisted of hand-coded interview transcriptions, field notes, written documents, and coded output from *Ethnograph* for each participant. Using the case records, I next searched the data for commonalities and patterns.

I used five broad chronological events to organize the data: a) participant background, which included early life events, family conditions, and attitudes toward school; b) dropping out, which encompassed reasons for leaving and attitudes toward schooling; c) returning to school, which looked at dissatisfaction with life conditions, the motivation to return, passing the GED, and college enrollment; d) the community college experience, which included level of preparation, support, the "balancing act" between family and school, social and academic integration, barriers, and commitment; and e) future orientation, which involved goals and intentions, student faith in the educational system, the value of persistence, and concepts of success and a better life.

I next wrote a case study for each participant using the five major chronological categories listed in the previous paragraph. I reread the coded data and student records and noted instances where either student words or case data referred to a particular category. Finally, I chose to use cross-case comparisons to illustrate the patterns that emerged from the data.

### Case Studies

#### Marge

Marge is a 40-year old, divorced mother of four, who passed her GED in 1991. She was born in California, but moved to Idaho as an infant. She grew up in a small rural town where nearly everyone was related. Her immediate family included nine brothers and sisters, and her parents, who separated and divorced while Marge was in elementary school. They each later remarried. Her family was very poor.

Marge quit school after starting 10th grade. She had never really liked school, always feeling out of place and self-conscious. After her parents separated, her family moved numerous times. During seventh grade she attended five different schools, constantly feeling like the new kid who was being sized up by other students. She knew as she began her 10th-grade year that she was pregnant and that she would be dropping out, although because of her attitude toward school, she had mentally dropped out earlier. When asked why she actually dropped out, she responded, "Well, I was pregnant, and that's the excuse I've always given, but I think it's just I left because I wanted to. I didn't like school and I didn't want to be there."

After going through a church program for unwed mothers, Marge had her baby and went on welfare. Later, she married and had three more children in California. Following her husband's incarceration for manslaughter, Marge moved back to Idaho, where the rest of her extended family was living. Back on welfare, she attempted to return to school, but Idaho had no programs in place which would allow her to do so.

She moved to Washington, and within a short time located a GED preparation program in a community college adult education center and began studying for her GED, 20 years after leaving high school. She only studied for six weeks before passing all sections of the GED Tests. Asked how she was able to pass the tests so quickly, Marge responded, "I read constantly. I read all the time. And like I said, it wasn't because the work was hard that I was failing [in] school. It's just that I didn't want to do it."

Her goal was to go to college, and the GED provided her with a way into post-secondary education. Marge's motivation for enrolling in college was to become self-sufficient. She passed the GED and started classes at YVCC, the closest community college in the area. She chose the community college because of its proximity and its cost.

Though she is not close to her brothers and sisters, she is close to her mother and to her own children. Her mother was fourteen when she dropped out of school; Marge is only the fourth of ten siblings to graduate from high school or receive a GED. She lives in a two-bedroom house with her seventeen-year-old son, her younger daughter and her daughter's three children. According to Marge, they are all supportive of her educational efforts. "All my family is supportive. . . . All of my kids have been really supportive. My mother and I are close, and she's very, very supportive." In fact, her younger

daughter, who dropped out of school before graduating, has begun to study for her GED since Marge enrolled in school.

Marge has been enrolled for three years, with summer quarters off and with one "stop-out" quarter. She interrupted her program at a time when her older daughter's family was living with her. The family had numerous problems, which included heavy drinking and emotional problems. According to Marge, the choice was to fail all of her courses that quarter, or to stop out and return when she could. Although she has taken three years to finish a two-year transfer degree, Marge has a respectable GPA (2.79), and will graduate after fall quarter, 1994, with 130 credits. But it hasn't been easy.

Marge quickly noticed that there were areas where high school graduates seemed to have advantages over GED graduates such as herself. In her opinion, "The GED was a starting point. [It] just says you can go to college, not that you've had the same experiences as high school graduates." She didn't know how to take notes, how to use the library to research a topic, or how to give a class presentation. Marge assumed that her classmates had learned these skills in high school.

She found writing a research paper to be a new way of writing, one for which she was ill-prepared. Marge also found that she had missed learning about English mechanics--especially how to use punctuation effectively. Her English placement recommendation was English 75, a class which prepares students to enroll and succeed in English 101. She moved steadily through her communication requirements. However, because she had been out of school for so long, she had no experience with computers and was afraid of them. To this day, she types her papers at home on a typewriter rather than using the computer lab on campus.

Math has been a particular problem for Marge. It was the only subject that she really had to study to pass the GED Tests. Although she lacked confidence in her mathematical abilities, she passed the mathematics section of the GED Tests with the highest score the local examiner had ever seen. Marge was surprised because she considered math her worst subject. Her math placement recommendation was Math 90, which is a year of high school algebra condensed into one college quarter. Because she felt that she needed more self-confidence in mathematics, Marge elected to take Math 70, a review of basic arithmetic that precedes Math 90. Math 70 seemed easy because it repeated much of the material she had reviewed for the GED Tests. Math 90, however, was much more difficult for her. She had to take the class twice in order to pass with a satisfactory grade, slowing her progress towards a degree.

Besides needing to acquire the basic skills in math and English that she missed by dropping out of high school, Marge has had to learn how to take notes and how to study for tests. She learned by just starting to write down "what [she] was hearing, what was written on the board, and what sounded like it was important." Because she had never developed study habits, just sitting down to study was difficult. "It's been really hard for me to sit down and study. I get frustrated [and]. . . I'll get up and do housework. I'll sit back down for a little while, get frustrated again, get up and do something else. I don't have the patience to sit and study for hours."

Family problems present a constant challenge to Marge's college performance. During her enrollment she has had at least one of her daughters living with her, along with several grandchildren, and her son. She has lived on the edge financially, relying on welfare for her small monthly income, and relying on a combination of funding from the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) Program, and

financial aid to pay for her education. As she described, "I haven't had a car for the last month and a half. My car's kaput. I've got a friend's car right now. I have to give it back at the end of the week. I still don't know whether I'm getting my car back." The pressures of living so close to the edge, of being responsible for her extended family, and of keeping her grades up have given her anxiety attacks and high blood pressure.

In Marge's opinion, the institution itself has presented few obstacles to her success. In fact, when she was asked to name problem areas, she only came up with one: the difficulty of getting into required classes during her first quarter or two on campus. Asked to describe her experience at YVCC, she responded, "Oh, it's been good. I've had a lot of support. Most teachers are always willing to help. If you have problems, most of them will understand if you go and talk to them. So, I haven't had a bad experience at all at YVCC."

She has used tutoring, the computer-assisted instructional lab, financial aid and counseling services, and has no complaints about them. As far as making suggestions for improvement, Marge indicated that perhaps instructors could do more to help students form study groups, that more tutoring services could be provided, and that sections of the Freshman Experience Seminar could be made available for all students.

Marge has experienced Yakima Valley Community College as a typical commuter student. She arrives on campus each day shortly before her first class, and leaves immediately after her last class. Her friends are people from her own community, which is located 25 miles from campus. She knows students from some of her classes, but although she talks to them when she sees them on campus, they do not form a support network for her. Marge has never participated in any student activities.

She has been focused on a two-year transfer degree since she first enrolled at YVCC. Her declared major is sociology. Marge plans to transfer after fall quarter to a private four-year college that is located close to her community in order to obtain a degree in counseling.

I've been leaning toward counseling ever since I worked as a counselor for the battered women's shelter in Idaho. . . . Originally I wanted to work with abused children, because I think the parent that hasn't abused the child gets the raw end of the deal. . . . But I don't think I could handle it. I, right now, am leaning more toward maybe counseling for rape crisis, through the police department, or something. But I definitely want to go into counseling.

Even with her commitment to this goal, Marge's determination has wavered at times--mostly because of the extra quarters it has taken her to finish her degree. Rumors about cutbacks in federal employment and training programs have made her wonder if she will actually be able to finish her degree, yet her JOBS counselor has reassured her that she will have the financial support she needs for the next two years of school. Marge will finish her coursework at YVCC after one more quarter.

### Jeremy

Jeremy is a 34-year-old, married father of two, who passed his GED in the spring of 1993. He has an outgoing personality, and usually has an infectious smile on his face. Because he is so friendly, he readily attracts people. It's rare to see him alone. Born in California, he moved to Washington as a young child. His immediate family included his mother, his step-father, and a sister, none of whom graduated from high school. His mother went to ninth grade, his father to seventh. Jeremy grew up in Yakima, moving several times, and attending four different grade schools during his elementary years.



He completed ninth grade at a local junior high, and briefly attended high school, dropping out after one quarter of 10th grade. According to him, junior high was "an important part of my life. I started making some really bad choices then. Seventh grade was probably my last school year that I really applied myself at academics. . . . I started getting into smoking pot and drinking and stuff like that and kind of lost interest in the normal class routine."

Jeremy feels that teenage rebelliousness initially led him into drinking and drugs, and that he fooled himself into thinking that he was wise enough to make decisions for himself.

When school authorities warned him that he would be suspended if he continued to collect unexcused absences, Jeremy's response was to quit school before he was kicked out. When asked if he missed being in school once he was out, he admitted that he missed some of his friends, but that he was so involved with drugs and girls that he really didn't care. He remembers feeling that he could take care of himself, that he could be successful on his own, that he knew what he was doing.

He became involved with a young woman several years older than he, moved to Oregon and did farm labor, harvesting berries, cucumbers and cherries to survive. Returning to Yakima several months later, Jeremy washed dishes and went through a series of other short-term jobs. He was not yet 17 years old. "I was still pretty young, and I'd been working different jobs and so on. And just hanging around doing drugs, things like that." One night he and two friends got a "wild idea" and broke into a department store, stealing clothing and other items. Soon thereafter they broke into the high school and stole sports equipment. The three were finally caught when they broke into a grocery store that had a silent alarm system. Because each robbery was considered as

a separate felony, Jeremy found himself facing between ten and thirty years of prison. As he states:

And I was in jail and just, quite honestly, scared to death. And my grandmother, who's a very strong Christian woman, guess she'd just been praying for me all of my life, and always trying to get me into church and so on, and I just sit there and says, Okay, God, if you're out there, you get me out of here and I'm yours for the rest of my life. And it worked out just marvelous, because I paid restitution on the materials that were not returnable. I served 35 days in jail, and had three years probation.

He started attending church, made restitution, and served a year and a half of probation. During that time he met his wife, to whom he has been married for 15 years. He was almost twenty years old. Jeremy spent the next 13 years raising a family and working in numerous blue-collar jobs. At various points in his life he was a forklift operator, a general laborer, a roofer, a retail sales clerk, a line operator, and a building insulator. Several times during those years he thought about returning to school, even picking up application forms. But the nine-dollar enrollment fee stopped him, as did the need to work to support his family. There were many weeks when he and his family lived on \$48 a week--times when he was between jobs and on unemployment.

During his last job working for a building contractor, he dropped a hot tub on his leg, which meant that he could no longer work as a manual laborer. While recovering from knee surgery, he started thinking again about returning to school, and soon enrolled in adult basic education classes, intending to earn his GED. His mother had earned her GED, and he figured that if she could pass the tests, so could he. Feeling "totally stupid," he took his entry tests and found that math was the only subject he would have to really have to study. He joined the Step-Up Program, a program that was put together to help GED students transition to community college and other training programs, although at that

time he had not really thought past earning a GED. He admired the way his Step-Up instructor taught:

If I didn't get this, I wasn't going to get what's coming next, and he understood this, and he assured me in a way to not give up on me, to make me feel important, because I've always been afraid of math. "It's nothing," he says, "you will do this." And his philosophy about I teach you this, you get an understanding, and you show somebody else. And he worked us in groups so that I could begin to show other people. And as I showed other people, things became clear in my mind, so that I could say, "Yeah, this is mine." Because he says, "Once you teach somebody, and you have the ability to show them, it's yours." That was important to me.

Jeremy passed the GED Tests in the spring of 1993, after studying for about three months, taking all of them rather than doing one or two at a time. As he stated, "I sat down, and didn't leave that place until the test was done. . . . I just wanted to get it in, get it done, to breathe." He not only passed the tests easily, but he achieved a score of 301, which is 76 points above the minimum score needed to earn a GED. By this time, he had decided to enroll in college.

Jeremy's reason for entering college was to get a better education so he could get a better job in order to provide for his family and contribute to the community.

I know that by pursuing this education I'm doing it for a purpose, for not just myself, not just my family, but my idea is to be a benefit to this community that I live in. And I think that would come from living on the tight edge of life for so long. Because when you don't have some of the advantages of education, you're forced to take jobs that are not mentally stimulating. . . . Once you get the basic fundamental part of your job down, you just go in mechanically to do it every day. It's like a no-brainer.

Faced with the inability to continue the type of manual labor he had done before, Jeremy had to decide how to prepare for the rest of his working life. He

chose psychology as a major and Spanish as a minor, eventually intending to work within the juvenile justice system as a counselor.

He returned to the learning center and continued to study until June, when his college classes began. Due in large part to the extra several months in the learning center, Jeremy's college entrance scores recommended enrollment into English 101 and Math 90, and showed that his reading skills were at college level. It's likely that he saved himself one or two extra quarters of enrollment in developmental college courses by continuing to study in the adult basic education center for those extra months. During that time, he applied for college admission, for financial aid, and for additional funding from the Department of Labor and Industries.

His commitment to counseling stems from an incident in his past when a church evangelist predicted that he would eventually work in the juvenile justice system. The evangelist's words and encouragement from other people in his life are leading Jeremy toward such a career. He feels that he has the full support of his family. At first, his kids thought it was funny that he was in school like they were, but they have grown accustomed to it. His family also needed to get used to the fact that he needed some quiet time to study. Both his wife and his children check with him to make sure he has completed his homework before he does anything else.

Jeremy's first quarter in college classes did not begin smoothly. Because his financial aid had not been approved, he assumed that he would have to wait another quarter to enroll, so he didn't attend class. On the third day of the quarter, he was informed that he had his funding, so he started attending. He borrowed money to buy his books and "just started taking it one day at a time." Jeremy quickly found that he loved going to college. He has accumulated a GPA of 2.93 after five quarters of study. The only disadvantage he feels

compared to recent high school graduates is that they are accustomed to studying, whereas he has had to relearn study habits. "When you quit school and you wait 18 years to come back, your mind is out of that routine. And your mind's not as young and fresh as the people just coming out of high school."

When asked about his overall experience as a student at YVCC, Jeremy responded that in general, his experience had been quite good. He values the caring attitude and the professionalism of the faculty and staff. He has used financial aid, tutoring services and counseling. Other than some miscommunications from the financial aid office, Jeremy gives campus support services high marks. He took a freshman orientation class his second quarter, which helped him learn how to study, how to take notes, and how to use the library, among other things. And he was able to buy a computer, which has eased the process of writing papers and completing other assignments. Additionally he has been fortunate to have an excellent faculty advisor, one who has guided and supported him.

Obstacles on campus have tended to be bureaucratic ones: financial aid paperwork and confusion, registration problems, and a lack of guidance about coursework needed for transfer. Although Jeremy did not totally overcome his math deficits and his math anxiety before enrolling in college courses, he did not feel at a major disadvantage when compared to the high school graduates who were attending the same classes. Barriers off campus have been related to his family life: a lack of time to be with his children, the need to take over the running of the house when his wife became ill, and constant problems finding the funds to support his family while he attends school.

On a typical day, Jeremy arrives on campus right before his first class, attends his classes and any tutoring sessions he might have scheduled, goes to the student union building for a lunch break, attends his last class and heads for

home. Occasionally he stays for an extra half hour or so to socialize with someone, but he does not participate in organized clubs or activities.

Jeremy is committed to finishing his education. He makes no excuses about his background or his past actions.

I'm not into this big sob story thing--my life, such-and-such a background, and I was at such a disadvantage. There are enough programs available to people no matter what education level they happen to be at, that they can come back and learn if they want to. I had a fairly rough childhood, but I am who I am, I make my decisions on what I'm going to do. . . . I don't put a lot of stock into the idea that we have a rough childhood therefore we can't succeed as adults. . . . For the most part, if you want something, it may be difficult to do, but life's not always easy. We have to work for things.

Although he feels that he has the same values he had when he enrolled in school, Jeremy does feel that his thought processes have changed.

Me as a person, who I am, what I believe in, my value system, my basic makeup has not changed. The way I might view something, analyze something, think about something, in the mechanical sense, because I have more tools to work with now, you see. It just adds up to who I am, and so long as I keep those tools working within the structure of who I am personally, I probably won't change.

Jeremy will finish at YVCC after winter quarter 1995, and will enroll in a nearby four-year college (Central Washington University) at that time.

### Becky

Becky is 37 years old, the mother of three children. She is married to a mechanic who works in a juice processing plant. In many ways she epitomizes the returning, high-risk, non-traditional student. She dropped out of high school, had a family, worked in an unskilled job for a number of years, and

returned to earn her GED in order to gain entrance into nurses' training. She is female, older than the traditional college student, and Hispanic.

Born in Yakima, Becky has spent her entire life in the area. As a young child, her immediate family included her mother, father and two brothers, but later on her parents divorced and remarried, bringing two step-brothers, an adopted brother, and a half-brother into her family. Neither of her parents graduated from high school. Her mother completed eighth grade, and her father fifth or sixth grade. Becky's two brothers both dropped out of high school, but the younger one returned to earn a GED. She is the first and only member of her family to go on to college.

While Becky is Hispanic, she is careful to explain that her mother is Caucasian, her father half Mexican, half Spanish. She was not raised in a traditional Hispanic household, nor does she speak Spanish. Her parents divorced when she was starting junior high school. She has, however, been exposed to the Hispanic culture through her father, who felt that it was important for her to learn about her heritage.

Becky attended elementary school mostly at one school. When she moved during fifth grade and transferred to another school, she found herself feeling behind the students in her new school, especially in math. Becky remembers that she made it through by copying other students' papers, thereby getting her assignments in and passing her classes. During 10th grade, she met her future husband, began skipping school, became pregnant, and dropped out. Her father, with whom she was living at the time, told her she would have to get married. Seeing no other options, she did just that.

I finished my 10th-grade year. I started going out with my husband and skipping a lot of school, and still passing my classes, but found out that I'd rather be out goofing around than going to school. Then fell into the old rut that a lot of girls do today. . . but I

ended up getting pregnant and at the time my folks were divorced and I didn't have much of an option. I was living with my dad and he was saying get married. So that's what I ended up doing. And then after that I never went back.

By the time she was 18, Becky had two children, and felt that there was no way to return to school. She started working in a local cannery, first working the night shift while her children were small, later moving to day shift. During this time she expressed a desire to return to school, but her husband, who had always hated school, objected to her return, telling her that she had family and work obligations. Becky took recreational evening classes at her children's school, but yearned to start studying to become a nurse.

At the age of 34, Becky walked into the Learning Assistance Resource Center at YVCC, ready to start work on earning a GED in order to enroll in nursing classes. She took the GED pre-tests and scored high enough to pass all but three of her tests. After attending the learning center for about six weeks, she decided to risk taking the GED Tests even though she knew she wasn't really ready. Because her scores on the three reading sections were high, she was able to earn her GED with lower scores in English and math.

When asked how she felt when she learned she had passed her GED, Becky replied, "I was real happy. I was *really* happy. Finally--it's taken me so long." Her husband wasn't happy for her, but her daughter bought her a dozen roses and had them waiting on the table when Becky returned home with her test results. Becky credits her children with providing the support she needed during that time. She is still wounded by her husband's attitude toward her education. "Because I'm not getting an education--just. . . a lot of it is for myself, because I know I can do better than what the cannery work has to offer me. That's a no-win situation. It's just a circle. And so I know I can do better, and I



want to do better, and he's going to reap the profits from it, too. But he doesn't see it that way."

In order to pay for her college classes, Becky continues to work at the cannery from June to November, which means that fall quarter's schedule includes working from 2:00 p. m. until midnight six days a week, in addition to attending classes. "As soon as I get done [with school] I go to work and I work until November, so fall quarter I'm working night shift and going to school at the same time. I've done that for two years. And that's hard."

Becky was fortunate to enroll in a linked group of classes during her first quarter on campus, which included a biology, an English, and a communication class. Because the students stayed together for their entire schedule, they all got to know one another quickly. She maintains that the bonds that were formed during that class have lasted over the two years she has been enrolled. Additionally, staying with one group of students and in one classroom made the transition from the Learning Assistance Resource Center easier for her, and promoted her success in all three classes.

Though school has been difficult at times, Becky has maintained a solid grade point average (2.95) while working and caring for her family. She describes herself as an average student.

I don't feel like I--I don't know, I try my hardest, most of the time. Sometimes I feel like I could really do more, but I don't have time to do any better, and I feel like if--my family would suffer more if I studied more. I'm in that catch-22, where if I study more, my family suffers more, my house suffers more. . . . I have to find that happy middle, so I have to be satisfied with what I can do, which isn't the best I can do. I know I [could] do better if I had more time. . . .

Although she thinks the faculty have been helpful to her whenever she has needed them, she has not developed a close relationship with any of her college level instructors. She has never had an instructor for more than one

class, nor has she used her advisor for advice about her career or her personal life. Her favorite teachers are still her GED instructors, who always made her feel comfortable.

Because she has such a busy schedule, Becky has attended the college as a commuter student. She lives about 30 minutes from campus, and drives back and forth by herself. But she has made friends from her classes. In fact, some of the people she has met on campus have become close friends and support for her off campus. When her classes are over for the day, she doesn't stay to socialize or to participate in clubs or student government, which means that she is usually only on campus about three hours each day. She does most of her studying at home. Since she has been active at her children's school and with other community activities, Becky has a wide circle of friends and acquaintances outside of school.

As an Hispanic student, she was asked to join the MEChA Club, a student activities club for Hispanics, but Becky didn't consider the invitation seriously because she really doesn't consider herself a minority student. Becky has strong feelings about minority students who use their culture as an excuse for poor work or for other personal benefit.

But I really think that a lot of the ethnic things that get carried around get so far out of hand, that people use it to prejudice as an advantage to the situation, and, oh, that teacher didn't like me because I'm Mexican, and I'm like--He didn't like your paper because you wrote a bad paper, you know? I mean, don't use your color as an excuse, and I think it's used too much, to the fact where I'm just, I'm not going to use it to my advantage.

She was also amused when a state university tried to recruit her for their nursing program because they were looking for students of color.

Becky's use of student support systems on campus has been limited, however she has used tutoring several quarters--one quarter for biology and

another for math help. Becky appears to be satisfied with other college services such as registration and library services. Unlike many students, she has not experienced problems getting into the classes she needs. But she has faced a great deal of pressure to quit school from her husband.

He feels that when I get done with my school that going on to nursing that I'll be self-sufficient, self-supportive. I won't need him financially and then I'm going to run off and marry the first doctor I see. . . . He knows I'm continuing through it, even though the first couple years have been really hard with him.

She feels guilty about being away so much from her youngest child, who is eight years old. She also feels the financial pressure of paying for all of her college expenses herself.

Because she is the first in her family to graduate from high school and enroll in college, the longer she is in college, the more she feels a sense of alienation from her extended family.

I don't want to stereotype people, but I kind of feel like the kind of upbringing that they're in--use my family as an example, all the dropouts in there and the kind of life that we've been accustomed to, to actually go back to school is kind of breaking away from what you're stereotyped to. I mean, already I've been kind of stereotyped away from my family, because they think that--at first it was like she [my mother-in-law] was really happy for me, and it's now like, well, I have to study so much I'm not allowed to do the things that I used to be able to and--"Well, she's going to school now and she's just going to be too good for us. . . . Well, she's going to school to be better than me. . . ." And it just saddens me to think that they think that I'm going to school to be better than them.

In her opinion, they have misinterpreted her reasons for returning to school, and because of their attitude she has literally been "kicked out of the family group."

In June of 1994, Becky was informed that she had been accepted into the nursing program. Though it seems a long time to wait, knowing that she has

been accepted gives Becky a timeline and a new set of goals. At times her determination waivers and she asks herself why she is making such sacrifices to finish her education. But she has a strong belief in the value of an education both for herself and for her family. "I guess it just depends on the way you look at yourself. But the reason that I'm going back to school is for me, and for my future, and for my kids' future, and for my husband's future." Becky begins nurses' training in January, 1995.

### Dan

Dan is a widowed father of three, who enrolled in GED preparation classes at the age of 41. He has been at YVCC for three years, which includes the four months he studied for his GED and another five months he spent improving his basic skills before taking college courses. According to Dan, he actually passed the GED while he was in the military service many years ago, but he felt that the certificate he had was fraudulent and outdated. He remembers going to class after his regular army work day, being given the GED sub-tests along with answer sheets with correct answers on them, and being told to memorize the answers in order to pass the GED Tests. Twenty years later, as he was trying to figure out what to do next, he decided to legitimately prepare for and pass the GED.

Dan was born in Missouri, but migrated to California with his family when he was two years old. His parents were farm workers who later left California and moved to Portland, Oregon, where Dan grew up and went to school. He describes his childhood as a "basic childhood," but his family as "really poor." He is the sixth out of seven children in his family. His parents each only had about two years of education. He didn't even start school until he was eight

years old. One of his brothers didn't enroll until he was 10. His family just kept them at home.

Once enrolled, elementary school was fun and easy for him. He describes himself as "teacher's pet," because he caught on to things quickly and finished his work ahead of his classmates. He played sports and enjoyed his classes in elementary school, which went through eighth grade. Most of the rest of the kids in his school were also poor. In ninth grade, Dan moved from his elementary school to one of the largest four-year high schools in Oregon. He became "really confused and intimidated from the size of it and the people and everything." All of a sudden he had to have the right clothes and belong to the right group. Since he had done so well in elementary school, he was put into biology, algebra, and other college prep classes. He started doing badly the first week he was there, and quickly became involved with the wrong crowd, getting into trouble, smoking, and stealing cars.

Dan began skipping school during his freshman year, then dropped out at the beginning of his sophomore year. He didn't actually earn any credits from ninth grade because his attendance was so irregular. In order to leave school, he lied to the juvenile authorities, telling them that he was going into the army. To Dan's recollection, no one tried to talk him out of leaving school. Rather than entering the service, he and a good friend of his got jobs at a car wash. The next three or four years were spent "just running, doing drugs, and drinking and everything wrong." And then he was actually drafted into the army.

Through several mix-ups, Dan's orders were lost, and by the time he was due to go to Viet Nam, he only had ten months left in the army. In order to make up for the fact that a tour of duty in Viet Nam was 11 months long, he was sent home to Portland on a 30-day leave. Once home, he met a girl and fell in love. His family urged him to remain absent without leave (AWOL). He stayed AWOL

for a time, but eventually turned himself in, receiving an undesirable discharge. To this day, Dan feels like he shirked his duty by not going to Viet Nam.

Dan married and needed to find work, but he had no particular job skills. Since his wife's family were farm laborers, his wife and he joined them picking fruit. For the next 10 years, he migrated from Arizona to California, to Washington, and even to Colorado and Michigan to do farm labor, following the berry crops and tree fruit. In his words, "That's the only time I was ever happy--when I was on the road. I used to love it." His children--two sons and a daughter--were born during this time. He recalls now that his oldest son was in nine different schools as a first-grader. "And I had no idea what I was doing to my kids at that time. But now I can see it."

One winter when he and his family stayed in Portland, his wife found out about an education program for low-income adults. She enrolled, passed her GED, and was going to start classes at Mt. Hood Community College. Dan realized that it was time for the cherries to start in California, so he made her quit school. "That's another thing I always regretted there, too. Because she was trying to better her life and I didn't see it at all. I couldn't see it. I was too hung up on--well, I was addicted to drugs and alcohol since I was about 15."

After his wife died of cancer in 1988, Dan went through some very tough times. He had become addicted to heroin, he had lost most of his possessions, and nearly everyone who knew him had given up on him.

I guess it took hitting rock bottom to come out of it, but I finally did hit rock bottom. Believe me, everyone had given up on me except my daughter. And I was laying in our apartment, flat broke, a month behind on my rent, because I'd lied to my landlord and told him that I didn't get my check and used it for drugs, no car or nothing. Sold everything that I had that was worth a dime. I was without anything. And I just asked God to come in and turn my life around, and he did. And from that time on I haven't had to have any drugs or alcohol.

He was able to get on the methadone program in Yakima, and went through it. In his words, "I've been clean and sober ever since. Thank God."

In 1991, Dan started studying to pass his GED. He attended GED preparation classes for four months before taking his tests. He felt ill at ease and scared when he first arrived in the learning center, but he credits the adult basic education staff with calming his fears. "They treated everyone the same way, too. They were real positive and always there for you, no matter how long it would take for you to figure out a problem, they'd stay there with you until you got it."

The decision to enroll in college was forming as Dan studied for the GED. Counselors from the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and Comprehensive Mental Health had urged him to consider taking college classes, something he had not planned to do when he started studying for his GED. By the time he passed his tests, he was about 70% sure he would enroll in college. Once Dan made the decision, he continued studying in the learning center until his college classes started. He was afraid that if he stopped attending school, he would never come back. Because he took the additional time to strengthen his basic skills, Dan did very well on his community college placement test, testing into college level math, reading and English classes. In his opinion, the process of studying for the GED helped prepare him for college by helping him learn how to study. The content of the test itself wasn't as important as the learning process.

Dan feels that his experience in the learning center gave him the confidence to go on.

I saw that there was a lot of older students here. See, I thought this was like 18- to 19-year-old people. And that scared me and I didn't want to be in an environment like that at all. But as I saw that more of the students were my age and everyone was so

helpful. Anywhere you go here, ask a question and they'll go out of their way to help you. And I've never been in an environment like that before. And that probably did it more for me than anything, right there. Just the people being so helpful and understanding and I could see that I could do the work.

His first quarter grades were a pleasant surprise for Dan. He earned a 3.67 GPA, and was on the dean's list for high scholarship. After six quarters, he maintains a 3.40 cumulative grade point average. Because Dan wanted to enter the workforce as quickly as possible, and because he wanted to stay in Yakima, his counselor advised him to major in accounting. He hopes to go to work and earn a "decent living," which to Dan means some amount of pay over minimum wage.

Dan's opinion about his educational experience at YVCC is heavily influenced by his 10 months in the Learning Assistance Resource Center. The first day he was on campus for college level classes, he had a hard time staying away from the second floor of the library, where the learning center is located.

I could hardly stay away from this building. Every break I'd run back over here for security. And I was lost. And I signed up with the tutoring center and that's the only thing that helped me right there. I would have stopped the first month of school and never come back if it hadn't been for the tutoring here. And since I had help with tutoring, after the first test I saw that I could pass them. I was all right then. The first month, I'd say, was pretty hard.

Besides using tutoring services, Dan participated in several student study groups that formed with the encouragement of instructors. The study groups showed him that there were other students as lost as he was, and that there were also students who would help him.

Dan has high praise for some of the teaching he has experienced. He has the following words to say about his favorite instructor:



He doesn't let anyone fall through the cracks, or whatever. And he always puts us in groups so where we've got support of [other students], besides his support. And he always tries to tie students that are more advanced with the ones that are behind, put them together like that, and that's a lot of help. . . . And I really enjoy the way he teaches.

His only real complaint about his enrollment at YVCC centers around advising and planning. When he first enrolled, he was under the impression that all classes were available whenever a student needed them. He didn't realize that he would have to plan carefully in order to graduate. Dan maintains that with better planning help he could have graduated at least one quarter earlier. He also maintains that grades are too easy to get in some classes, and that there could be more homework. But he adds:

You know, this is all so different for me, and so positive. I haven't seen anything wrong with it, because it's all so much better than what I was used to that I really haven't got anything to compare it to, except hell. Anything's better than that. I've had a great time here, and everything, everyone's really been real good to me and for me. I really can't find anything to say about how I would improve any of it.

Dan describes himself as an average student; however, when asked if his grades reflect average ability or effort, he admits that they do not. He suggests that his grade point average supports his contention that good grades are too easy to come by. Dan adds that he prepares himself very well for tests and he attends class religiously, something that he feels would improve most students' grade point averages. Because he is a serious student, he has little respect for students who enroll in classes but who don't do their homework or study for tests. Dan has several pieces of advice for anyone who might consider enrolling. First, he recommends that students plan their schedule well so they don't have to spend extra time getting the classes they need to graduate.

Second, he advises that students take a freshman orientation class to learn how to study, how to use the library, and how to manage their time.

Although he spends more time on campus than many students, Dan interacts academically rather than socially with the institution. He arrives on campus two or three hours before his first class in order to spend time in a computer lab. The rest of his day alternates between classes and computer labs. Dan has not participated in any clubs or student activities; however, he has joined student study groups whenever he could. He does all of his studying on campus rather than at home.

During the two years that Dan has been enrolled at YVCC, he has only worked occasionally, doing odd jobs for his landlord. He relies on financial help from a Pell Grant and from public assistance. Because his grant is not available for summer quarter tuition, Dan has taken each summer off from school. Other than those summer quarters, he has not stopped out of school. But he did come close to dropping out. Last summer he managed to get a job that paid \$6.00 per hour, and although it wasn't much, he found himself getting out of the school routine and into the work routine. It was difficult for him to quit his job and return to school, even though the school experience has been extremely positive for him.

As his life began to improve, and as he achieved some successes, Dan had a hard time dealing with change. He explains, "I found that I didn't think I deserved a lot of the things that I do deserve, and am receiving now. Before I started coming to school, I really didn't think that we deserved to have a better lifestyle. . . . I think addiction probably does that to you." Asked why he has persisted, and what has kept him in school, Dan states that he has always tried hard "to do the best that [he] could," and to finish anything he starts. Dan will finish his coursework for a two-year degree in Business and Accounting in

March, 1995, and will re-enter the work force armed with an education that he hopes will enable him to obtain a good job.

### Miguel

Miguel is the youngest of the students interviewed for this study. He is Hispanic, 29 years old, and single. He lives with his parents, although he has a girlfriend with whom he has two children. Miguel and his girlfriend are both college students who have chosen to live with their respective parents in order to make ends meet while they attend college. Their intent is to finish school, find jobs, and eventually live together as a family.

Miguel has five brothers and four sisters, and is the youngest of 10 children. His parents moved to Washington from Texas before he was born. He grew up and went to school in a small town about 20 miles from Yakima. Miguel's parents have been very supportive of his schooling, perhaps in part due to the fact that they only had a chance to attend three or four years of school themselves before their parents took them out of school to go to work.

From then on their mom and dad got them out of school and they're working ever since. So when they had children, they made sure we got clean clothes and clean everything just for us to go to school, and we didn't have to worry about going to work or nothing. Which is pretty cool, but I didn't take advantage of that. I should have, 'cause I had all my summers free and all I had to do was just go to school and get good grades, but I didn't see that back then.

Two of his sisters and his five brothers have graduated from high school. One brother and one sister have attended college, but both dropped out before graduating.

He remembers being taught bilingually for the first several years of elementary school, then being placed in a class with mostly other Hispanic children. Although he was a good student in the first four or five grades, sometime after sixth grade he began to rebel and to lose interest in school.

It seemed I couldn't associate with nothing positive in my life at that time. It wasn't like if I get good grades, this would happen. I didn't see far beyond, like if I did good, maybe I'd be smarter in high school and if I was smarter in high school I'd get better grades and maybe I'd get into college, if my grades were good enough. But I didn't see that far, maybe because I didn't have no one. . . for some reason I didn't have that role model in my life to tell me this, that, stay in school and do good and it's going to help you out in the long run. I didn't have that. It didn't click back then.

He attended junior high, but considered himself a "slacker." As he stated, "If I could get by with a C, I'd do it. I knew I could do better, but it just wasn't in me. I don't know. I just didn't have that drive or something. I didn't have no goals in furthering my education." Miguel decided to move from Toppenish to Yakima, to live with his brother, to try a different high school and make a fresh start. Instead of working on his grades, he spent his time getting to know people and trying to fit in. He flunked about half a year, lost credits, and decided he had better return to Toppenish. Miguel states, "[I] fell in with the wrong crowd and that kind of held me back in my life." Although Miguel actually finished high school with his class, he had lost so much credit that he was unable to graduate.

After his class graduated, Miguel considered going back to high school to finish earning the credits he needed for a diploma, but he was too embarrassed. "And for some reason I was kind of hesitant about going back because I felt kind of scared. What are people going to think? Everybody in my grade graduated already, and I really didn't want to go back. . . . Now I'd do it on a dime, because

I'm not as scared, or not as insecure about myself." Following two or three months of wondering what he was going to do next, Miguel ended up working in a fruit warehouse.

For the next eight or nine years, he went from warehouse job to warehouse job, not being satisfied with his life, but not doing much about it. Meanwhile, his girlfriend graduated from high school in 1991, and applied to YVCC. Miguel started thinking about entering college. He originally looked into attending a four-year institution, but when he compared the costs between that institution with YVCC, he decided to try YVCC. He also learned that he would have to pass his GED in order to enroll.

Miguel contacted a local Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) office that was willing to give him some financial support while he worked on his GED. He attended one of YVCC's off-campus learning centers and earned his GED in about six months. For Miguel, the GED was a way into college. For others, he thinks "it's a good stepping stone. It's kind of like getting your foot through the door and helping you get into other things you want to get into." By spring quarter, Miguel had applied for financial aid and had begun to attend college. His placement scores recommended developmental courses in math and English, and a college reading skills course in reading. He remembers feeling intimidated because he didn't know what to expect since he had been out of school for so long.

One difference that Miguel noticed right away was that the college students he met had a different attitude from high school students. There was no more "have to." Instead, "at college, it was a different sort of crowd. It was a more of a 'want to,' it was more relaxed, which was just very nice. A lot more open minds, a lot more a certain type of people going, which was all right." Miguel knew why he was in school.

My life was going away. It was the same thing, like I said. It had a pattern going to it, getting a job, working for so long, and then doing something for me to get fired or either I'd just get tired of it and I'd go on to maybe try to get another job. It was my life wasn't going nowhere and I knew I had to do something.

However, he had no idea what he wanted to do. He declared no major; he was just happy to be in school. After a full year of classes, Miguel still doesn't know where he is heading with his education. He continues to take distribution courses for his associate of arts (AA) degree without a major in mind.

Miguel's short term goals are to get to school each day and to pass his classes. Although he talks about earning his AA degree so he can transfer, he isn't even sure that he will transfer. His first quarter was a difficult one academically for Miguel. He flunked one class, which put him on academic suspension. In retrospect, he wishes that he had taken the freshman seminar class, which would have helped him learn how to use the library, how to do research, and how to take notes. He also thinks that he should have followed the math recommended by his placement scores instead of trying to jump ahead.

In the end I paid for it, 'cause I didn't do good in those classes. And I guess after my third quarter, this last quarter we just finished, I finally got everything situated and I learned how to take notes, I learned how to get enough time to study, and enough time to do [my] reading, and I guess to discipline myself. Finally kind of keep track of things.

His parents have remained supportive of his education, giving him room and board while he is enrolled in classes, and he is grateful for their support. Miguel does not work during the school year on a regular basis, but he works for a parcel service during the Christmas break. Financial aid helps with the

rest of his school costs. His greatest barrier in college has been his lack of knowledge about how to study effectively.

Miguel has taken the many of his classes from just two or three instructors, teachers with whom he is comfortable. One is an ethnic studies instructor; another teaches reading. He knows what to expect from them and believes that he can pass their classes. Because he has teetered on the edge of academic suspension, Miguel feels that he needs to be very careful when he chooses classes and instructors. He worries that the wrong choice will result in another failing grade, which would threaten his college enrollment.

It's kind of, that when you're on a Pell Grant and, like I was talking to you before, that there's a lot of classes you'd like to take but then you get kind of hesitant about taking them because you're kind of scared about flunking it and if you flunk it you get on probation and you can drop out, you can make yourself flunk out of class, or out of college. So you find yourself taking classes, 'Oh, OK, maybe I can pass that class or I can pass this class,' and you don't really challenge yourself as much as you want.

Between spring and summer quarter, Miguel had a difficult decision to make. He had taken a Math 50 class spring quarter, but had missed a large number of the class sessions. In order to receive a passing grade in the class, he had to earn an A on the final. Although Miguel studied hard for the final, he did not earn an A. He was distraught. Miguel finally seemed to realize that his own choices--decisions about whether to attend class, whether to complete his homework, whether to study for tests--would determine his success in college. He spent a long weekend struggling with his priorities. He concluded that he wanted to find a way to remain in school. His math instructor allowed him to take an incomplete and to re-take the class summer quarter.

Miguel considers his experience at YVCC to be positive, but not what he expected. "It's not what you'd see on campus when you see a college or some

situation, school situation on TV. It's--YVC is almost just one step ahead of high school." He has used various services on campus, including financial aid, counseling, the computer assisted instructional lab, and tutoring. He hasn't been very happy with counseling, but admits that he really doesn't understand what to expect from the counselors. He wants the counselors to be more specific about careers, class choices and other recommendations. Miguel has found tutoring to be helpful and supportive. He feels that he is friendly with most of his instructors, and that they are very approachable. "I've learned things that I didn't know before, which made me want to even stay in college more, 'cause if I've learned that much in that short a time, then I'm looking forward to learning some more stuff."

Although, on the one hand, Miguel considers YVCC just one step ahead of high school, on the other, he states that it's a "lot better" for him because he is taking it more seriously. He would "recommend it [YVCC] to anybody who's looking into further education." He admits that he expected the institution to help him more with the decisions he needs to make about his future. "Maybe because I haven't took classes, maybe because I don't know what direction I'm going to. There's some classes I take and I wonder if they're going to help me further on in my life, and should I be taking these classes." When asked if he will succeed at YVCC, Miguel replied, "I guess at some points you doubt yourself, but I think I'll be successful at YVCC--in the long run." Miguel has completed about half of the credits he needs to graduate.

### Paula

Paula is a 52-year-old Native American student who was born and raised in a small town south of Yakima on the Yakama Indian Reservation. She is an



attractive, compact woman, with dark curly hair and a ready smile. Paula spent the first 17 years of her life in that small community, attending both elementary and junior high school there. She has six siblings--three sisters and two brothers. Her father left the family during her childhood, leaving her mother to raise the children. Her mother worked as a farm laborer. "You know, cherries, hops, all that. So just being a mother, I can just imagine how she felt, because, you know, taking us out to the field, and dragging us home, and how tired she'd be and have to cook for us. . . ." Neither of her parents graduated from high school, nor did any of her brothers or sisters.

Paula describes herself as a "regular tomboy" during her early years. She didn't care about her schooling, neither did her mother. Paula finished ninth grade in Wapato, then transferred to another nearby community to live with her grandmother. Her new school district initially placed her in 10th grade, but moved her back to fourth grade after testing her basic skills. Paula couldn't handle being moved back to fourth grade as a 16-year-old--it was just too embarrassing. In retrospect, she wishes that her earlier schooling had been more rigorous, and that she had been held accountable, rather than being passed from grade to grade.

The move to Toppenish was difficult for other reasons. Her grandmother, with whom she had been sent to live, was an alcoholic, and was not really able to care for her. Feeling neglected, she moved in with relatives of some of her friends. "And I can't remember what happened after that. I guess I just gave up. And then I met my husband and we lived together and then I got pregnant and got married. . . ." So at the age of 17, Paula left school, and began a series of moves around the state with her husband. The marriage lasted long enough for her to give birth to five of her seven children, but eventually her husband's alcoholism drove the couple apart. For the next 10 years or so, Paula lived off

and on with her mother, or with other partners that she met. Sometimes her children were with her, other times they either lived with her mother or at an Indian boarding school.

Paula held a series of manual labor jobs, sometimes working in fruit warehouses, other times working as a seamstress at a clothing factory and a furniture factory. She would work for a while, quit for a time, and then return to work. Thus she was never able to gain seniority, which left her vulnerable to lay-off. She studied for her GED several times, but by then her own alcoholism interfered, and she couldn't stay sober long enough to make much headway. After going to drug and alcohol treatment three times, she was finally able to maintain sobriety. "I went to enroll in school and I made my first goal, and I said, 'I'm going to get my GED regardless of my grandchildren or anybody. My GED comes first.' So that was my first goal in my whole life. And it took me almost two years." She passed her GED in the spring of 1993.

After passing her GED, she enrolled in Women's Programs classes for displaced homemakers at YVCC, and spent time clarifying her next goal. By then, she was raising four of her grandchildren. Paula attended a college fair and decided that she would enroll at YVCC with the intent to transfer to a fashion design program at Central Washington University. Yakama Nation Higher Education and the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation promised financial support for her efforts. In order to get help with her four grandchildren, Paula has had to go on public assistance, which she didn't want to do. "I hated to get on welfare, but the children were on welfare and they would not help me unless I get on welfare with them." She needed to be able to pay for child care.

Paula has been enrolled continuously for seven quarters, attending summer quarters in hopes of speeding up her progress and of making up some

of the extra time it has taken her to get into college level courses. She was nervous when she first started classes.

I thought there was going to be a lot of young kids and I didn't know how I was going to adjust, but there's all [ages of students] and there's quite a few Indians here that I knew. And Bonnie was pretty helpful and I was just more or less scared if I wasn't going to do the school work right or if I was going to fail. Right away I was getting, what do you call it--already putting myself down, which I shouldn't be doing. But I says, 'You can do it, you can do it.'

Because her placement scores recommended the most beginning levels of developmental reading, writing and math, Paula has taken two years to complete freshman level coursework in those areas, which frustrates her greatly. She feels that she often studies for hours without tangible results. "Well, I seem like I study and I study and I study and I just don't get anywhere." Most of the courses she has left to take are in the natural and social sciences.

She has struggled with feelings of guilt from leaving her grandchildren with babysitters, but she is determined to finish her education. During one class she made a collage that showed her in the middle, being pulled by her grandchildren on one side, and by college on the other. "I'm getting pulled apart from both my family and from the college, but I tell myself just maybe another three years, and we can go out and do anything we want then."

Paula has the verbal support of her family. "Oh, they're proud of [me]. They're glad. I think that's what gave my other daughter [the idea] to go back to school. 'If Mom can do it, I can do it.'" Although she has their verbal support, only one daughter actually helps her by picking up and caring for the grandchildren Paula is raising. Her other children are alcoholics, and are unable to manage their own lives. Paula has hopes for them, but their problems inevitably impact her life. She worries about what will happen to her grandchildren when she transfers to Central Washington University, which is an

additional 40 miles away, and considers whether she should turn their parents in to Child Protective Services to force treatment for drug and alcohol abuse.

Paula's experiences at YVCC have been positive. Her teachers have all "taught pretty well." She uses tutoring services often, feeling that her basic skills still aren't where they should be. Her advice to other students is to "listen and do your homework, because once you get behind there's no way of catching up, because it'll just stress you out more." She also recommends that students get their college level skills up as far as possible before enrolling in college classes. "If they don't get the knowledge that they need, it's really frustrating to them. Well, it was to me. And me coming out, like, out of the dark ages and not knowing any of these things." Her advisor, also a Native American, has helped her with course planning and other information necessary for her enrollment. Two of her developmental instructors have been instrumental in providing her with the encouragement she needs to continue in school.

At first, Paula went to the Indian Club's meetings, but then she told herself, "Well, you know, I shouldn't be in there because I don't know anything about being one of the officers, and how to say 'I object,' or something like that. I don't know what they're talking about, it's all gibberish to me." She decided to spend that time on her studies, rather than on student activities. Although she commutes to school, Paula spends long hours on campus, often studying in the library or the HUB until the night janitor has to close up. Her long hours of study earned her a place on the academic President's List her first quarter. Six quarters later she still has a 3.18 GPA.

She has met students in study groups and other classes, but most of the friends she has made on campus come from the developmental classes she took when she first enrolled at YVCC. Her support network comes mainly from her family and from the financial and counseling help she receives from DVR,

Indian Higher Education and the JOBS Program. When one funding source dries up, she has others to rely upon.

Paula has changed since enrolling at YVCC. One of her first instructors described Paula as "a shadow" when she first entered class. She was so unsure of herself that she glued herself to the instructor and asked questions about everything. Now she often provides answers for other students. Another instructor described Paula as initially being withdrawn and hesitant. Now that she has gained confidence, Paula has shown herself to be motivated, capable, and sensitive to other students. In her own words, Paula expresses some of these changes. "I believe I've changed a lot, because I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. I wouldn't know how to express myself. I'd be too afraid to talk or say. And I'm more outspoken; I have more confidence in myself than I had before." She is on course to finish her classes at YVCC in one more year.

### Cross-Case Analysis

The student participants in this study were selected because they had several characteristics in common. First, they were all enrolled at Yakima Valley Community College during fall quarter, 1993. None of them had graduated from high school. They had returned to school to earn their GEDs, had prepared for their tests in one of YVCC's adult education centers, and had thereafter enrolled in college classes at YVCC. Each student had earned at least 20 college credits before they became participants in the study. All were 21 years of age, or older. Cross-case analysis revealed a set of patterns, or similarities, among the participants. I have organized these patterns into the following categories: backgrounds, return motivation, attitudinal effects of passing the GED, academic self-concept, academic integration, faith in

education, and breaking the cycle. The next section contains descriptions of these categories.

### Backgrounds

The participants share four background characteristics. These characteristics are low socio-economic status, little or no family tradition of valuing education, moving or changing schools, and negative attitudes toward schooling. A fifth characteristic, parental divorce, is discussed in this section even though it appeared in only four of the six cases.

#### Low socio-economic status

All of the participants grew up in low-income homes. Dan, Paula, and Miguel's parents were farm laborers who either followed the migrant stream, or stayed in the Yakima Valley, moving from harvest to harvest. Marge, Becky and Jeremy's parents occasionally did farm labor, but also found work in other unskilled areas. Jeremy remembered weeks when the family had little or no income, and other weeks when his father received unemployment income between jobs. Marge described why her family was so poor:

My father never worked. He broke his back when I was really young and didn't work--and he would not accept charity. So my mother worked in the potato fields and we got all my cousins' hand-me-downs--and I hated it. 'Cause the kids all knew. And they teased. We were really poor--we were the poor relations, and I hated school.

### Little or no family tradition of valuing education

The parents of the participants in this study had very little education, and for the most part demonstrated little interest in their children's success in school. Paula described her mother's attitude toward education. "And I don't remember Mom telling us to study or anything. We'd just go home and do anything we wanted. . . . She never cared about our report cards, neither." Going to school just wasn't valued. As Dan explained:

Education was nothing. My family didn't stress education at all. My mom and dad might have went to second grade, and none of my brothers or sisters went to high school. . . . I'm talking about the early sixties. And even me as a young kid, fifteen, sixteen years old I could go out and get a job. . . . And so no one stressed education at all in my family.

Miguel's parents were an exception to this pattern. Although they only completed the first few years of elementary school themselves, they have been very supportive of education for their own children. "They're real supportive, but it was kind of hard for them to help us with homework and everything, because they didn't have much education." Only two participants--Marge and Miguel--have any siblings who graduated from high school, but they are in the minority. Jeremy, Becky, Dan, and Paula are the first members of their families to attend college.

### Moving or changing schools

Most of the participants moved and changed schools several times during their childhood, and these moves contributed to their negative attitudes toward schooling. Jeremy went to four different grade schools; Marge attended five schools during seventh grade alone, and found herself hating to go to

school. Becky started fifth grade in one location, but moved later that year. "And when I transferred, it was like I couldn't catch up. And the math was terrible. That's when I started getting frustrated."

Even the participants who didn't change schools as often seemed to have experienced difficulty when they went to a new school. Dan had been a good student in elementary school, but when he enrolled in a large high school, he got lost, fell in with the wrong crowd, and only lasted part of a year. Miguel transferred from one high school to another, spent his time trying to fit in, and flunked half a year of school. Paula moved from one community to another, and was sent from 10th back to fourth grade due to basic skills deficiencies. Rather than attend fourth grade as a 16-year-old, she quit school.

### Parental Divorce

At first, divorce appeared to be a common factor in the family backgrounds of the participants, but with further questioning, I found that Miguel's and Dan's parents are still married. Paula's father left her family when she was nine years old. Marge's parents separated and later divorced while she was in elementary school, as did Jeremy's. Becky's parents divorced and each remarried. Although divorce is not included as a common factor, I believe that it contributed to the instability of the early lives of four of the participants and disrupted their schooling.

### Dropping Out of School

At some point during high school, each of the participants in this study chose to drop out. Most dropped out during 10th grade. Miguel is the exception, because he actually stayed in school until his class graduated.



Participants' reasons for dropping out have been discussed in their case studies. Although there are some similarities--all three females were pregnant when they left school, and two of the three males were using drugs and alcohol, there does not seem to be any single theme that defines the students' reasons for dropping out. The years that followed for the participants were filled with numerous life events. Five of the six married and raised families. They all found jobs and went to work.

### Return Motivation

The participants in this study all reached a time in their lives when they became discontented with their lives and with their work. This discontentment and the drive to become economically self-sufficient motivated them to return to school in order to obtain more satisfying jobs. Because the participants had not graduated from high school, and because they had no additional job training, the jobs they had held since dropping out of school were manual labor jobs.

Paula worked as a sewing machine operator for a clothing factory and a furniture factory. Marge worked as a dispatcher. Becky worked as a cannery worker. Jeremy held jobs as a dish washer, insulator, and factory worker. Dan was a farm laborer, and Miguel packed fruit. Each of them expressed frustration about the work they were able to obtain. For two participants, health problems also interfered with their ability to do certain types of work. During his last job in construction, Jeremy dropped a hot tub on his leg, which meant that he could no longer work as a manual laborer. While recovering from knee surgery, he started thinking again about returning to school.

[I] laid around after surgery, you're sitting on the couch cause you can't do much else with the brace on, and you're just kind of wondering. Where is my life going? What am I going to do? I

cannot do what I once did physically. My brain's still intact. But you can't make the kind of money that I was making without an education.

As a single parent, Marge needed to find a way to support herself and her family where she didn't need to be on her feet. "The only kind of job I can get is stuff that I have already done--janitorial, hospital work, stuff like that, where I have to be on my feet. I can't be on my feet for more than a couple of hours, I can't walk. My legs and feet hurt so bad. I'm not going to have an income pretty soon. I need a way to make money." Additionally, she expressed a desire to get off welfare. "I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to get off welfare. I wanted to do something."

For the other four, it was a matter of discontent and a need to be economically self-sufficient. They expressed dissatisfaction with the way their lives and their jobs were going. As Becky stated, "[The] work is hard and it's meaningless. . . . Towards the end there, I would run a machine and I would just sit there and you have all day just to sit there and you run this machine and it's just like your mind just goes to jelly. And I said, if I don't get out of here, I'll just be a mindless blob!" Miguel began to feel that his life would never change unless he did something about it.

That's why I realized that I needed something to do. Something better in life. I was bouncing around from warehouse to warehouse. Then it became a pattern. I caught myself thinking, "Geez, what am I doing?" I'm going from job to job. Why aren't I satisfied with just one job or just with my life? And that's when I realized that maybe I should go back to school and do something I really want to do instead of have to do.

Paula would work as a sewing machine operator for a few months or sometimes for a few years, never achieving seniority because of her tendency to quit going

to work. And Dan stated, "I've used my back as a laborer all my life and it's worn out. So I have to do something [else] now, get out of that line of work."

### Attitudinal Effects of Passing the GED

Earning a GED provided a second chance for "success" for all six students. Success for the participants in this study meant being able to work in a job that paid well enough to support their families, that gave them an opportunity to use their brains, and that allowed them to contribute in some personal way. Passing the GED Tests also proved to participants that they could achieve academically. All six expressed similar emotions when asked how they felt when they learned that they had passed their GED Tests. Becky sums up her feelings about the GED:

Well, it benefited me a lot for myself, my self-esteem, thinking that I, you know, I knew that I could do it and I should have done it a long time ago and it was the step that I needed to get back on track and to getting something done with the future. With my trying to get ready for another job and getting out of the job that I'm in right now, getting out of the work situation that I'm in right now, and that I'm not really happy with. And doing something else that will be a lot more meaningful, and accomplishing something else.

And Paula went to her GED graduation and yelled, "Yahoo! I made it! All these years, but I'm proud of myself and I pat myself on the back." Miguel felt that passing the GED was "a big accomplishment for me in my life. . . . It was something I finally did, a start." Jeremy talked about the "self gratification," and how good it felt to say, "I've done this. I've completed it. It's mine."

Jeremy also expressed strong feelings about the existence of the GED as an alternative high school diploma:

Well, I think [the GED] is very beneficial, but that depends on the individual. You could have every program in the world available to somebody to help them better themselves, but if people don't act upon it and take it seriously, then it's just a waste. I wanted to get it for the benefits that it has, and that was to get me into college so that I could make a difference in my life. Because it didn't matter whether I had a high school diploma or not, so long as I had a paper that said that I can do whatever these other people can do with a high school diploma. And still come out with a new career. And I'm glad that it was available for that, because I'd still be in some kind of a, I don't know, rut, I guess, in some job that I wasn't happy with. . . .

For these students, completing the GED was tangible evidence that they could actually finish something that they set out to do. When informed that he had passed the GED, Dan was surprised. He didn't think he had it in him. "Really, it made me feel good, too. Probably better than I'd ever felt before in my life. . . . I built my confidence level up in all the areas of my life. It made me feel worthy, I guess, more than anything." He doesn't know what he would have done without an alternative degree such as the GED. "Without the GED, I mean, I would have been stuck back where I was forever--what would I--you know, I'm so old that I couldn't have [gone] back to high school to get a high school degree. That was the end of my road."

A gain in self-confidence is probably the greatest change that participants have recognized since entering YVCC to study for their GEDs. Marge credits both the attainment of her GED and her educational experience at YVCC with bolstering her self-confidence. As she states, "I think it's really helped my self-esteem a lot. Before, I don't know. . . it's just I know I can do it. . . . And I've never felt like I could really do anything. I'm still screwed up, but I have an idea of what I want to do, and I know I can do it. It's taking me a long time, but I know I'm going to do it." Although participants saw the GED as a

worthy achievement by itself, it was also valued as a "confidence builder" and for the doors it opened for them, namely the doors to college.

### Academic Self-Awareness

Each participant voiced self-awareness of their academic status as community college students. Sometimes these words were expressed in comparison to high school graduates, sometimes, just as certain skill or social deficiencies. Marge didn't know how to take notes, how to use the library for research, or how to give a class presentation.

One thing, too, in high school, they make you get up and you have to give reports and things like that and when you go through the GED, you don't have to do that. So I came here and I've never talked in front of a class. Ever. When I was in school and I had to give a report, I'd take an F on it before I'd give it. My first thing I did in front of a class was the quarter I dropped out and I was in speech and I gave my first speech. And I was shaking. I was petrified. I did the speech. I never looked at my notes. I have no idea what I said.

Other participants talked about vocabulary or reading problems. As Paula remarked, "I really improved in my math. But I need more reading. I'm so bad in my vocabulary and my words. There's a lot of words I don't know." She also talked about gaps in her knowledge of history, about her need to improve her writing abilities, and about her inability to use a calculator to do math. Dan claims that he "didn't know how to study at all." However, he credits the process of studying for his GED as being good preparation for beginning to learn how to study and how to ask questions. Dan isn't sure what he missed by dropping out of school. "I'm sure I missed a lot, but I don't know what to compare it to because I really--because I never had any high school at all, you know. I mean, I went a little bit, but I wasn't really there." Interestingly, Dan also feels that

returning to school with a current GED gave him an advantage over returning with a 20-year-old high school degree because his learning was fresher and more current.

Miguel reflected about his study habits in high school. "I don't know why, I think maybe I didn't catch on in high school. I knew I was just going by and I was getting Cs and maybe I got a B and I got lucky. But I didn't know how to get down and study and go two hours straight one night and study for a test and do research." He doesn't know how someone who dropped out of high school earlier than he did would cope.

In high school, you know, you're going into subjects that kind of follow into college courses, and so when you're like dropping out of ninth or 10th grade, you're missing so much learning--you're missing out so much--things that teachers can teach you to help you go into college. And so when you get to college you have to like, catch up, on a lot of things.

All of the participants used available student services to remedy their academic problems. Every one of them used tutoring services to a greater or lesser extent. After initially accessing tutoring services, Dan learned to rely on student study groups formed within his classes to help fill in the gaps. Jeremy took a Freshman Experience seminar, which he considered to be helpful for several reasons. First, it provided a good introduction to campus and to the kinds of academic skills needed by students. It also helped students form support groups by introducing them to cooperative learning projects.

Four of the students spoke of needing an orientation or study skills class, but of either not knowing that these classes were available to them, or of being advised that such classes weren't very helpful. They expressed regret at missing the opportunity to learn useful college survival skills early in their enrollment. The sixth student agreed that a class like the freshmen experience

classes would be helpful to most GED students who were trying to transition into college level classes. Miguel wishes that he had taken the same course, feeling that it would have made his first several quarters easier and improved his grades. Marge feels that everyone should have such a course when they first enter college.

Rather than fighting placement in developmental math, reading and writing classes, five of the students either took the courses recommended by their entering placement scores, or dropped down a level below that recommendation. Although she was placed in Math 070, Becky took Math 050 instead because she felt so much math anxiety. Dan is just now taking Math 070 at the end of his college enrollment, just to be sure of his math skills, even though his placement scores recommended Math 101.

Becky could have started with English 070, but chose to take a lower-numbered course to build up her confidence in writing. Unlike the other five students, Miguel tried to skip a level in math. "By not going with the [placement] results, I took classes that I was not ready for and the final result was a poor grade like an F, which put me on academic suspension." He has since begun the math sequence over again, and is no longer on academic suspension.

### Academic Integration

Each of the participants has experienced the community college as a commuter student. They have involved themselves with the academic side of the institution by attending classes and using academic services, but they have not participated in social or student government activities. Participation in organized student extracurricular activities and informal social activities, involvement with other college students both on and off campus, and informal

social contact with faculty and staff have not been important elements in their college experience, and thus, have not contributed strongly to their persistence. Four of them live 20-30 miles from campus, and commute that distance each day to their classes. All are parents or grandparents, which means that they have family commitments that draw them away from school.

Five out of the six students arrive on campus, attend their classes, take care of any other campus business, and leave for home again. Marge's schedule for spring quarter was typical. She arrived about 8:15 in the morning, and was gone most days by noon. Paula's attendance pattern is the exception. She often arrives early in the morning and spends long hours studying in the library or in the HUB (Hopf Student Union Building). Miguel spent time in the HUB when he first arrived on campus, but he no longer does. "When I first started at YVC, it was a big thing. It was exciting, it was something new, and so that's where everybody was, and I met some friends there."

Miguel's new friends were from different towns, and were different ages. They formed a support group of sorts, all being new to YVCC. As his first quarter went by, he found himself spending less and less time in the HUB, focusing more on his homework, and going straight home. Although they no longer get together in the HUB, several of these same friends still see each other during quarter breaks. Miguel has not become involved in student activities or clubs, maintaining that he doesn't have the time or the confidence, and that, "I'm just focusing on school." For this group of students, apparently any extended time on campus outside of class time is spent either in the library or in the tutoring center. Although several of them expressed positive comments about faculty members, relationships between students and faculty appear to have been established for academic rather than social reasons.



Paula is the only participant who became involved with student government, but that involvement was brief. She attended a few Indian Club meetings at the suggestion of her advisor, but soon decided to spend that time on her studies rather than on student activities. When Marge was asked about student clubs, she replied, "I know there's a lot of different clubs and stuff. I just want to come here and get out of here." Jeremy has made friends on campus, but he doesn't have time to join clubs or student government. "I just don't find that I have the time to be personally involved in those clubs. My education is where I am right now."

### Faith in Education

For the participants in this study, faith in education describes the confidence they expressed in the power of education to change their lives economically, socially and occupationally. This faith also appears to be the key to participants' persistence, providing them with strong motivation to continue. Education was equated with success. With different words, participants spoke of finishing school, and of beginning a job that would allow them to use their minds, earn a good living, and feel a sense of self-satisfaction. Becky's attitude toward the possibilities of her success are reflected in the following words:

I know it's going to be really challenging, and really hard, and not to say the least on my family life, what it's going to do, but, the benefits in the end will be all worth it. So that's all I have to think, that I've got half of it done, and I'm going towards the end of the rainbow. I'm at the top, I'm on the downhill slide right now, and there's that goal at the end. . . .

Dan sees education as the answer to most problems. "I know that the answer to almost any problem is education--to drug abuse or whatever." He

believes that education will enable him to earn a decent wage. "What's kept me here is the hope that I'll be able to get employment after this where I can get a wage that I can live on--more than minimum wage, and something to where I don't have to use my back." Finances and personal problems continue to plague most of the participants, but they seem determined to finish what they have started. Jeremy's Labor and Industries claim was running out and he pondered how he was going to get by, but his words reflect his determination.

I don't know what I'm going to do for sure. But I know I'm not quitting school. . . . I just have to follow it, just keep doing it. 'Cause it'll all pay off in the end. . . . I'll be real happy when I graduate and I'm in place somewhere working and making a decent living.

Miguel states that he's "understanding how important an education is in life. How important education in life is determines how far you can go, how far you can succeed, in life or in your goals that you want to do." Every participant talked about being serious about their studies, of holding themselves on course, of investing in themselves. Paula reflected on her commitment to finish.

I'm serious. I want to succeed. I want to, you know. I want something to show for my life. I want to show myself that I can do it, that I succeeded in my life. For once, I started something and finished it, 'cause all my life I've never, ever finished anything. Always halfway there. This is like I said, this is my first goal I've ever made and I succeeded and got my GED, so now, it's my college. I've had my doubts. Oh, I'll never make it, but I got that little prayer in there. I says, 'Help me, God.' You know. Then I got the self-talk. 'You can do it. You can do it.'

Jeremy adds,

Nobody held a gun to my head and said, "You're going to quit school." I did it on my own. I think it's very important, at least ways to me, at my age and doing this, that it's not a joke. It's not something to play around with anymore. If you're going to do

something serious with your life, you need to get in, you need to get it done. If you're going to make any changes for your family. If you're going to make any changes for your community. You need to be serious about it.

When Marge was asked why she thinks that she has persisted, she responded that she has the internal motivation to finish her degree, and that she is getting an education for herself and for her future, not to make someone else happy.

I think a lot of people just go back to school because they think they want to do something else, but there's not any big motivation. I've got to take care of myself. . . . I know a lot of people that are going to school because welfare says, okay, you have to. . . . You've got to go to school or go to work. Well, let's go to school. It's better than going to work. . . . If you're doing something for somebody else, what are you getting out of it? It's just like an alcoholic. If they quit drinking for somebody else, it's not going to last. You've got to do it for yourself.

Dan is very direct in his comments about success.

I don't feel like I am succeeding yet. This is just a step here and I really don't feel like this is any more than anyone could do or probably will do. . . . Until I get finished with school and get a job, that's when I'll feel like I've started succeeding. Because I'm still living on somebody else's money right now and I can't call this succeeding.

Jeremy sums it up when he says that all of them have to be very proud of what they're doing. "We didn't do it when we were given our first chance through the normal cycle, but there was enough insight to see that we needed something if we were going to be successful." For the participants, education has opened up new possibilities for them to succeed.

## Breaking the Cycle

Breaking the cycle refers to changing the life cycle pattern that has existed for these families of dropping out of school, struggling to support a family by working as unskilled laborers, and of repeating the same cycle over again with the next generation. As these six students have passed their GEDs and enrolled in college, four of them have noticed that their return to school has had a positive effect on their children. Miguel's children are not in school yet, so he is not included in this pattern. Paula's children are grown up and married, so it may be difficult to judge how her enrollment in college has affected them. However, two of her children have returned to adult education centers to work on their GEDs. Because of problems related to alcoholism, their progress has been slow, and their commitment uneven. It may be that her influence on the grandchildren who live with her will be greater than it has been on her own children, but the grandchildren are still very young.

Jeremy's children are in fifth and eighth grades and are earning straight As in school. At first they were somewhat embarrassed that he was in school, but now they are used to it. In fact, they often check up on him to make sure he has completed his homework. Jeremy responded to a question about how his children are doing in school with one word: "fantastic."

Two of Marge's children have graduated from high school. Her younger son is a senior this year, and is on course to graduate. Her younger daughter, who dropped out of high school, has enrolled in GED classes at YVCC since Marge returned to school. In fact, the two of them commute together.

Becky directly credits her return to school as a positive influence on her children. Shortly before she enrolled at YVCC, her son began talking about dropping out of high school, since two of his cousins had just dropped out.

Becky feels that the example she set by returning to school helped him stay in high school and graduate with his class. Her older daughter graduated from high school last June and enters YVCC fall quarter, 1994.

Since he started attending YVCC, Dan has noticed a complete change in his daughter's behavior and in her attitude toward education. Whereas she previously skipped school and earned Fs on her report cards, now her attendance is consistent, and her grades are at the opposite end of the spectrum. In fact, she earned a perfect 4.0 on her last report card and was invited to her school's academic awards banquet. According to Dan, "She's made a complete turn-around." Additionally, over the last two years, his older son has earned a GED, and his younger son has enrolled in a GED program.

Becky reflects about the patterns she has seen in her own family that have kept them from succeeding and that cause her to be even more determined to finish her education.

Neither of my parents ever finished high school, and neither of my husband's parents ever finished high school. . . . I was thinking about this the other day, that of all my family, my husband only has one brother that finished high school. . . I only have a half-brother that finished high school. My two real brothers never finished high school. . . . And so we really do, in our family have a high rate of drop outs [from] school, and so I think that's another thing that makes me really determined, because I see what kind of life it can lead to, and I just don't want to be in that. . . I see the way my grandparents died, when they died, and I see the way his grandmother lives right now in a housing development in the lower valley for lower-income senior citizens, and I don't want to be like that. I want to have more out of life than to depend on someone to send me a check once a month.

## CHAPTER V HYPOTHESES AND IMPLICATIONS

### Introduction

This study sought to understand how six GED graduates who dropped out of high school came to be enrolled at a rural community college, and what factors they perceived contributed to or impeded their academic persistence and success. In-depth interviews with students and examination of student records provided most of the data for the development of participant case records. Case studies and cross-case comparisons presented in Chapter IV enabled me to examine patterns and commonalities that appeared to be present among participant experiences.

Participants were selected purposefully from an initial group of 637 GED graduates enrolled at Yakima Valley Community College during fall quarter, 1993. In order to participate in the study, students had to be at least 21 years of age and enrolled both fall and winter quarters during the 1993-94 academic year. They also had to have studied for and taken the GED Tests at YVCC after 1988, and to have earned at least 20 credits at the college by the end of fall quarter, 1993. Students were not chosen on the basis of their major areas of study, their intent, or their grade point averages. By chance, I ended up with three students who intended to transfer to four-year colleges, one who was a pre-nursing student, and one whose goal was to earn an associate degree in business and accounting. The sixth student had not determined a major or an intent.

I found that they had many background characteristics in common--more than I would have expected. All of them came from low-income homes with little or no family tradition of valuing education. Participants either changed schools

often or experienced a school move that disrupted their progress. They also developed negative attitudes toward schooling. Each dropped out of high school, married or developed significant relationships, had children, worked in unskilled labor, returned to the community college to earn a GED, and enrolled in college classes. Along the way, three of them became involved with drugs and alcohol. In most cases, participants were the first, or nearly the first members of their families to earn a high school diploma of any sort, let alone enroll in college.

Participants' backgrounds and life events suggested that the probability of success in college would be small, yet these students were succeeding. I sought to understand how this group of older, at-risk students arrived at the community college, how they perceived their community college experiences, and what factors they believed had influenced them to persist with their education. The central research question asks what it is about the experiences of these GED graduates that has either promoted or impeded their persistence and success in college.

This chapter is organized into four sections. The first presents my findings in terms of hypotheses generated from the data. The second section contains the educational implications I derived from the hypotheses. In the third section I discuss some limitations of the study. The fourth provides some suggestions for further research.

### Hypotheses

I have framed the central ideas that have been generated by this study as hypotheses because they are preliminary and tentative. The data is representative of the experiences of only six participants. The study is

exploratory in nature. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to label my findings as hypotheses rather than as conclusions.

Hypothesis One: The GED is an effective means for adult high school dropouts to access community college education.

Although a high school diploma or a GED is not an admissions requirement for enrollment at all community colleges, it is required to obtain financial aid at many institutions, including YVCC. Financial support was a necessity for five of the six participants in this study. Human services programs such as the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Program routinely require a GED for students who do not have a high school degree, but who request tuition assistance to attend college. Not only does the earning of a GED signify that a person has gained academic skills, it also demonstrates to human services organizations that GED graduates have the desire and the discipline to be in school.

The adult high school dropouts in this study viewed success as the ability to get a good job and to become self-sufficient. Because of the students' ages and the economic pressures they faced to get into the work force, they needed to acquire high school certification as quickly as possible. The GED was viewed as a direct route to access further education. Previous studies (Behal, 1983; Nelson, 1975; Thompson & Jimmerson, 1986; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986) have also concluded that the attainment of a GED is perceived by graduates as a means to gain entrance into education and training programs.

Five of the six students dropped out early in their high school careers--most at the beginning of 10th grade. Even in an adult high school diploma program, at least three years of full-time enrollment would be required to graduate from high school, as well as additional time to earn the rest of the



credits needed for college graduation. Economically and psychologically, these adult students would never have considered returning to school without the accessibility of an alternative diploma like the GED. All of the participants in this study attributed the GED with giving them another chance to succeed. One student called it a "second chance;" another called it a "last chance."

Hypothesis Two: A primary benefit of passing the GED Tests is an increase in the self-confidence adult high school dropouts need to enroll in community college education.

The acquisition of a GED demonstrated to participants, first, that they could be successful, and second, that they could accomplish a school-related goal. This finding supports numerous earlier studies that have examined the outcomes and benefits of passing the GED (Gaskin, 1982; Hayes, 1991; McClung, 1977; Nelson, 1975; Thompson & Jimmerson, 1986). In all of these studies, a major benefit of earning a GED was an increase in self-confidence. Gillespie's research (1987) specifically surveyed GED graduates who had participated in a GED preparatory program and found that their academic self-perceptions had improved after they passed their GED Tests.

Participants in this study had been out of school for anywhere from 10 to 35 years before returning to study for their GEDs. They had little or no self-confidence in themselves as students. They had failed in previous educational settings. They came from families that had negative attitudes toward education. The realization that it was possible to learn and to demonstrate learning by passing the GED opened up the possibility of further education for them. The time they spent preparing for their GED Tests provided them with a way to evaluate their chance for success in college and with the self-confidence they needed to enroll.

Hypothesis Three: GED graduates can do as well in community college education as traditional high school graduates when certain academic conditions are in place.

Three academic integration factors--the accessibility of an appropriate sequence of developmental classes, the existence of study skills or freshman orientation classes, and the availability of tutoring--appear to be important to the persistence and success of GED graduates in the community college setting. A fourth factor, that of supportive advising, was not mentioned as often, but appears to be another factor that contributed to student success.

All of the students enrolled in some developmental courses. Participants acknowledged a need to make up certain skill deficiencies, and recognized that developmental classes enabled them to gain these skills. Without developmental courses, these students likely would have failed in their attempts to handle college level classes, especially math classes. It was important not only to have the availability of developmental classes, but also the accessibility to them. In other words, enough sections of classes needed to be available for students when they most needed them at the beginning of their enrollment.

Study skills and freshman orientation classes provide a good introduction to the campus and to the kinds of skills that support academic success. These classes, especially freshman orientation, also help students form support groups by introducing them to cooperative learning projects. Much of the frustration about lacking basic study skills voiced by the participants in this study could have been addressed by enrollment in either freshman orientation or study skills classes. Only one of these students actually took the freshman orientation class offered at YVCC, and he highly recommended the experience. However, the other five expressed a need for basic learning skills such as time management, library research, essay writing, test-taking, and note-

taking. They also voiced frustration about finding out about freshman orientation and study skills classes after struggling for several quarters to learn the skills taught in these classes on their own.

During their community college enrollment all participants used tutoring services. Each spoke strongly about the necessity of having tutoring available whenever it is needed. Some students used tutoring services on nearly a daily basis, while others only used tutoring when they ran into problems with a particular concept or test. In all cases, tutoring was mentioned as a primary factor that supported students' academic success.

A fourth academic integration factor which wasn't mentioned as much as the above three factors, but which appeared to have influenced student success and persistence, is the factor of supportive, informed advising. Four of the students had been positively supported and guided by faculty advisors, and were verbally grateful for the support. Advising affected student goal clarification, progression toward goals, and student enrollment in appropriate classes. It appears that a positive relationship with a faculty advisor can help students become more academically integrated, which contributes to success and persistence (Halpin, 1989). Turner (1990) previously found that consistent contact with an advisor was a contributing factor to the success of GED graduates who had enrolled in college courses.

Thirteen of 17 studies reviewed in Chapter II that considered the use of the GED as a valid admissions tool for entrance into community college found that GED graduates performed as well as or better than their high school counterparts. Several researchers (Clark, 1987; McElroy, 1990; Willett, 1982, Wilson, Davis & Davis, 1980) compared student academic performance for more than one year, which gives a more precise picture of student progress, and found that GED graduates do as well academically as their traditional high

school counterparts. The participants in this study have shown by their grade point averages, progress towards degrees, and enrollment patterns that they can and will succeed in college if academic conditions like those mentioned in this section are in place.

Hypothesis Four: Students who access community college programs with a GED perceive that they lack academic survival skills due to dropping out of high school and are inclined to use college services to remediate these skills.

All six of the students attributed their preparation for the GED with giving them first, some initial basic skills, and second, insight into the study skills they would need for their college studies. However, they admitted to having additional inadequacies in these two arenas. Participants all enrolled in developmental courses and used tutoring services to remedy deficiencies. This voluntary use of academic support services, perhaps suggesting both a lack of confidence in themselves as students, and a realistic self-appraisal of entering skill levels, supports research done by Grady (1983), which found that GED entrants showed a considerably greater incidence of voluntary remedial enrollment than did high school graduates. GED students may be more willing to admit their academic shortcomings than students who have entered college through traditional means.

Participants in this study assumed that high school graduates develop academic coping skills during high school enrollment. Areas of weakness mentioned by participants included the knowledge of how to take notes and study for tests, how to manage schedules and time, how to do library research, how to write well, how to present information verbally, and how to do math. Their comments were similar to those of students interviewed by Sharon

(1972b), who felt that they lacked the high school background knowledge that was required at their colleges.

Hypothesis Five: Social integration is not an important factor in the persistence of adult GED graduates who are enrolled in community college programs.

Social integration, which is comprised of organized student activities, student government and other social activities arranged through the institution, was not an important factor in the retention of these participants in community college. This hypothesis supports several previous studies (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Grosset, 1989; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Voorhees, 1987). One student went to a few club meetings, but soon determined that her time would be better spent on her studies. Another student initially spent time in the student union building socializing and meeting new friends, but made the decision that he would profit more by using his time to study. None of the other four students have participated in campus activities.

There are three factors that contributed to the disinclination of participants to be involved in campus activities. First, several of the participants live 30-40 minutes from campus, which means they must build in commuting time into their schedules. Second, they are older students who find meaning with activities and friends in their own communities. Third, because they each have families, they have little time or energy left for campus activities in addition to their studies and home responsibilities.

Hypothesis Six: GED graduates develop a strong commitment to their college enrollment because of their faith in education's ability to promote long-term life changes.

Repeatedly throughout participant interviews, students expressed faith in the educational system to change their lives. I was surprised by this faith because participants came from families that had no educational traditions, and had mostly negative attitudes toward schooling. Although I do not have a clear answer as to when participants developed their faith in education, it appears that they grew increasingly unhappy with their jobs and with their prospects for growth and change.

Perhaps they watched other people who had more education be promoted to more responsible positions while they were limited to manual labor. Most participants had changed jobs many times over their adult years. There was some indication that participants saw their parents struggling late in life, and that they didn't want to end up like them. Since their parents were all high school dropouts, it is possible that participants saw education as the difference between economic and social stability and instability. All six students were frustrated by the fact that a lack of education stopped them from obtaining anything but unskilled laboring jobs. In their opinion, a lack of schooling--especially a high school diploma--was the roadblock to change in their lives.

Surprisingly, these students did not fit the mold of many community college students who attend school for a quarter or two and then stop out, later perhaps returning for additional credits. This group of students not only avoided the stop-out pattern (other than one quarter of stop-out by one student) so prevalent in community colleges, but several of them also attended summer quarters in order to accelerate their progress. It appeared to me that

participants' persistence was related to their need to finish and become economically self-sufficient.

Hypothesis Seven: Successful first generation community college students appear to exert a powerful influence toward breaking the cycle of high school dropout and negative family attitudes toward schooling for the next generation.

Three GED graduates have noticed a distinct change in their children's attitudes toward school since they, as parents, passed their GEDs and enrolled in college. Five children are either not yet in school, or have not reached high school yet. Of the nine children who have reached high school age, four have graduated, two have passed their GEDs, two are in high school, and one is attending a GED preparation program. One of the six who has a high school diploma is now in college. Coming from families that had no high school graduates in the past, this is a distinct change in attitude and achievement.

The participants in this study tend to believe that their own re-enrollment in school has influenced their children. Probably the most dramatic effect is on one participant's daughter, who was flunking out of high school before he returned to school. Two years later, this daughter was invited to the academic awards dinner at her high school in honor of her high academic achievement. Although a longer study would have to be undertaken to determine if the educational enrollment of participants has actually broken the cycle of dropout and negative family attitudes toward schooling, it appears that most of the families have a good start in that direction.

### Educational Implications

Five educational implications are drawn from the hypotheses presented in the previous section of this chapter. The first two implications focus on the

continued availability and use of the GED for admission to post-secondary education. The third implication suggests that community colleges have a responsibility to incorporate academic skills into GED preparation classes for students who want to transition into college coursework.

A fourth implication concerns the need for community colleges to offer a well-organized program of academic support for GED graduates (and other at-risk students) who need remediation before they enroll in college-level courses. The last implication posits the need for community colleges to recognize that different cohorts of students, such as older students, have needs that may differ from those of traditional college students.

#### Availability and Acceptance of the GED

The participants in this study have shown that GED graduates can enroll and succeed in community college education given the same kinds of academic support as other at-risk students. The GED was the means through which participants accessed post-secondary education. In their opinion, without the GED, they would be trapped in dead-end jobs, and would continue to struggle to support their families with low wages and unstable employment. The majority of quantitative studies cited in this research that have compared GED graduates' academic performance in two-year institutions with high school graduates' performance in those same institutions support the contention that GED graduates do as well academically as their traditional counterparts (Ayers, 1978; Beltzer, 1985; Grady, 1983; Hannah, 1972; Scales, 1990).

The evidence suggests that the GED should continue to be made available to students as an alternate high school equivalency degree and as a criterion for entrance to two-year institutions. According to the American



Council on Education (1994), by 1993 60% of GED candidates took the GED Tests to access further education and training. Although the number of GED graduates entering post-secondary education in the State of Washington appears to be smaller than that (WSBCTC, 1993), YVCC had 637 GED graduates enrolled in college courses fall quarter, 1993. This number represented nearly one-seventh of the college's headcount.

### Incorporation of Transitional Academic and Study Skills

GED preparation programs housed within the community college system might consider identifying GED students who plan to enroll in college and incorporate transition survival skills into those students' GED preparation programs. Students in this study indicated that besides lacking certain basic academic skills, they also lacked knowledge about how to take notes and study for tests, how to manage schedules, how to do library research, and how to present information verbally.

The two participants in this study who transitioned most easily into college courses stayed in the GED preparation program three or four months beyond the time they passed the GED. This additional transition time continued to boost their self-confidence, improved their basic skills, and accustomed them to the routine of studying and attending college. Both students scored higher on admissions placement tests, which enabled them to skip certain developmental classes, thus shortening the number of quarters they needed to be enrolled.

Since most GED programs set up individual education plans for students, it would be a small step to incorporate more of the above learning skills into a GED preparation program for students who wish to continue in college. Because GED preparation students tend to be in a hurry to pass their GEDs,

GED programs sometimes become little more than test-taking and review classes. Learning how to take a test is a useful tool, but learning how to learn would serve GED students far better for future lifelong learning needs.

### Identifying GED Graduates as At-risk Students

It seems reasonable that GED graduates should be initially identified as at-risk students when they enroll in college. Based upon the placement scores of entering freshmen at YVCC in 1993-94, the scores for the six participants in this study were slightly lower than those of most entering students, with math being the lowest.

Placement recommendations below the 101 level in English averaged 55% for the campus as a whole and 67% for the GED group in this study. Average campus placement recommendations in math ran about 62% into courses below Math 101 compared to 83% for the study group. In reading, the GED students in this study performed about the same as most entering YVCC students, with about 66% of them placing in Reading 100 or below. The campus average suggested that approximately 63% of new students needed developmental reading courses that year.

An effective approach to academically at-risk students needs to demonstrate a proactive orientation toward intervention (Tinto, 1993). It should include assessment, placement, advising, enhancement of basic skills, and the development of learning skills (Roueche & Roueche, 1993). A well-defined transition program for GED graduates would acknowledge that study skills and other academic coping skills may have been missed due to dropping out of school. The goal would be to further increase academic self-confidence and to develop basic and learning skills.

### Students with Different Needs

Community colleges need to recognize that certain groups of students entering the community college have different needs. Older adult students like the GED graduates in this study have family responsibilities and ties to other parts of the community that have nothing to do with their college enrollment. They may feel marginalized, have different values and dispositions, and be subject to external demands which may constrain the amount of time they have to interact with faculty and other students (Tinto, 1993). Community colleges need to find ways to promote institutional integration for adult students through academic communities rather than through student clubs and activities--for example through the formation of student learning groups and linked classes.

In a two-year commuter institution like YVCC, attending class, forming student study groups, developing relationships with faculty advisors, and using academic services such as the library and tutoring centers are more likely to create institutional integration for this older group of students than extracurricular activities will. It is in the best interest of community colleges to do what they can to develop on-campus communities through academic involvement, collaborative learning and student support groups (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988; Tinto, 1990, 1993).

### Limitations of the Study

This study was initially conceived as an opportunity to find out more about GED graduates who had enrolled in college courses at a community college. Although a number of hypotheses and implications about GED graduates have been framed by this study, my findings are limited in several ways.

A primary limitation is that I only examined the lives of six GED graduates. Thus, my assertions can reflect only the experience of these six students. Second, by choosing to include only students who had been enrolled in college for at least two successive quarters, who had earned at least 20 college credits, who were 21 year old or older, and who had prepared for the GED Tests at YVCC, I may have screened out certain types of students.

It is possible that age and maturity, or that the process of studying at YVCC for their GED Tests prior to enrolling in college classes contributed to this particular group's success and persistence. Because I wanted to interview students who had actually experienced the community college, I needed to find GED graduates who had completed more than one quarter before being interviewed. By selecting students who had completed at least 20 credits at YVCC, I may have included more persistent students.

### Suggestions for Further Research

The hypotheses framed in this chapter are presented as tentative and preliminary. Hopefully, they will form the basis for future research studies. In addition to the seven hypotheses presented, the study raises other questions for researchers interested in GED graduates, at-risk community college students, the effects of parental education on children, and the effectiveness of certain community college programs.

### Effects of Age

The group of students in this study ranged in age from 28 to 52. They all had families, worked for years as unskilled laborers, and chose relatively late in life to earn a GED and enroll in college. A question arises about how the results

of this study would compare to one that targeted younger GED graduates with shorter work histories who had decided to use the GED to access college enrollment. Would enrollment patterns and persistence be similar? Did the experience of working in one dead-end job after another influence students' attitudes toward completing their education?

### Voluntary Developmental Enrollment

The GED graduates in this study seemed willing to enroll in classes that would help them develop the academic and learning skills they needed to succeed in college. Grady (1983) found that GED entrants showed a considerably greater incidence of voluntary developmental enrollment than did high school graduates who needed remediation. Research could be conducted to examine whether there is any difference in the academic self-awareness and voluntary enrollment in developmental classes between GED graduates and high school graduates.

### GED Scores and College Admission

There has been some investigation of the relationship between GED scores, years of schooling completed, and subsequent academic performance (Bigby, 1989; Wolf, 1980). Because certain students prepare to pass their GEDs, while others do not, because some students pay attention to their studies while they attend school, and because students drop out of school at different times, GED scores are influenced by background, educational achievement, and test preparation. Although there was no consistent relationship between the GED scores of the students in this study and their GPAs in college, research should be undertaken that would help colleges decide if GED cut-off scores

should be used for college entrance. If nothing else, requiring cut-off scores might encourage students to continue to work towards gaining more basic skills and study skills prior to enrolling in college classes.

### Effect of Parental Return to School on Children

The participants in this study were in the process of breaking a negative educational cycle in their families. It appears that the return to school of a parent (to earn a GED and/or to enroll in college) can have a strong impact on the educational attitudes and performances of their children. An intriguing longitudinal study could follow several families like the ones in this study to investigate more fully what the short and long term effects on families of parents returning to school might be.

### Origin of Participants' Faith in Education

A final group of questions that arose from this study is derived from the students' belief that education would change their lives. Where did participants' unwavering faith in education come from? How and why did this faith develop? What events contributed to its development? Students came from families that, for the most part, did not value education. The norm for these families was to drop out before finishing high school. At least two of the participants are still receiving negative feedback from family members regarding their college enrollment. Yet the six students in this study somehow determined that education was the key to change.

Only time will tell if the faith that students verbalized is justified. As three of the students graduate this year with associate degrees, as another enters the nursing program, and as the other two progress towards their degrees, I will be

watching to see what happens to them. But I believe that without the access the GED provided for further education, and without the educational opportunity the community college provided for students in their own communities, these six students would still be on welfare, or in the canneries, the fruit warehouses, or the fields.

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## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

I would like to interview you about your experiences at Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC). I am working on my doctorate degree at Oregon State University, and am doing a study of GED graduates who enroll in college classes at YVCC. Although there won't be any benefits to you personally from this research, your viewpoints are valuable. The opinions you share with me would help me understand the community college experience you are having from your own point of view. The information I am gathering may help future GED graduates succeed by helping YVCC improve its student services and programs.

My research will focus on your perceptions of and reactions to your community college experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. Some of the topics we might talk about are your history, your family, school experiences both before and during your enrollment at YVCC, and your suggestions about how YVCC's programs might be improved.

Your identity and privacy will be protected. I will not use your real name in my paper, nor will I keep track of your name in my notes. Interview tapes and observation notes will be kept in a locked file in my personal office. Your participation is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to you. You will receive a copy of this agreement in case you have any questions.

The initial interview should last about an hour. If we have more to talk about, I will ask if you can stay longer, or if you can meet with me again. I would like to interview you another time later in the quarter to see if your perceptions have changed and how your classes are going. If you have questions, you may reach me or leave a message for me at YVCC at 575-2039. I will call you back as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your help.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Cheryl Falk, Researcher

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM  
FOR NON-STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

I am conducting research at Yakima Valley Community College for my doctoral dissertation and request your consent to interview you. Consent for interviews is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time.

The purpose of the research is to investigate how GED graduates perceive and interpret their community college experience once they enroll in college coursework. Statistics from the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges indicate that many GED graduates who matriculate into college courses drop out after their first quarter, yet no studies have been conducted to investigate why the attrition is high or how such students feel about their community college experiences. I have asked students about their family lives, school experiences both before and during enrollment in community college coursework, support systems they may use, and suggestions for program improvement at YVCC. I am interested in your perspectives with regard to the GED graduates who participate in this study. How do you perceive them as community college students? Are there barriers that prevent them from succeeding? Are there college services or structures that could increase their level of success?

Student participation is voluntary; refusal to participate involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Subjects may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

I will maintain your privacy by changing your name in my records and in the final report. I will do the same for the students I interview. Interview tapes and observation field notes are kept in my personal office. Students have received a detailed informed consent document describing what I am doing. Additionally, I have obtained their permission for any observations or conversations about them with faculty and staff. They had an opportunity to ask questions at the beginning of the interview process before deciding to participate. If you have any questions, please contact me at 575-2039. Thank you very much for your help.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Cheryl Falk, Researcher

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Background Information

Where were you born?

Did you grow up there? If not, where?

How many people were there in your family as you grew up??

Have other members of your family attended college?

Where did you go to elementary school?

Tell me what you remember about your elementary school experience.

Where did you go to junior high or middle school?

What was your experience in junior high like?

How far did you go in school?

Describe your high school experience for me.

Do you remember when you decided to leave school?

Please discuss some of the reasons why you left school.

How did you feel after you dropped out?

What did you do after leaving high school/junior high?

How did you find out about the GED?

Did you study to pass the GED? If so, for how long?

Did you use a GED preparation program or class to help you pass the GED?

What did you think of your GED prep program?

When did you take your GED?

Do you think that you have benefited from earning a GED? If so, how?

After the GED

What has happened to you since you received your GED?

How much time was there in between earning the GED and enrolling at YVCC?

Did you decide to attend college before or after you completed your GED?

What is the major reason you enrolled in college?

How did you choose YVCC?

Have you declared a major or chosen a course of study? Has it changed?

How did you decide what to study?

What are some of your goals, both short and long term?

Do you remember your first day at YVCC? If so, what was it like?

How many quarters have you attended YVCC?

Have you stopped out during certain quarters, or have you been enrolled continuously?

If you have stopped out, what are your reasons for doing so?

Has stopping out made the completion of your degree more difficult?

Do you attend classes full or part-time?

Do you work? If so, do you work full or part-time?

Do you have a family? If yes, are they supportive of your enrollment?  
In what ways do they support you?

What courses have you particularly liked at YVCC? For what reasons?

What courses have you not liked? For what reasons?

What are the largest obstacles that you have faced outside of school that impact your college enrollment?

What are some of the obstacles on campus that have caused problems for you?

How do you feel about your ability to succeed at YVCC?

How do you feel about the existence of an alternative degree like the GED? For what reasons did you choose the GED over a high school diploma?

Suppose I had just received my GED and was considering starting college classes at YVCC. What advice would you give me or what would you tell me (about the college, about studying, about how to succeed, etc.?)

Do you think special programs or services should be created to help people who begin YVCC with a GED? If so, what should those services be?

What have been the most frustrating of your college experiences so far?

What have been the most satisfying of your college experiences?

Do you participate in student activities? If so, which ones?

Do you have special study methods that you have developed? What are they?

Describe what kind of student you are for me.

Have there been faculty or staff that have been particularly helpful to you?

How would you describe the faculty you have had as instructors?

Do you spend time talking to faculty or staff on a regular basis after or outside of class?

May I contact your advisor or other faculty members to ask them about their experience with you as a student?

Describe your relationship to other students and staff. Have you made friends on campus?

Describe any student support services like tutoring, CAI Lab, or counseling that you have used. How have they been beneficial to you? Do you have suggestions for how they might be improved?

If I were in class with you, what would I see?

If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing? What experiences would I observe you having?

Why are you succeeding when so many GED graduates do not succeed in college?

What is your opinion of your educational experience here?

Would you say that you identify with YVCC and that you are loyal to it as an institution?

Have you changed as a result of your experience at YVCC? In other words, if I knew you previous to your enrollment, and I know you now, would I notice any difference in you?

Do you "see" things differently now that you have attended YVCC?

What haven't I asked that I should have asked?

What have I left out?

Do you have anything to add?

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT: DAN  
4/1/94

- 1
- 2     *CF: Where were you born?*
- 3     DW: Louis, Missouri.
- 4     *CF: That far away. Did you spend a long part of your life there, or*  
5         *did you grow up there?*
- 6     DW: No, we left there when I was about two years old, and  
7         migrated to California. My parents were like farm workers,  
8         migrant workers. And from California, we came up to Portland,  
9         Oregon, when I was about six, and I grew up there until I went  
10        in the army.
- 11    *CF: Okay. So are most of your early childhood memories and youth*  
12        *memories from the Portland area?*
- 13    DW: Right.
- 14    *CF: What do you remember about Portland, or, just about your*  
15        *childhood. Anything specific that kind of jumps out?*
- 16    DW: Well, not really. I had a pretty basic childhood, except we were  
17        poor, a real poor family, and that held me back in school a lot,  
18        because where I went to school, David Douglas High School,  
19        if you didn't have the right clothes, you were an outcast  
20        automatically, so that's the reason why, more than anything,  
21        I dropped out of high school. I always got real good grades.  
22        I liked school, but I didn't like that part of it so I quit going to  
23        school, actually as a freshman, but I just started skipping, and  
24        then later on as a sophomore I completely quit.
- 25    *CF: How many people in your family?*
- 26    DW: Seven kids.
- 27    *CF: Where do you fall within this—*
- 28    DW: Well, there was two boys and a girl, and then like fifteen years

- 29 later my parents had another family, which is one girl and three  
30 boys and I'm in the second family. I'm the second from the  
31 youngest. I'm the sixth child out of seven.
- 32 *CF: So, as you were growing up, by then, was it mainly the four of*  
33 *you—*
- 34 *DW: The four of us. My older brothers and sisters were, in fact I've*  
35 *got nieces and nephews older than me. They were gone and*  
36 *married before I was born.*
- 37 *CF: Have other members of your family attended college?*
- 38 *DW: No, no one that I know of. As far back as I can trace my*  
39 *family, no one has ever went to college.*
- 40 *CF: So you're the first. Congratulations. You talked a little bit*  
41 *about high school, and I'll ask you a few more questions about*  
42 *that, but could I have you just think a little bit about elementary*  
43 *school, and tell me what do you remember about your*  
44 *elementary school experiences, or are there any particular*  
45 *memories that you can think about?*
- 46 *DW: Nothing except it was always fun and easy for me. I was*  
47 *always the teacher's pet and since I caught on to things fairly*  
48 *quickly and I got my work done before anyone else, I did a lot*  
49 *of work for the teachers. And I played a lot of sports. I just*  
50 *had a lot of fun in elementary school.*
- 51 *CF: Okay. After elementary, did you go to a middle school, or a*  
52 *junior high, or how was it arranged?*
- 53 *DW: I graduated from the eighth grade and went right into the high*  
54 *school. They didn't have any junior highs or anything—*
- 55 *CF: or middle school or anything, so you didn't ever have that*  
56 *experience. It was just elementary school and then high*  
57 *school. I'm not sure how valid a question this would be, but*  
58 *have you ever thought— I mean, do you have children of your*  
59 *own right now?*



- 60 DW: Yeah.
- 61 CF: *I don't know how old they are, but most of us now our kids*  
62 *either go to a junior high or middle school, and I'm wondering*  
63 *have you ever thought about how things might have been*  
64 *different if you'd had that experience, or was that anything you*  
65 *ever . . . .*
- 66 DW: I never really thought about it, but I thought it was to my  
67 advantage being around the same kids for eight years. Where  
68 now when you're going to a middle school or whatever you're  
69 around kids from other areas. So I thought of it as an  
70 advantage but I guess being around more people would be an  
71 advantage, too, so I really don't know. But getting back to my  
72 kids, my youngest is seventeen years old. She's my daughter.  
73 And my two boys are already out of the home. And I've pretty  
74 much had to raise my kids myself because like twelve years  
75 ago my wife was diagnosed with cancer and she died six years  
76 ago. That's one of the reasons I came back to school and  
77 everything was for my daughter, to give her something. I  
78 wanted to break the cycle of welfare and the gutter. I did this  
79 more for her than I did myself, but I'm finding out that I like it  
80 for myself, too.
- 81 CF: *That's important.*
- 82 DW: Yeah, it is. You've got to like yourself before you like anyone  
83 else.
- 84 CF: *I agree with you. So as you explained it, you went through*  
85 *ninth— Let's see, if I—*
- 86 DW: From one to eighth at the same school.
- 87 CF: *And then you moved into high school, and you finished ninth*  
88 *grade?*
- 89 DW: Well, I, yeah, I didn't get any credits or anything, but I was  
90 there at the last day of the ninth grade. And when the tenth

91 grade started I went a couple of months and then just decided  
92 to drop out. I told a lie that I was going into the army and they  
93 let me quit school, because then you couldn't quit unless you  
94 were eighteen, the school I went to, you couldn't quit school  
95 until you were eighteen or the juvenile authorities would take  
96 it up. But I told them that I was going into the service,  
97 because I was seventeen by then. See I didn't start to school  
98 until I was eight years old. One of my brothers didn't start 'til  
99 he was ten. My family just kept us at home. My mom and  
100 dad— I remember my dad asking me, "You want to start  
101 school this year?" and of course I'd say no. So they finally  
102 made him put me in when I was eight. So I was a couple of  
103 years older than most kids.

104 *CF: So maybe you had a little bit more maturity, which is— No?*

105 *DW: No, I was /?/ immature.*

106 *CF: Okay. But I find it real interesting that you had such a good*  
107 *elementary experience and then all of a sudden things really*  
108 *changed.*

109 *DW: Well, I think the reason for that is the grade school I went to,*  
110 *most of the people were fairly poor, and then when I moved up*  
111 *to David Douglas, that's the largest high school in Oregon, or*  
112 *it was then. The freshman class was 2000 kids when I*  
113 *started. And it was a lot of people that I'd never known*  
114 *before, and that's where the cliques set in, was there. Like in*  
115 *grade school—*

116 *CF: Did you feel lost?*

117 *DW: Oh, yeah. I was really confused and intimidated from the size*  
118 *of it and the people and everything. And all the classes, since*  
119 *I did so well, my teachers sort of filled out my schedule for my*  
120 *high school and they put me into things like Algebra, and*  
121 *Biology, and classes I couldn't even pronounce, and I started*

122 doing badly the first week and basically started running around  
123 with the wrong crowd and started getting in trouble and  
124 smoking and stealing cars, and stuff like that was more fun  
125 than going to school, so I just basically got worse from there.

126 *CF: Did anyone try to talk you out of leaving school?*

127 DW: You know, I've often thought about that, and I can't remember  
128 anyone, because education was nothing— my family didn't  
129 stress education at all. My mom and dad might have went to  
130 second grade, and none of my brothers or sisters went to high  
131 school, or— like my brothers were working as laborers then in  
132 a labor union and making more than most people with a high  
133 school or college graduation, but it's not like that now. But  
134 then it was. I'm talking about the early sixties. And even me  
135 as a young kid, fifteen, sixteen years old I could go out and get  
136 a job framing houses making \$100 a day if I was fast enough.  
137 And so no one stressed education at all in my family, and I  
138 don't remember anyone else. I'm sure some counselors or  
139 someone in school probably mentioned it and I didn't listen.

140 *CF: What did you do right after you dropped out of school?*

141 DW: I got a job at Rub-a-Dub car wash, and lasted about two  
142 weeks.

143 *CF: What was that like? And why did you only last . . . .*

144 DW: Well, me and a friend went and applied for jobs at the same  
145 time and his job was riding in the inside of the car cleaning the  
146 inside as it went through the car wash. Mine was at the last  
147 I would dry it off. And he was stealing things inside the cars.  
148 So when they caught him and fired him I quit too. I couldn't  
149 work without him. We were glued together, I guess.

150 *CF: What did you do next?*

151 DW: The next three or four years were just running, doing drugs,  
152 and drinking and everything wrong. And then I got drafted into

- 153           the Army.
- 154   *CF: So you did actually end up in the military.*
- 155   DW: It came back to haunt me. And that's initially where I first got  
156       my GED, but see the— Well, when I went into the army, that  
157       was the first year that you had to have a GED to stay in the  
158       army, so since I didn't have a high school diploma, after we did  
159       our regular work I would go to school at night and they would  
160       give us a GED test with the answer sheet to make sure that we  
161       passed it. And that's what I explained whenever I came here.  
162       I said, "I have a GED, but it's not really legitimate, and I really  
163       don't feel like I'm capable of entering college classes, right now  
164       anyway." And that's the reason I went to class here and got  
165       a GED.
- 166   *CF: Let me ask this again, because this is pretty interesting. The*  
167       *army actually gave you the test themselves, and the answers,*  
168       *and then did you basically, in a sense, did you memorize the*  
169       *answers and then . . . or did you just fill it out?*
- 170   DW: No, it was at the same time. They just give you a test to take  
171       with the answer sheet and you look over here and fill it out.
- 172   *CF: You just copy—*
- 173   DW: They needed bodies in Viet Nam. This is hard to understand  
174       unless you went through it, but I passed the eye examination  
175       without my glasses, and I can barely see you. If they drafted  
176       you and you could stand up, you were going to Viet Nam.
- 177   *CF: Well, that's really interesting.*
- 178   DW: They rushed us through basic training. It's supposed to last  
179       sixteen weeks; it only lasted for nine weeks, for us.
- 180   *CF: So did you end up going to Viet Nam?*
- 181   DW: No, the first set of orders out of basic I had were to Fort Dix,  
182       New Jersey, to be trained for an MP, and about a week before  
183       I got out they got changed to go to Fort McClellan in Alabama

184 to enter an OJT program fire-fighting. So I went down there  
185 and some way they just lost my records, or forgot about me,  
186 but I was there about a year and then I came down "on levy"  
187 for Viet Nam and I only had ten months left to go in the  
188 service, but the tour in Viet Nam was at least eleven months so  
189 I was going to have to stay that long, so they gave me a thirty  
190 day leave and I went back home to Portland, and fell in love  
191 and my family was all telling me not to go, so I didn't go. I  
192 stayed AWOL and turned myself in and got an "undesirable"  
193 discharge.

194 *CF: But you didn't have to go over.*

195 DW: No, but I really wish I had of. That's something that's always  
196 made me feel bad.

197 *CF: Has it?*

198 DW: Yeah, I really feel like I shirked my duty there. If I had it all to  
199 do over again, and knew I was going to get killed, I'd go over  
200 there now, you know?

201 *CF: So you ended up at that point staying in Portland and what*  
202 *happened next?*

203 DW: Got married, started working on just labor jobs and then my  
204 family, in the summer and stuff, my dad and mom would take  
205 us out and we would pick berries and /?/ beans and stuff but  
206 I never had to pick any fruit on a tree, but my wife's family  
207 migrated and picked tree fruit up in here and that's what I  
208 basically did for about the next ten years, was we picked citrus  
209 in Arizona and then we'd move up to California and pick  
210 cherries and then on up into Yakima and on up into Okanogan  
211 and sometimes we'd go to Colorado and pick cherries.  
212 Michigan, pick berries. Just farm labor work.

213 *CF: That's a long loop when you went out there.*

214 DW: Yeah, that's only time I was ever happy, though, is when I was

215 on the road. I used to love it.

216 *CF: And were you starting your family at that point? And would*  
217 *you tell me again— you said you have a seventeen-year-old—*  
218 *DW:* daughter. And I have a boy that's twenty-one and one twenty-  
219 three. Two boys and a girl.

220 *CF: And during that time, did you ever think of going back to*  
221 *school?*

222 *DW:* No, my wife did. We stayed in Portland one winter and I was  
223 working for a furniture moving company and she went down to  
224 apply for food stamps and they called it a WIN program then.  
225 She got involved in that, went through and got her GED and  
226 was starting classes at Mt. Hood Community College and it  
227 was a time of year that the cherries were going to start in  
228 California, so I just made her quit and we just— That's another  
229 thing I always regretted there, too. Because she was trying to  
230 better her life and I didn't see it at all. I couldn't see it. I was  
231 too hung up on— Well, I was addicted to drugs and alcohol  
232 since I was about fifteen.

233 *CF: And so you basically, as your family was growing up, you were*  
234 *basically making the picking route—*

235 *DW:* Migrant work—

236 *CF: migrant work—*

237 *DW:* Yeah, my oldest son was in nine different schools his first year.  
238 And I had no idea what I was doing to my kids at that time.  
239 But now I can see it.

240 *CF: You said that you've been addicted to drugs and alcohol since*  
241 *you were pretty young, since you were fifteen. What is your*  
242 *situation now?*

243 *DW:* Well, when my wife died, after she died in '88, '87 or '8, I  
244 went through a real hard couple of years there and really got  
245 bad on heroin, and I guess it took hitting rock bottom to come

246 out of it, but I finally did hit rock bottom. Believe me, everyone  
247 had given up on me except my daughter. And I was laying in  
248 our apartment, flat broke, a month behind on my rent, because  
249 I'd lied to my landlord and told him that I didn't get my check  
250 and used it for drugs, no car or nothing. Sold everything that  
251 I had that was worth a dime. I was without anything. And I  
252 just asked God to come in and turn my life around, and he did.  
253 And from that time on I haven't had to have any drugs or  
254 alcohol.

255 *CF: That's amazing.*

256 *DW: That's the only thing that I know that made a change. There's*  
257 *been several changes since that, but that was the initial change*  
258 *right there. I got on the methadone program here in Yakima*  
259 *and went through it. I've been clean and sober ever since.*  
260 *Thank God.*

261 *CF: So you think the influence of having some faith come into your*  
262 *life was something that changed your ability to deal with your*  
263 *addictions?*

264 *DW: Yeah, I do.*

265 *CF: Wow. When did you decide to come into YVC, as far as GED?*

266 *DW: My older brother, in '90 maybe, came here and took his GED*  
267 *without taking any classes, and passed it and I think that's*  
268 *what influenced me to do that. But I came up here probably*  
269 *about seven months or something to these classes to study for*  
270 *mine. And after I took it, I had a counselor at Central*  
271 *Washington Mental Health and a counselor at the DSHS office*  
272 *and they sort of influenced me to sign up for classes and I did.*

273 *CF: When you first came up here, I presume you took an entry test*  
274 *and predictor test and all of that. Do you remember what the*  
275 *experience was like and how you felt?*

276 *DW: I felt really out of place, and scared, but these people here are*

277 great. That Lynn Raymond, if it hadn't been for her I would  
278 have quit the first week. She really talked me into staying and  
279 helped me through a lot of it. Her and Leslie and Becky, all of  
280 them. They really helped. I've got nothing but great praise for  
281 this place, I'll tell you.

282 *CF: Thank you. That's very meaningful to me.*

283 DW: And they treated everyone the same way, too. They were real  
284 positive and always there for you, no matter how long it would  
285 take for you to figure out a problem, they'd stay there with you  
286 until you got it.

287 *CF: How long ago were you up here? Do you remember when you*  
288 *started and when you passed your GED? I'm sorry to ask you*  
289 *all these dates, but it's—*

290 DW: I'm not sure of the date. I know it was November 14, because  
291 that's my birthday, and I guess it was four years ago next  
292 November.

293 *CF: And how long did you study up here, about?*

294 DW: Maybe about four months, and then I went and got my GED.  
295 But that was, like spring and summer, I came up here after I  
296 got my GED just to stay in class until school started. I was  
297 afraid if I would quit, not come up here for that length of time,  
298 that I'd never start classes. And I probably would have, too.  
299 So I just kept coming up here, even though I didn't have to,  
300 just to stay in the mood, coming to school.

301 *CF: Do you think after you passed your GED, while you were still*  
302 *coming up here to work on reinforcing your skills and all of*  
303 *that, do you think you made more progress? Or was it mainly*  
304 *a holding pattern?*

305 DW: In everything except math. I made progress in math, because  
306 we got into geometry and algebra that I never had before. But  
307 the rest of it was making me just hold it.



- 308 CF: *Can you happen to remember any of your emotions, or how*  
309 *you felt when you actually found out that you passed the GED*  
310 *test?*
- 311 DW: I felt surprised. I didn't think I had it in me, to tell you the  
312 truth. I was going to look under here. I think there's a date on  
313 here, somewhere. Really, it made me feel good, too. Probably  
314 better than I'd ever felt before in my life.
- 315 CF: *Good scores, too. Nothing shaky there. That's great. Well, it*  
316 *interests me for one thing, that, by the time you passed the*  
317 *GED, did you know that you were going to enter college?*
- 318 DW: I was probably 70% sure.
- 319 CF: *Was that developing as you were working on your GED?*
- 320 DW: Yeah.
- 321 CF: *So when you first came up to take the GED, to prepare for it,*  
322 *and to pass it, hopefully, did you know you were going to go*  
323 *on to college right then? Or was that something—*
- 324 DW: No.
- 325 CF: *Why did you want to pass your GED, at that point?*
- 326 DW: I don't know if it was just to prove to myself, or maybe it was  
327 to prove to my brother. I really don't know.
- 328 CF: *I think what I'm understanding is that as you worked up here*  
329 *and prepared for your GED, you started developing some goals?*
- 330 DW: Yeah, that, and I saw that there was a lot of older students  
331 here. See, I thought this was like 18- to 19-year-old people.  
332 And that scared me and I didn't want to be in an environment  
333 like that at all. But as I saw that more of the students were my  
334 age and everyone was so helpful. Anywhere you go here, ask  
335 a question and they'll go out of your way to help you. And I've  
336 never been in an environment like that before. And that really,  
337 probably, did it more for me than anything, right there. Just  
338 the people being so helpful and understanding and I could see

339           that I could do the work.

340       CF: *Absolutely. Which one of these gave you the biggest pain, to*  
341           *prepare for?*

342       DW: The writing, because of the essay. I never did anything like  
343           that before in my life. You know, put together an essay, with  
344           paragraphs and sentences.

345       CF: *One of the reasons why I wanted to interview those of you*  
346           *who passed the GED from 1989 on, is that '89 is when the*  
347           *essay came into the GED test. And of course many of us*  
348           *worked with students earlier than that, who didn't have to*  
349           *write an essay, and the test looked a fair amount different,*  
350           *back then. You may remember that a little bit from your*  
351           *military thing.*

352       DW: I really don't remember.

353       CF: *But I'm wondering, I don't know if you can answer this*  
354           *question or have an opinion about it or not, but do you think*  
355           *having to write an essay helped prepare you for college?*

356       DW: Oh, definitely. Yes. But I'm majoring (or whatever they call  
357           that) in Business Accounting, so I haven't had to do, except  
358           one, term paper. But for that, it did. I wouldn't have had any  
359           idea what to have done without that.

360       CF: *Thanks. That's real interesting, I think, to those of us who are*  
361           *working in the GED area. Because I think we've felt as*  
362           *instructors that having the essay on there was a real positive*  
363           *step for people who do want to go on. But it's much better for*  
364           *me to hear that from you than just our "Well, this is what we*  
365           *think. But what do you think?" How do you think you've*  
366           *benefitted from earning your GED? You've kind of answered*  
367           *this, but I'm going to ask it just specifically like that.*

368       DW: I built my confidence level up in all the areas of my life. It  
369           made me feel worthy, I guess, more than anything.

- 370 CF: *Did you get feedback from any family members?*
- 371 DW: No.
- 372 CF: *Did anyone care that you passed it?*
- 373 DW: No. No, that's sort of the way my family is. I haven't got,  
374 except for a brother and sister-in-law here in town, anyway.  
375 But we're not really close at all, anyway, so . . . . Now my  
376 kids, they were real supportive and even from that right there  
377 my daughter started attending school. Before that she was  
378 having a lot of trouble going to school. She was skipping a lot.  
379 But now she goes to school every day. Her grades have come  
380 up: 4.0 GPA last trimester. It's just great. It's done as much  
381 for her as it's done for me.
- 382 CF: *That's worth a lot.*
- 383 DW: Yeah, it is.
- 384 CF: *What year is she in school now?*
- 385 DW: She's a sophomore at Eisenhower.
- 386 CF: *She's getting there. So since you received your GED, let me*  
387 *see if I understand it. You continued to come up and review*  
388 *and move forward, at least in math.*
- 389 DW: M-hm.
- 390 CF: *How long between passing the GED in, it looks like it was the*  
391 *end of March . . . . When did you actually start college*  
392 *classes?*
- 393 DW: September the same year.
- 394 CF: *Did you take the ASSET test in between?*
- 395 DW: M-hm.
- 396 CF: *And how did you do on that, do you think?*
- 397 DW: I don't know. Do they give us our scores, or whatever?
- 398 CF: *They probably did, but I guess what I'm curious about is, Do*  
399 *you remember what the levels of math and writing and so forth*  
400 *were that you were placed into from the ASSET test?*

- 401 DW: No, I don't.
- 402 CF: *Your first quarter, do you remember what classes you took?*
- 403 DW: Oh, yeah. My first quarter was Intro to Business—
- 404 CF: *Oh, wow! Look at those grades!*
- 405 DW: and Business Math and Principles of Accounting I.
- 406 CF: *3.67. Did that surprise you?*
- 407 DW: Yeah. It really did. I had no idea that I could do that. But sort
- 408 of embarrassed about it, because it's just gradually come
- 409 down. I've still got a 3.4 cumulative average.
- 410 CF: *So how many quarters do you have here now? And there they*
- 411 *are!*
- 412 DW: This is my sixth quarter. But I'm not going to graduate in six.
- 413 I gotta come back next fall and if I can't get in one class I
- 414 might have to come back even for that next winter. A class
- 415 that I need, Written Business Communications, but it's offered
- 416 at the same time as my other classes are and I haven't been
- 417 able to fit it in, yet.
- 418 CF: *Do you ever check Weekend College to see if it's—*
- 419 DW: Yeah. My advisor went through there. I tried to come at night,
- 420 or on weekends or whatever.
- 421 CF: *Well, good. At least you're checking there, 'cause sometimes*
- 422 *you'll find some of the courses there, instead. That's really*
- 423 *impressive. Once you decided to enroll in college classes, what*
- 424 *was your goal?*
- 425 DW: To become a probation officer for juveniles. But I took the
- 426 Strong-Campbell test and the results of that came back and
- 427 said I was real uncomfortable around people, which I am, and
- 428 they said my math scores were real high so I should probably
- 429 go— My age and everything else, since I didn't want to leave
- 430 Yakima and go to Ellensburg for a four-year institution, they
- 431 thought it'd be better for me to enter into a two-year program

432 and into Accounting because of my math scores. I pretty much  
433 did that.

434 *CF: So what you hope to do when you actually graduate is?*

435 DW: Go to work. Go to work making enough money to live  
436 comfortably. I know I'm not going to make a great amount of  
437 money, but something above minimum wage, you know?

438 *CF: Oh, sure. Do you kind of watch the job market around to see*  
439 *what kind of openings there are in that area?*

440 DW: Yeah. There's a program at DSHS called JOBS, I don't know  
441 if you're familiar with it or not, but I have a counselor out there  
442 and she's got me enrolled in summer programs and they help  
443 you with job placement and everything. Right now she's  
444 working on trying to get me a job with Southland Corporation,  
445 7-11. But I got to get a little bit closer to graduation before  
446 they get real serious about that.

447 *CF: I have a few more minutes, without, hopefully, exhausting you*  
448 *and me both. I'm real interested in some of your experiences*  
449 *when you changed from GED prep classes into actual college*  
450 *classes. And too, I'd like to start asking, and I won't ask too*  
451 *many questions, because we'll stop today, because I think*  
452 *we're easily about half-way through anything that I would want*  
453 *to ask you, but I'm real curious about how did you feel the first*  
454 *day you were on campus as a college matriculated student,*  
455 *attending classes out there rather than in here?*

456 DW: I could hardly stay away from this building. Every break I'd run  
457 back over here for security. And I was lost. And I signed up  
458 with the Tutoring Center and that's the only thing that helped  
459 me right there. I would have stopped the first month of school  
460 and never come back if it hadn't been for the tutoring here.  
461 And since I had help with tutoring, after the first test I saw that  
462 I could pass them. I was alright, then. The first month, I

463 would say, was pretty hard.

464 *CF: What was it like walking in to one of those classes?*

465 DW: Scary. I almost didn't come the first day, I'll tell you that.  
466 That's probably the scariest thing I ever did in my life, was  
467 walk up here to a real class.

468 *CF: Do you remember which class that was?*

469 DW: It was Principles of Accounting I, was my first class. And they  
470 were talking about debits and credits and I didn't have any idea  
471 what it was and I was lost. And I had always been afraid to  
472 ask for help. All my life, I had been. And this one girl, or she's  
473 a woman, came up after class and said, "I saw that you looked  
474 sort of confused. Can I help you?" and offered her help. And  
475 I thought, Well, that's great. So that's what probably did more  
476 for me right there than anything. We went over to the HUB  
477 and sat there and talked a few minutes and she explained that  
478 she had worked in the banking system and sort of knew a little  
479 bit about it, and she would help me through it and not to worry  
480 about it and everything. And the instructor had mentioned the  
481 Tutoring Center—

482 *CF: I was going to ask you how you found out. So did you come*  
483 *up to this tutoring center right here?*

484 DW: Yeah, but it was downstairs, then.

485 *CF: Did anyone else from that program help you— Did you have*  
486 *student tutors or were you working with Carolyn and Ron?*

487 DW: Student tutors, but she helped me some, too, Carolyn did in my  
488 other classes. See I just had a tutor for Accounting. Carolyn  
489 helped me with my other classes /?/. I'd make an appointment.  
490 Sometimes she would have those little classes, whatever she  
491 calls them. And I had a student tutor but we also had a group  
492 of students in my class that we met here at the library two  
493 nights a week and on Saturdays at the library downtown we'd

494 meet for a couple hours.

495 *CF: So was this a spontaneous student group that just—*

496 DW: The instructor asked if someone wanted to do that and there  
497 was a sheet passed around of anyone that was interested, and  
498 we signed up that way.

499 *CF: What a good idea.*

500 DW: Yeah, it is.

501 *CF: Did that student support group help?*

502 DW: Yeah, definitely. It sure did. I saw that there was some as lost  
503 as me and I saw that there was some that knew what was  
504 going on that was willing to help us.

505 *CF: That's great. And we talked about how many quarters you've*  
506 *been here and about how long, you think, it will take to finish*  
507 *up.*

508 DW: That's one of the main gripes, in fact the only gripe that I have  
509 about this is that the planning part of it, to plan your degree is  
510 not really stressed enough up here because see I thought these  
511 classes were offered, I guess I thought, they were offered  
512 seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, just whenever  
513 you wanted them. I knew some people were taking night  
514 classes. I thought that was because they wanted to, not  
515 because that was the only time they were offered. And that's  
516 how I got messed up here. Of course, my program's changed,  
517 too, a lot, since whenever I started. But that one Written  
518 Business Communication's only offered a certain time and if I  
519 would have planned that a little better I could have graduated,  
520 well, I should have graduated the end of this quarter, but I  
521 could have graduated easily at the end of fall quarter. Or if I  
522 would have come last summer, I could have graduated this  
523 quarter, but I didn't know enough about planning, and no one  
524 really told me about this. I had an advisor, Mr. Bentley, but

525           whenever I would take in, I mean, I don't want to get anyone  
526           in trouble or anything, but whenever I would take my—  
527    CF:   *Don't worry about it.*  
528    DW:   thing in for my next classes, it would be blank and he would  
529           just sign his name down here and I could— He never explained  
530           anything to me.  
531    CF:   *He never offered to help you plan?*  
532    DW:   He never said anything to me. In fact of business, he acted like  
533           I was intruding on his time for him to sign that. But he's gone  
534           now, anyway.  
535    CF:   *I know.*  
536    DW:   I mean, he's a nice guy and everything. I would stand out and  
537           talk to him before class and stuff, but as far as helping me plan  
538           for this college, he wasn't into it. He was worried too much  
539           about getting his last quarter in so he could retire. But I have  
540           a real good advisor, now, Mr. Rogers. He's great.  
541    CF:   *Good. I know how it's supposed to work. And it's not*  
542           *supposed to work the way you experienced it. But I*  
543           *understand that it does happen that way. And I wonder*  
544           *sometimes how we could get information to students to let*  
545           *them know that if their advisors aren't helping them set up a*  
546           *schedule, for one thing, the counselors, who are actually*  
547           *counselors, are available to do that if you're not getting help*  
548           *from your own advisor.*  
549    DW:   The information may be out there. I just didn't hear it, or  
550           whatever. Because I'm not real big about hanging around over  
551           at the HUB. And I really don't read that little paper they've got  
552           that much. It's probably in there, but I just didn't do it. I  
553           didn't know. I'm not trying to put the blame on anyone.