

**GED Candidates and Their Postsecondary Educational Outcomes: A Pilot Study
GED Testing Service® Research Studies, 2009–5
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Abstract and Executive Summary**

Abstract

For most high school non-completers, the GED® credential is the bridge to postsecondary education, but little is known about how successfully they could make that transition and whether their participation shifts across time. The American Council on Education (ACE) has begun a three-year longitudinal study to understand the effect of the GED credential on postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion. This study is in support of GED 20/20, a new comprehensive initiative to transition adults without a high school diploma to the GED credential and career and college readiness via accelerated learning. A first step of the study involved piloting the work with a random sample of 1,000 U.S. GED candidates in September 2008. The pilot reports the latest data available from a 2003 cohort of GED candidates who tested shortly after the introduction of the new rigorous 2002 test series.

The 307 GED candidates in the pilot attended a total of 369 postsecondary institutions in 44 states. (Some students attended more than one institution.) The vast majority of students who had taken the GED Test initially attended colleges offering programs of two years or less; 78 percent attended public two-year colleges. GED candidates who enrolled in postsecondary institutions enrolled mostly within the first three years after taking the test (i.e., 2003, 2004, or 2005). The vast majority (77 percent) enrolled for a single semester only. Ten of 17 graduates were male, and graduates were either African American, Hispanic, or white. It took graduates an average of 3.8 years to complete their degree program.

Major findings of interest in this pilot study reflect a positive relationship between the GED credential and entering postsecondary education. GED credential recipients enrolled in postsecondary education at a significantly higher rate than did non-passers. Women with a GED credential enrolled at a higher rate than male GED credential recipients. Approximately half of GED credential recipients who indicated *Enter Two-Year College* and *Enter Four-Year College* as reasons for testing enrolled in postsecondary education after testing. These comparisons suggest that GED credential recipients with the intention to enroll in a two-year or four-year college when testing are more likely to actually do so, compared with GED credential recipients who do not state these goals.

Those who earned the GED credential while working part time were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education. GED credential recipients who enrolled in postsecondary education tended to have higher standard scores on the GED Test in all five content areas, and those with higher standard scores were more likely to enroll. A discussion of findings and their implications for future longitudinal research follows.

Executive Summary

For most high school non-completers, the GED® credential is the bridge to postsecondary education, but little is known about how successfully they could make that transition and whether their participation shifts across time. The American Council on Education (ACE) has begun a three-year longitudinal study to understand the effect of the GED credential on postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion. This study is in support of GED 20/20, a new comprehensive initiative to transition adults without a high school diploma to the GED credential and career and college readiness via accelerated learning. GED 20/20 has been developed in response to President Obama's call for an increase in the number of adults with college degrees by the year 2020. A first step of the study involved piloting the work with a random sample of 1,000 U.S. GED candidates in September 2008. The pilot reports the latest data available from a 2003 cohort of GED candidates who tested shortly after the introduction of the new rigorous 2002 test series. A sample of this 2003 cohort was matched with postsecondary enrollment and completion records from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC).

Out of these randomly selected 1,000 GED candidates in the 2003 cohort sample, 307 candidates (regardless of their GED Test completion and passing status) attended a total of 369 postsecondary institutions in 44 states. (Some students attended more than one institution.) The vast majority of students who had taken the GED Test initially attended colleges offering programs of two years or less; 78 percent attended public two-year colleges. GED candidates who enrolled in postsecondary institutions enrolled mostly within the first three years after taking the test (i.e., 2003, 2004, or 2005). The vast majority (77 percent) enrolled for a single semester only. Ten of 17 graduates were male, and graduates were either African American, Hispanic, or white. It took graduates an average of 3.8 years to complete their degree program.

Major findings of interest in this pilot study include the following:

- * This study matched 307 records out of the 1,000 randomly selected candidates, so approximately 31 percent of candidates enrolled in postsecondary education. Nearly 37 percent of GED credential recipients were enrolled in postsecondary education by fall 2008, which is in line with enrollment rates estimated by other researchers.

- * There was a positive relationship between the GED credential and entering postsecondary education. GED credential recipients enrolled in postsecondary education at a significantly higher rate (36.6 percent) than did non-passers (20.4 percent), which confirms previous research that GED recipients are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than dropouts.

- * Women with a GED credential enrolled at a higher rate than male GED credential recipients.

- * No significant differences for GED credential recipients occurred by ethnic group between enrollees and non-enrollees.

- * Percentages of GED credential recipients taking an Official GED Practice Test were similar for enrollees and non-enrollees.

- * Approximately half of GED credential recipients who indicated *Enter Two-Year College* (48 percent) and *Enter Four-Year College* (55 percent) as reasons for

testing enrolled in postsecondary education after testing. These comparisons suggest that GED credential recipients with the intention to enroll in a two-year or four-year college when testing are more likely to actually do so, compared with GED credential recipients who do not state these goals. However, the aspirations of GED candidates to pursue further education, although strong enough for many to get started in college, also largely go unfulfilled. Also, GED credential recipients who reported testing for a better job tended to not see postsecondary education as a means to advancing their careers.

- * Those who earned the GED credential while working part time were 1.7 times more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

- * GED credential recipients who enrolled in postsecondary education tended to have higher standard scores on the GED Test in all five content areas, and those with higher standard scores were more likely to enroll.

- * Even though many GED candidates attended a semester, frequently at a public community college or technical college, and nearly half attended full time or half time, more than three-quarters (77 percent) left after the first semester.

A discussion of findings and their implications for future longitudinal research include the following:

- * Time was an important element in this pilot project. The preliminary findings indicate that allowing enough time to pass before expecting postsecondary outcomes remains critical in the full study.

- * Further research into the relationship of job aspirations, career improvements, and postsecondary education would be valuable.

- * As many enrollees in this pilot left after the first semester, examining open admissions policies and their effects, particularly in community colleges and technical colleges, would be of value in the full study.

- * Similarly, it remained unclear whether those with GED credentials were fully prepared for postsecondary education and what assistance was available to them as they made the transition to college. More research on the educational background of single semester GED credential holders, in contrast with those who continue, would be useful, as would a better understanding of the transition efforts provided by postsecondary institutions, especially those with programs of two years or less.

- * The 1,000 people in the sample were selected at random, and, therefore, there is no known reason to believe that the postsecondary population of GED candidates in 2003. However, because the population of GED candidates has never been fully examined, it remains possible that population results could be remarkably different from sample results. With a larger number of enrollees, we could determine event occurrence of enrollment and identify postsecondary institutions that serve GED credential recipients and the characteristics of those institutions. With a larger number of graduates, we can model event occurrence of graduation. A report on the full population of the 2003 cohort is planned for 2010.