

GED Credentials and Postsecondary Educational Outcomes

Research Quick Facts (2011)



While the U.S. continues to recover from economic recession, the need for adults to prepare for family-sustaining careers is acute. To gain needed skills, adults can no longer end their education with a secondary credential (or less).

Key Findings: About 43 percent of GED test passers enroll in postsecondary education (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, & Song, 2011). Within the period of review these studies found approximately 62 percent of postsecondary enrollees with GED credentials were no longer enrolled, and 26 percent were still enrolled. The graduation rate for postsecondary enrollees with GED credentials was approximately 12 percent.

Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Who among adults with GED credentials enters college? A sizable proportion of nontraditional adult students enrolls in postsecondary education (PSE) and frequently attends two-year colleges (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008; NCHEMS, 2009; Reder, 2007). Less than 10 percent of beginning postsecondary students in 2003–04 had GED credentials (Berkner & Choy, 2008). Enrollment of GED test passers in PSE may vary by age, gender, or ethnicity. Younger adults with GED credentials tended to enroll in PSE more often, and females entered PSE more frequently than males, particularly two-year colleges (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). Almeida, Johnson, and Steinberg (2006) reported that African-American dropouts who later earned credentials had significantly lower PSE enrollment rates than their white and Hispanic counterparts. Ethnicity was not a predictor of 2003 GED test passer PSE enrollment (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010).

Reder (2007) saw the GED credential functioning as a potential “gateway” to PSE, especially for non-white students.

Enrolling Close to Home: Low PSE enrollment is keenly felt in regions of the U.S that are struggling economically as well as educationally (SREB, 2010). Enrolling close to home is an important indicator for economic development, as college students often start careers where they graduate. Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2010) noted that 85 percent of college students enrolled in the state where they reside. Similarly, 83 percent of GED passers enrolled in PSE in the state where they passed the GED test (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010).

Approximately 65 percent of GED test passers report they take the test to further their education. About 43 percent actually enroll in college.

Timing Is Critical for Persistence: What role does timing play in college student retention? Researchers found that few PSE enrollees with GED credentials complete the first year of postsecondary education (Duke & Ganzglass, 2007; Patterson, Song, & Zhang, 2009; Tyler, 2003). A number of characteristics—including nontraditional age, parental status, full-time employment, and their own self-expectations—could put adults with GED credentials at risk of dropping out (Reder, 2007). Attending full time or part time may be another indicator of persistence (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Reder, 2007). Time to graduation has gradually increased, particularly for public two-year institutions (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010), and allowing twice as much time to elapse for completion—such as four years for an associate degree—is becoming the norm (Horn, 2010; NPEC, 2010). The 2008 U.S. two year (associate degree) college graduation rate was 28.4 percent when allowing 4 years (Horn, 2010).

Using These Findings: Knowing which adults with GED credentials pursued postsecondary education, when and where they enrolled, and how they persisted is valuable to adult educators who work with prospective college students. Adult educators can use this information to counsel adult learners on their options. Counseling could include identifying the adult learner’s long- and short-term goals, exploring occupations which would be open to him or her as a GED credential holder, and discussing the option to transition to further education to expand career possibilities even further.