FROM GED TO COLLEGE DEGREE:

CREATING PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS FOR HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

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GED TO COLLEGE

Developing Postsecondary On Ramps for Older, Disconnected Youth

Through support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jobs for the Future is working with national youth-serving networks to increase the number and quality of postsecondary pathways for older disconnected youth, ages 18-26. JFF works as a strategic partner with the National Youth Employment Coalition and YouthBuild USA. JFF also provides strategic consultation and technical assistance for the partners' grantees, helping them build their capacity to grow and scale up new college-connected designs. This work ultimately aims to make the case for investments in programming that helps youth obtain postsecondary credentials with labor market value. As part of this work, JFF focuses on scaling up two pathways, *Back on Track/GED to College* and *Year to Career*.

About the Authors

John Garvey is a consultant on higher education, working for such clients as the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, Jobs for the Future, the Academy for Educational Development, the National League of Cities, and the Youth Development Institute. For many years, he was dean of the Teacher Academy and Collaborative Programs at the City University of New York, Office of Academic Affairs. He oversaw CUNY's numerous collaborations with the New York City Department of Education, including College Now, the Middle Grades Initiative/GEAR UP project, the Early College Initiative, and the CUNY School Support Organization. He also coordinated the development of the Teacher Academy, an undergraduate program intended to prepare math and science teachers for the city's public middle schools and high schools. The academy was CUNY's component of the New York City Partnership for Teacher Excellence, which includes the city's Department of Education and New York University. In 2003, Mr. Garvey led the effort to establish CUNY Prep, a college preparatory program for young adults who had left school before obtaining a diploma. During his 20 years working in CUNY's central office, he also designed and conducted numerous research and professional development projects on literacy-related issues.

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PREFACE

For many years, the GED credential has been viewed as the high school dropout's safety net. Though not as well regarded as the high school diploma, the GED has opened up educational and economic opportunity for millions of young people and adults who did not finish high school. Nearly 680,000 people take the full battery of GED tests each year—and more than three-quarters pass. In 2009, 63 percent of test takers were young adults, aged 19-24 (GED Testing Service 2010).

The assumption has been that with GED in hand, many credential earners would enroll in college and, once there, benefit greatly from their chance at a postsecondary education. However, recent studies reveal an alarming fact: few GED recipients persist in college to earn a postsecondary degree. While nearly three out of four GED test takers pass the tests, far fewer pass with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college. In fact, while nearly half of all GED holders eventually enroll in postsecondary education, only 4 percent persist to earn a degree (Goldberger 2007).

That GED holders are poorly prepared to enter college and graduate is gaining recognition as a pressing problem. In 2009, the GED Testing Service summarized its own research on the postsecondary educational outcomes of a random sample of 1,000 individuals who had completed the GED test in 2003. Of those 1,000 GED holders:

- 307 enrolled in at least one postsecondary institution by fall 2008;
- 77 percent of those individuals dropped out after one semester; and
- Only 17 individuals earned a postsecondary credential by 2008.

At the same time, according to the GED Testing Service, 50 percent of all test takers in 2009 indicated they were taking the GED because they wanted to go on to some form of postsecondary education. Those individuals returned to programs with hopes that the time they invested would help them reach higher educational goals. Few could imagine how unlikely it would be that their hope would be realized.

We must do better.

High school dropouts who want to get back on track with their education must be able to rely on sound programming that meets their needs, expectations, and aspirations. Without clear and effective pathways from the GED to postsecondary education, the nation will not achieve even marginal—let alone radically improved—college-ready and career-ready outcomes for most youth.

The GED was first instituted for returning World War II veterans; earning a high school equivalency certificate was the quickest way to help them get into college or start a job. The GED first became available to non-veterans in New York State in 1947 and then across the country within about a decade.[1] Today, GED preparation programs draw large numbers of students, including recent high school dropouts returning to earn a secondary credential in a reasonable amount of time. Thanks to this option, many people who did not succeed in high school qualify for college or gain entry to the labor market.

However, in today's economy, when most jobs requiring limited skills also come with limited pay and benefits, the shortcomings of programs that offer only short-term preparation for passing the GED with minimum scores are all too apparent. Innovators are responding by moving away from bare-bones, test-oriented instruction and toward more academically rich approaches that incorporate powerful instructional methods and supports. The field is changing in numerous ways as it moves to "college-connected" designs that lead to success in earning postsecondary credentials. As educational innovators experiment with models that provide a more effective transition from GED programs to college, these emerging *GED to College* designs provide opportunities to explore the potential for success—as well as persistent problems—in efforts to better prepare young people and adults to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jobs for the Future identified and documented a number of "best in class" *GED to College* programs—those showing early success in helping youth prepare for and persist in college. This study helped surface a number of shifts that policy leaders and program staff are making as they move away from short-term test preparation to more intensive college-connected designs as shown in Table 1 on page 3.

Work to document *GED to College* programs also led JFF to articulate a multi-phase model design that is helping partners build and scale up GED/Diploma to College programs for older youth (and adults). The model consists of three phases that programs are developing or strengthening:

- **Enriched Preparation:** Integrating high-quality college-ready instruction with strong academic and social supports.
- **Postsecondary Bridging:** Building college-ready skills and providing informed transition counseling.
- **First-Year Supports:** Offering appropriate support in the critical first year to help students accumulate credits predictive of completion.

Table 1.
The Shift from GED to College: Program Practices

TRADITIONAL GED	GED TO COLLEGE
» Focus on the GED test as ultimate indicator of student success and program performance	→ Build a college-going culture where college is an expectation for all students and college access and completion are the ultimate program performance measures
» Instruction focused on minimum literacy and numeracy skills students need to pass the GED test	→ Enriched curriculum and classroom instruction and incorporation of critical thinking, high-level literacy, and numeracy skills needed for success in college
» Multiple entry and exit points for students during the year	→ Clear entry and exit points to create cohorts of students, reinforcing group learning and peer support
» Limited assessment of college readiness skills	→ Use of broad set of pre- and post-assessment instructions (e.g., ACCUPLACER, COMPASS) to measure readiness for credit-bearing classes
» Standalone programming with limited links to postsecondary institutions	→ Strong partnership with a postsecondary institution to facilitate curricular alignment and leveraging of resources on both sides to support student transition
» Minimal integration of career exploration and planning	→ Include a range of career exploration and planning activities to link classroom activities to students' college aspirations
» Insufficient financial resources to ensure quality and sustainability of program offerings	→ Adequate public and private funding to sustain prgrams and services needed to support the transition to college

As program innovators develop these college-connected designs, they confront three major areas of concern. These complex issues must be grappled with and addressed in order to build a full and effective design and improve students' postsecondary outcomes:[2]

- **Student Preparation:** Closing the gap between students' abilities, knowledge, and habits and the skills needed for college readiness, persistence, and success.
- **Curricular and Instructional Methodology:** Developing curricular and instructional program models that integrate foundational skills in literacy and numeracy, and help prepare youth for the academic demands of postsecondary study.
- **Limits of the GED Tests:** Strengthening the relationship between earning a GED credential and being college ready.

The GED: Fast Facts

- Each year, nearly 700,000 adults take the full battery of GED tests, which are administered by the GED Testing Service.
- The minimum passing score on each test is 410 out of a range of 200 to 800.
- Passing the entire GED battery requires a total minimum score of 2,250 out of a possible total of 4,000 on the five tests.
- Just over 69 percent (approximately 473,000) of the 684,000 candidates who took all five tests in 2009 passed and received the GED.
- More than 60 percent of GED test takers say they intend to further their education beyond the GED program.
- An estimated 98 percent of colleges that require a high school diploma accept the GED credential in its place.
- An estimated 96 percent of companies accept applicants with a GED credential for jobs requiring a high school diploma.

SOURCE: General Educational Development Testing Service, American Council on Education website: http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ged/index.htm.

This paper shares perspectives from John Garvey on the changes and challenges currently in play in GED programming. Its primary focus is on programs serving older youth (although many of the conclusions hold true for programs serving both older youth and adults). Youth-focused GED programming generally offers a more intensive course of study than is generally available in adult programs and emphasizes preparing recent dropouts for a full-time (or near full-time) postsecondary course of study. This gives these programs more time (relatively speaking) to prepare GED seekers to enter postsecondary education "college ready."

This paper augments Garvey's perspectives with lessons from JFF's *Postsecondary Success Initiative*, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and focused on identifying and scaling up effective pathways to postsecondary education for youth ages 18 to 26. JFF partners on this work with two national networks—YouthBuild USA and the National Youth Employment Coalition—assisting network leaders to grow and scale up college-connected designs (both GED and diploma-granting) within their membership.

Garvey, a long time leader in the field, argues for the critical importance of more robust GED programming—of the need to grow new *GED to College* designs that prepare students not just to earn secondary certificates but to enter and succeed in college. In the first section, he highlights essential challenges that must be addressed within a new design (e.g., student preparation, current instructional methodology) as well as some limitations of the GED tests. Part II offers a framework of key principles for educators to consider as they redesign their own programming. The final section suggests public policies that may follow the development of a new, more "college ready" GED assessment.

PART I.
CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE GED TO COLLEGE PROGRAMMING

THE PREPARATION GAP

To prepare themselves for postsecondary success, students in GED programs need help in many areas. Obviously, academic preparation is central. The more skills and content knowledge young people acquire and demonstrate, the more likely they will be to be able to tackle credit-bearing courses immediately, rather than starting college in developmental education. That said, young people often need considerable help in developing a broad set of college-readiness skills, ranging from managing time to navigating the postsecondary environment. The diverse skill needs of young people in GED programs create a complex set of preparation challenges.

Academic Preparation

The most important component of college readiness is academic knowledge and skill. The nation's ideas about academic preparedness have evolved in recent years, with significant contributions to our understanding of what is required for postsecondary success. The American Diploma Project, sponsored by Achieve, Inc., has functioned as a leader in the effort to ensure that all high school students graduate "college ready."[3] After more than a decade of working to raise standards state by state, 48 states (many of which began this work through the ADP coalition) have agreed to adopt a set of national Common Core State Standards. These standards significantly raise academic expectations for high school students and further support the idea of graduating all students college ready (*see Appendix I for excerpts from these standards*).

While this work does not directly address the unique needs of students who have not completed high school, it stands to reason that GED recipients must be as prepared for college as their peers who earn high school diplomas; therefore, standards such as those included in the common core must become a central part of *GED to College* programs. Although standards may differ in language and emphasis, they share an understanding of college preparation that goes beyond the minimum expected of high school graduates—and far beyond the performance required for passing GED tests, which focus on what might be considered the evidence of a certain degree of proficiency in communication, information processing and problem solving, and computation (Cain 2003).

For these new standards to serve as anything but painful reminders of the gulf between typical secondary achievement and true college readiness, the intellectual life of classrooms in both high schools and GED preparation programs will need to be enhanced dramatically.

Broader Dimensions of College Readiness

While absolutely critical, academic preparedness is only part of college readiness. David T. Conley, head of the Educational Policy Improvement Center and a national expert on college entry and success issues, has developed perhaps the most comprehensive description of college readiness. His framework consists of four complementary elements (Conley 2007):

- **Key cognitive strategies:** Well-prepared students have key habits of mind that enable them to learn content from a range of disciplines. They can reach a conclusion, follow the logic of an argument, document a finding, postulate an explanation for an observed phenomenon, solve a non-routine problem, and interpret seemingly contradictory information regarding an event.
- **Academic knowledge and skills:** Well-prepared students can write effectively and efficiently in different modes, conduct research, and synthesize findings. They have what might be considered core knowledge in English, math, science, social studies, world languages, and the arts.
- **Academic behaviors:** Well-prepared students have self-management skills. These include characteristics such as time management, awareness of one's actual skill level, the ability to prioritize tasks, study skills including using study groups, and the ability to take the initiative to do more than the minimum that is specified.
- **Contextual skills:** Well-prepared students know how colleges operate and understand that postsecondary institutions are communities of scholars focused on ways of knowing. They understand that the best way to connect with this community is to develop interests in ideas, concepts, and field-specific content. Well-prepared students also have "college knowledge": they know how to apply to college, access financial aid, and utilize a range of special services available to students that help them remain in school when they are struggling.

Conley focuses on high school students preparing for Bachelor's degree programs in relatively selective institutions, but his ideas relate directly to what needs to be done to prepare young adults in GED programs for any kind of postsecondary education. Yet the kinds of knowledge he describes are not often acquired by young people who graduate from high school, let alone by those who dropped out and are returning to second-chance programs.

This lack of college-ready preparation is evident once young people enter postsecondary education. First-year failure rates are high for all students—especially for those entering community college. According to Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center, approximately 60 percent of community college students take at least one developmental education course. And fewer than 25 percent of community college students in developmental education earn a degree or certificate within eight years of first enrolling (Bailey 2009). Even for those not assigned to developmental education classes, assignments in college will likely be much more complex and demanding than any they have completed before. As a result, they will have difficulty keeping up with the work and preparing for exams. Many will earn low, if not failing, grades. After just one semester without adequate first-year supports, they can already be off track for earning a college credential.

We can easily imagine that the readiness challenges are even more acute for students who have interrupted their education and are pursuing the GED as a result. For these young people, the time available to catch up, build a stronger academic base, and acquire a range of college-readiness skills is quite limited. Thus, their time in an education program must be very well spent. GED preparation programs are typically short—even new *GED to College* models are likely to offer a one-year preparation phase, with perhaps a summer academic bridge program on a local campus. GED students are already "behind the eight-ball" even as their relatively more educated peers are also experiencing issues with college readiness.

To ensure that program time is genuinely productive for returning students, practitioners will have to move decisively away from approaches that, implicitly or explicitly, endorse the notion that preparedness can be acquired with modest investments of effort or that academic work can be delivered without a good deal of intensity. The expectations for performance—and therefore the accompanying supports—need to be substantially increased.

Challenges of College Transition

GED learners need a good deal of early and ongoing help in applying to college, selecting an appropriate school, and accessing financial aid (Roderick et al. 2008). Just like adults returning to school, most disconnected youth have little understanding of what is involved in qualifying for college, completing applications for admission and financial aid, making a good choice of which college to attend, and acclimating themselves to the college environment. They depend on the quality of the advice and support they receive.

There is evidence that even students in high schools, whose resources are more substantial than most GED programs, do not get what they need in these important areas. According to Lori Chajet and Sierra Stoneman-Bell (2008-09):

> [M]any low-income students blindly follow a rote college application process rather than taking control of it themselves. Without the knowledge needed to make informed choices, many end up at colleges that do not meet their needs or expectations; others, after realizing that they never fully understood their financial aid packages, are unable to make their first payment and never begin; and still others, despite their desire to attend, never even complete the application process.

Students face additional difficulties once they enter college. These include understanding a wide range of standard postsecondary practices such as registration, placement tests, course requirements, and financing (e.g., bill payments, student loans, and financial aid). Other common challenges include navigating the college environment (e.g., understanding college coursework expectations; developing efficient study strategies; balancing work, school, and family obligations). To make matters worse, some routine institutional practices (e.g., the cut score requirements for entering developmental education; required general introductory courses) are not especially conducive to student success, especially for nontraditional students. As described in a recent concept paper for a new community college at CUNY, "Students often experience college, especially a commuter college, as a jigsaw puzzle of discrete courses, services, and administrative obligations" (CUNY 2008).

In addition, many institutions face an unresolved philosophical clash between the general education program and their students' goals. Today, most college students see the completion of a degree as a way to obtain a job, preferably one that they will enjoy and that will pay them enough for them to support themselves and their families. But at most colleges, general education coursework is designed to provide students with the opportunity to become knowledgeable about a range of disciplines—such as math, science, social science, and the humanities—and to be able to use the knowledge to inform their choice of a major and decisions they will make after college.

As worthwhile as general education approach may be, too few students ever get to the point where they enjoy the challenge or experience the excitement of engaging with important ideas in general education courses. In some cases, this is due to the requirement that they first complete remedial courses rather than for-credit work in their fields of interest. In other instances, it is due to the students' inability to keep up with the work that is required in introductory college-level courses. And in far too many instances, it will be due to the students' unfamiliarity with, if not inability to exert, the kind of effort entailed in intellectual work.[4]

This suggests a need to reconsider the relationship between what students think they want and the responsibility of an educational institution to enable them to move beyond the perspectives they have upon entry. A new relationship would likely involve introducing critical perspectives grounded in traditional academic disciplines into the major courses of study, rather than placing them in a kind of vestibule that students must pass through before they settle on a major.

While there are students who complete the required general education courses and go on to upper-division courses associated with their majors, *GED to College* programs need to look closely at the abilities, interests, and circumstances of each student. This must include an examination not only of academic skills but also whether young people can—and will—invest enough time in their first postsecondary experiences. It also is crucial to ensure a match of each student with the culture and requirements of a particular college or program of study. This requires counselors to have high-quality information with which to guide students toward various programs of study—including sub-baccalaureate technical training programs.

THE LIMITS OF TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION MODELS

The GED test, shaped by its origins, is primarily an instrument for certifying that individuals possess the skills and knowledge of high school graduates. A premise—whether explicit or not—is that test takers largely acquire GED skills and knowledge through life experience. If that were true, then candidates could prepare for the test with only a brief review to help them recall forgotten facts, rules, and procedures. Few GED test takers match this profile today.

Many GED test takers are not adults entering from the workforce but rather 18- to 26-year-olds who dropped out of high school and are floundering in the labor market because of their inadequate skills. These young people need effective and sustained instruction to build solid foundational skills that they did not learn (or did not learn well) during high school. They also need additional time to develop deeper the content knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college. The preparation phase of many GED programs is still too time-limited to fully prepare youth for further education beyond the GED. The following sections discuss limitations of "typical" GED instruction models, including the limitations of bridge programming that focuses too much on preparing students for college placement testing.

Pre-GED and GED Test Preparation

The predominant mode of preparation for the GED test remains part-time study for brief periods. A typical test-prep program lasts six months or less and offers 15 to 20 hours of instruction or less per week. This model mistakenly assumes that most people can quickly learn what they need to pass the tests, leading to the unfortunate and widespread belief among struggling high school students that the GED test is a fast and easy way to a high school diploma (Michalowski & Newman 2008). This issue has become a matter of considerable concern with the growth of advertisers promising quick and easy online GED preparation services that may or may not get students ready for the test and that fall far short of developing skills needed to take the next step in their education.[5]

Almost anyone involved in delivering educational services to those who have not graduated from high school is well aware that most of their students need much more than a quick brush up. Indeed, a substantial number of students have such limited reading and writing abilities that test preparation must be put off until they improve their skills enough to engage with the kind of content found in GED tests.

Once students enter a GED prep program, it is unlikely that its curriculum, instruction, or assessments are robust enough to ensure that they will do well on the test, even if they get the minimal scores needed to pass. Typical GED programs may get students over the first test hurdle, but they will *not* help those students who have less-developed skills to gain the knowledge they need to pass college placement tests and access credit-bearing courses—or to do well in those courses when they enroll.

Several aspects of typical GED programming are cause for concern. These begin with a focus on obtaining passing scores rather than high scores on the GED test. Second, there is an overreliance on commercially available material stressing familiarity with and preparation for the test versus gaining a deep understanding of the content. Third, typical GED preparation relies on content that is "doubly de-contextualized": it has little significant meaning within the larger subject matter or discipline and little relevance to the life concerns of students. This narrow view of instruction pays little heed to the importance of building on students' prior knowledge and conceptions. It also ignores other aspects of the ways in which students learn—for example, by engaging with powerful, relevant, and controversial content or tackling compelling social issues.

For students to acquire robust college-ready knowledge and skills—not just pass the GED tests—they must become versatile in reading, writing, and math. This developmental work needs to occur across the full continuum of learning levels, from students who are not quite ready to prepare for the GED tests, to students who barely pass subject area tests, to those who pass with relatively high scores.

Even with the diversity of young people taking the GED, some useful generalizations can be made about most students who leave high school before graduation, and a good number apply equally well to individuals who graduate with histories of below average or poor academic performance. In general, these students have not had extensive or productive experiences in reading and writing within academic

Literacy: Essential Elements

The following are essential elements of literacy learning, according to a report on adolescent literacy produced under the auspices of Carnegie Corporation of New York (2009):

- **Phonemic awareness:** A recognition that sounds map onto letters in more or less predictable ways
- **Alphabetics:** An understanding of the simple and complex ways in which sequences of letters in English represent sounds of the oral language
- **Fluency:** An ability to read with accuracy and adequate speed to enable a focus on meaning making
- **Vocabulary:** An understanding not only of the meanings of many words but of how words relate to each other and the ways in which they can be used in multiple ways and have multiple meanings
- **Comprehension:** A realization that the possible meanings of a text have to be constructed by readers using a variety of cues and strategies
- **Writing:** A recognition that writing can contribute to deeper comprehension and connecting one text to others
- **Speaking and listening:** A recognition that speaking and listening should be done carefully and precisely
- **Critical thinking:** A recognition that texts should be scrutinized to assess their credibility and the quality of their arguments

contexts. They frequently over-rely on a limited set of strategies when reading different types of texts or writing for different purposes. They usually lack a strong sense of what might be considered quality when they try to understand a text or write in response to a prompt. In addition, they may doubt their own abilities and prefer to avoid demanding academic tasks.

While learners at different levels may interact with texts in many similar ways, there also are important ways in which their facility with reading and writing varies across those different levels—that is, students bring with them a diverse array of learning gaps. These learning gaps show clearly that GED students need to be immersed in an array of literacy-based tasks—from phonemic awareness and vocabulary to fluency and critical thinking—that meet their individual skill needs and foster their continuous development (*see box, "Literacy: Essential Elements," for a continuum of skill development needs)*.

It is also important to emphasize that literacy skills are fluid. As students progress within education settings, the texts they read typically become longer and more complex, the meanings more ambiguous, and the vocabulary less familiar. Further, there are some types of texts and some types of reading tasks that an individual can handle relatively easily, while others will prove quite difficult. In other words, the work of becoming a better reader is never truly completed. New texts and new tasks require the development of new skills.

This point further bolsters the argument for significantly enriching the *GED to College* preparation phase. Program staff must move well beyond test prep to build rich, literacy-based learning environments. Retooling curricula and instruction requires staff to assess student skill levels carefully (using skill taxonomies like those presented in the box above), understand the kinds of texts and tasks that enable students to think seriously about what they do when they read and write, and then consistently practice productive strategies. Because most GED program participants have not had the kinds of opportunities that are conducive to acquiring the broad range of competencies essential for college readiness, it is critical that *GED to College* programs provide extensive practice in completing genuine tasks that anticipate what those students will be expected to complete in college.

Motivation and Engagement

As *GED to College* programs work to improve curricula and instruction, enhancing student motivation is critical to their success. In fact, an underappreciated aspect of David Conley's "college knowledge" framework is his conviction that prospective college students must understand and participate in the expanded intellectual, aesthetic, and social opportunities of postsecondary institutions. Conley has in mind traditional—but powerful—notions that a college education can transform students' understanding of who they are and who they might become. Following his logic, if GED students can recognize the transformative potential of college education, it may be easier to convince them to invest the time and effort needed to prepare themselves for the challenge of postsecondary work.

However, convincing them is unlikely to come easily. Perhaps one of the most pervasive and stubborn characteristics of second-chance and adult education programs is the belief that students will do little work outside the classroom. Staff who do not encourage students to make significant academic efforts will jeopardize the success of even the best-constructed *GED to College* program.

Instructors do not invent these problems; rather, they face a paradox. High school dropouts enroll in second-chance programs because they want to get back on the track of what education makes possible. At the same time, many of them see no compelling reason to change the patterns of their previous limited engagement with a formal learning program.

"Dropping out of high school is but the most visible indication of pervasive disengagement from the academic purposes and programs of these schools," according to a National Academy of Sciences report (2003). In other words, disengagement precedes dropping out. In far too many cases, it also follows dropping out. Each individual may have a distinctive story to tell about what led her or him to leave high school, but if such accounts do not include a recognition of what serious academic work might have looked like, they probably will be unable to reconsider what they need to do to succeed as students.

The National Academy of Sciences also noted studies that have found 40 to 60 percent of high school students to be "chronically disengaged." These students are "inattentive, exert little effort, do not complete tasks, and claim to be bored." Wisely, the report's authors pointed out that while learning "involves cognitive processes that take place within each individual, motivation to learn also depends on the student's involvement in a web of social relationships that support learning" (National Academy of Sciences 2003).

This suggests that programmatic efforts aimed at developing and sustaining student motivation and engagement must pay attention to the social dimensions of those behaviors. This requires the development of a powerful "college culture" within each *GED to College* program as the major tactic for transforming students' personal understandings of their potential and true academic achievement. This culture, which articulates and supports high expectations and a "college for all" orientation, needs to be carefully formulated, put into active practice, and embraced by staff and students alike. In fact, all program practices must flow from a few basic and transparent principles. Drawing on long-time professional perspectives and field study, we offer this set of principles:

- An expectation of high rates of consistent attendance and focused effort;
- Substantial and challenging academic work, within and outside the classroom;
- Consistency of daily instructional practice, such as starting classes on time and collecting student work for review;
- Regular assessment of student skills and performance, with results shared through conferences and written progress reports;

- Cultivation of an intellectually curious environment, using techniques such as bringing in guest lecturers and including college coursework as part of the curriculum; and
- Substantial program of professional development for staff members.

College Preparation (Bridge) Program Instruction

In programs where staff are incorporating college preparation—either within the traditional test-prep phase or as an extra "college bridge" component—too often the focus is on preparing students for college placement tests. However, as is true with the GED itself, the form and content of those tests have a profound impact on the design of the instructional preparation. What is unfortunate about an overreliance on test preparation is that the tests themselves are not true measures of actual college readiness (Achieve 2007).

The two most commonly used college placement tests are the COMPASS, developed by ACT, and ACCUPLACER, developed by the College Board. Both tests are computer-based and interactive: students answer different sequences of questions depending on the difficulty of the questions they get right and wrong. Each student begins with a question considered to be of mid-level difficulty. Those who answer it correctly get a harder next question; those who answer incorrectly get an easier one. The test continues to the end in the same manner. According to the design principles for the test, this approach should allow for valid determinations of a student's skills.[6] However, many test questions are significantly below college level, according to Achieve. For example, the reading tests include "less challenging passages that are more in line with the kind of reading done in middle school and early high school" (Achieve 2007). Regarding the math tests, the Achieve study concluded: "[T]he algebra content assessed tends to favor pre-algebra and basic algebra over the advanced algebra concepts and skills essential for college readiness and placement into College Algebra." Overall, the tests are "too narrow and do not reflect the full range of content . . . college students need in a wide variety of courses."

While placement tests do not necessarily indicate whether students are ready for college-level work, poor performance likely does reveal their shortcomings in knowledge of material they should have learned years earlier.[7]

Several particularly important aspects of what might be considered typical college preparation programs are cause for concern. Many of these issues are similar to those within standard GED preparation programs, such as an overreliance on test-taking skills and the presentation of diverse content presented without context. There is also often a lack of substantive connection to the demands of introductory (and required) college coursework or the skills and content of various college disciplines that students may pursue.

The problem of GED preparation programs that rely on rote teaching and of bridge programs that focus on test preparation, coupled with low-quality remedial instruction at the college level, results in a sad state of affairs: most dropouts are unlikely ever to gain the skills and knowledge they need for long-term success in college and careers. Steve Hinds, a math staff developer at City University of New York who works with adult education teachers, has perceptively commented on this issue:

> Reports on how to improve outcomes for underprepared students often focus on the merits of adopting specific program components such as learning communities, computer-assisted instruction, accelerated learning, supplemental instruction, work-based curricula, intensive advisement, or faculty inquiry groups. Certainly, many of these can be useful features of a high-quality . . . program. Unfortunately, though, too little attention is given to exactly how instructors teach students in remedial classrooms. There is an urgent need to re-examine the ways we teach underprepared students entering college. Re-focusing attention on pedagogy must also

cause us to rethink how we approach content, assessment, curricula, staff development, student placement, and research (Hinds 2009).

Of great concern are the many similarities among typical practices at different education levels. Students who progress through purported levels of instruction—pre-GED, GED preparation, bridge programming, developmental courses in college—often experience little that would signal they are taking on increasingly challenging work and developing higher-level skills such as those elucidated in the now well-known taxonomy developed in the 1950s by Benjamin Bloom.[8]

LIMITATIONS OF GED TESTS

In addition to the preparation and instructional challenges within GED programming, the GED test itself constrains an emphasis or clear focus on college readiness. According to the GED Testing Service, the test is designed to measure the "major and lasting academic outcomes students normally acquired by completing a typical high school program of study" (GED Testing Service 2010). The assessment includes five subject-area multiple-choice tests and an essay test (*see Table 2*).

Table 2.
GED Test Areas

GED TEST AREA	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	TIME LIMIT
Language Arts, Writing, Part I	50	75 minutes
Language Arts, Writing, Part II	1 essay	45 minutes
Social Studies	50	70 minutes
Science	50	80 minutes
Language Arts, Reading	40	65 minutes
Mathematics	50	90 minutes

The GED testing program is thoughtful in matters of test design (content specification, context setting for items, cognitive levels, and formats), validity and reliability studies, scoring and scaling, and standards setting. For those wishing to design effective *GED to College* programs, the challenge is to take full advantage of the quality of the current test. Paradoxically, this is made more difficult by one of the inherent virtues of the GED test: fulfilling the promise of equivalency by setting passing scores according to the performance of a representative group of graduating high school seniors in the United States and Canada. To pass the current GED test, a person must demonstrate a level of skill that meets or surpasses that of the top 60 percent of graduating high school seniors in a 2001 sample (GED Testing Service 2010).

Put simply, the demands of the test and the performance required for passing are fundamentally limited by the expected and actual performance of graduating high school seniors across North America. The GED Testing Service could have included content and questions that are more demanding, thereby better aligning the test with actual college readiness, but it would have had to set a much lower passing score in order to maintain an equivalent relationship between the performance of high school graduates and GED test takers. As a result, test takers might have passed even if they got only half of the items correct, but that would have raised serious questions about the test's integrity. Using the current model, the only way for GED standards to increase to college-readiness levels is for the achievement of high school graduates to improve.

Performance on the GED Test

The Testing Service collects and reports data on the characteristics and performance patterns of GED test takers. Of special interest here are the data on participation and performance by age, which support the view that test takers are growing younger: in 2009, individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 accounted for 63 percent of all U.S. test takers (*see Table 3*). In light of the discussion on preparation challenges, it is also worth noting that younger candidates did better than older ones. This is likely the result of the fact that those younger candidates were more recently enrolled in school; thus, they more easily drew on prior knowledge and used it as a base to build new knowledge and skills.

Table 3.
GED Pass Rates, by Age

AGE	PERCENT OF PARTICIPANTS	PASS RATE
16-18	27.4	77.5
19-24	35.8	69.8
25-29	13.4	68.4
30-34	8.4	64.8
35-39	5.6	61.3
40-49	6.8	56.3
50-59	2.5	53.7
60+	0.4	45.2
Total	100%	69.4

SOURCE: GED Testing Service 2010

It is not clear if these results have any relationship to the likelihood of participation in a formal program of GED test preparation. But in 2006 and 2007, between 33 percent and 37 percent of all New York City test takers indicated that they had participated in a preparation program before taking the test. Those who did so passed at rates more than 20 percent higher than those who did not (Cook 2008).[9]

PART II.
CREATING POWERFUL GED TO COLLEGE PROGRAMS: FASHIONING A NEW APPROACH

To create effective program models that prepare young people to enter and succeed in postsecondary settings, *GED to College* planners must develop a comprehensive approach to improving assessment, curriculum and instruction, student supports, and program evaluation. Each of these components plays a critical role during all three key student transition phases: GED preparation, college preparation (bridging), and support in early postsecondary experiences. This section presents a framework for building an effective *GED to College* program. Its principles should guide the planning and growth of this innovative new programming and ensure that both design and delivery address the key issues raised and discussed above.

Principles of Powerful Assessment Practices

- Capture each student's prior knowledge and skills, including those acquired outside of school, such as at work.
- Identify students' working theories, as well as misconceptions, when they perform different tasks.
- Assist teachers in identifying appropriate activities for productive student practice.
- Enable teachers to determine when students are prepared to advance to the next level of participation.

I. ASSESSMENT

Capture each student's prior knowledge and skills, including those acquired outside of school, such as at work.

Powerful assessment practices require moving away from the overreliance or singular focus on the tests that characterize traditional GED program assessment. Current tests tend to minimize student knowledge and maximize apparent deficits because they demand that candidates demonstrate what they can do under formal examination conditions, rather than what they must do in college course assignments in reading, writing, or math. Such tests produce predictable but not very useful information (Tuinman 1986).

Instead, it is essential to design and implement multiple assessment measures. Teachers need to construct a variety of learning experiences that help them assess what students know and can do, and then help each student recognize his or her competency while building new knowledge and skills. Teachers and program staff should work from a well-developed skill set that includes both college-ready academic standards and key non-cognitive skills. Then, using multiple measures, including classroom observation and structured tasks and practice, staff can evaluate students' competencies and decide what contexts and tasks are needed to help them build further skills and needed competencies.

In addition, the use of more informative entry assessments and individual student college/career planning can help staff discover and build on the assets that youth bring to the program.

Identify students' working theories—and misconceptions—when they perform different tasks.

While formal assessments are important, staff must pay close attention to what students actually do when they confront, work through, and complete a task—whether these are small tasks, such as solving a single math problem, or large ones, such as reading a book or completing a group project. Staff should seek to identify the ways in which students are engaged productively (or not) and whether they tackle tasks in ways that will facilitate future academic success. Also, learning activities need to be designed such that students surface their thought processes (surfacing their prior knowledge and key assumptions) so that misconceptions and knowledge gaps can be addressed and corrected.

Assist teachers in identifying the most appropriate activities for productive student practice.

Skill development activities in *GED to College* classrooms must move decisively away from routinized practice test activities (whether online or not) to incorporate the use of higher-level skill practice and skills demonstration activities. The most effective programs scaffold these activities: skill practice should demand more and more of students as they progress through the preparation phase; and assessment activities should look more like what those students will experience once in college. In fact, a number of *GED to College* programs have moved to embrace college-level instruction as the key instructional design for programming in the preparation phase and use a time-limited and intensive "boot camp" to prepare youth (when ready) to take and pass the GED tests.

Enable teachers to determine when students are prepared to advance to the next level of participation.

Powerful assessment practices must enable teachers and students to know what skills and competencies the students have mastered and what development lies ahead. Both parties should recognize—and celebrate—when it is time to advance, whether to the next major assignment or the next level of preparation for college.

II. CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Provide college-ready instruction first and GED test preparation as a supplemental experience.

The point has been extensively made that young people in GED programming must be more engaged in and challenged by their learning activities than is typical of most GED programs. Thus *GED to College* programs are "upending" the usual instructional design. They are providing college-ready instruction first and integrating test preparation within broader assessment activities or providing a test-prep boot camp as descried earlier. The characteristics of college-ready instruction include the provision of increasingly challenging assignments, the design and use of student products (e.g., group projects, presentations, research papers), and the use of inquiry approaches (e.g., the investigation of compelling or controversial social issues).

Principles of Powerful Curricular and Instructional Practices

- Provide college-ready instruction first and GED test preparation as a supplemental experience.
- Remain attentive to the frequently ambiguous character of much instructional language to make sure that content, vocabulary, and learning tasks are clear and transparent.
- Model the use of "classroom talk" to help students identify learning gaps in order to quickly build needed skills within ongoing learning tasks.
- Promote the extensive use of written and oral language across the curriculum, and model learning activities on those required to pass first-year "gatekeeper" college courses.
- Encourage learning beyond the classroom, and scaffold instruction so students increasingly do independent academic work.
- Focus instruction on depth, not breadth. Teach students to think mathematically, scientifically, and historically rather than to digest facts, dates, and formulas.

Remain attentive to the frequently ambiguous character of much instructional language to make sure that content, vocabulary, and learning tasks are clear and transparent.

It is fair to assume that GED students who have "interrupted" educational experiences or who have a history of unsuccessful experiences in high school often find academic settings and learning tasks bewildering. Much can be accomplished in a relatively short time by establishing good classroom routines. These include standard introductory activities that set up units by drawing on prior knowledge and generating key questions to anchor units, pre-teaching key vocabulary terms, "chunking" complex assignments into discrete steps (with associated timelines), and using rubrics to guide student work. These teaching aids, when used across classrooms, get students into the habit of thinking and acting like scholars of the discipline, and they begin to teach (and help students practice) the soft skills associated with college success.

Model the use of "classroom talk" to help students uncover misunderstandings or identify learning gaps in order to quickly build needed skills within ongoing learning tasks.

Teachers in *GED to College* classrooms encourage "classroom talk": asking students and groups of students to explain a problem, defend a point of view, describe why one solution (or answer) is stronger than another, and describe why a widespread opinion does not necessarily hold water. Working with students, whether they are working in groups on a lab experiment or doing math problems on their own, requires that teachers observe and talk with students about how they are approaching and solving problems and what steps they are generating to move from A to Z.

A major characteristic of effective teaching in this context is balancing direct instruction and facilitation. The teacher's primary role should not be to dispense knowledge but instead to provide an array of learning projects of increasing difficulty, offer assistance (by way of illustration, explanation, or guidance), and pay close attention to progress or the lack thereof. Teachers must provide enough supports to enable the students to complete assignments with increasing degrees of independence.

In many ways, these responsibilities demand much more from individual teachers than simply covering material. While this view of teaching is demanding, it holds the promise of being more rewarding for the teacher as well as for the student.

Promote the extensive use of written and oral language across the curriculum, and model learning activities on those required to pass first-year "gatekeeper" college courses.

Students in all levels of GED to College programs need to become versatile and proficient in the types of academic activities they will be expected to engage in during college. They will need to read much more than they are typically asked to do in school (or in the program) and will be expected to write both frequent short essays and longer research papers. Therefore, programs must continue to raise the level of rigor as students get comfortably settled in. And curricula and instruction should be structured to enable students

to use tools and materials and to complete tasks that prefigure what they will encounter in postsecondary classrooms. This will require program staff to observe various college contexts, including college classrooms in various disciplines, and to engage in regular conversations with college faculty.

Encourage learning beyond the classroom and scaffold instruction so students increasingly do independent academic work.

Powerful teaching must be premised on the conviction that all students can learn important things and learn them well.[10] For many students, this will mean gaining confidence in their ability to learn. Teaching also should be conducted in ways that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning—to understand that they need to invest time and effort in and out of the classroom if they expect to learn anything of substance. Powerful teaching encourages students to take risks, make mistakes, and reflect on their own thinking and learning processes. In turn, this should support students' development of flexible strategies for accomplishing different types of tasks in different contexts.

Focus instruction on depth, not breadth. Teach students to think mathematically, scientifically, and historically, rather than to digest facts, dates, and formulas.

For students to engage in the kinds of productive learning that are essential to the development of proficiency, they must have good reasons and good contexts for practice. The goal should be to nurture the acquisition of substantial knowledge, not merely to accelerate the remediation of skills. For the most part, efforts focused on remediation have fostered a preoccupation with minimum competencies, but these are not enough. No student, particularly one who has had little educational success, can be overly prepared for postsecondary learning. Rather than defining progress as efficient movement through a traditional skills hierarchy, it should be understood as the growth of essential skills and deep knowledge that reinforce each other through enriched contexts. It can be argued that what we think of as skills actually are crystallized forms of knowledge that have been acquired and practiced in multiple contexts.

To enable teachers to help students gain valuable academic knowledge and be able to focus on student work and progress, entire courses should be developed in advance of their delivery. Indeed, it would be beneficial for *GED to College* teaching staff to collaborate with program staff and college instructors in developing or refining courses. This would save teachers, especially newer ones, from the time-consuming task of planning courses while at the same time trying to focus on effective instruction and ensure good alignment between one phase of the program and the next. *(See Appendix III for an example of a reading/writing course that is consistent with these principles, described by Anthony Petrosky and David Bartholomae; for math, see Hinds 2009.)*

Principles of Powerful Advising

- Ensure that advising focuses primarily on academic achievement (e.g., supports help students focus on their studies).
- Design supports to address personal barriers that interfere with college success and help youth finish in a reasonable amount of time.
- Develop authentic preparation and practice activities to guide students through what to expect at each key transition point to and through college—and to ensure that they are ready and able to tackle each step.
- Create ongoing feedback channels for students and staff to ensure that advising is developmentally responsive; use the feedback for program improvement.

III. STUDENT SUPPORTS

Ensure that advising focuses primarily on academic achievement (e.g., supports help students focus on their studies).

Effective advising keeps a laser focus on this goal. While it would be foolish to discount the difficult life circumstances of many students or the barriers to learning these present, youth receiving transition and postsecondary supports should clearly understand that key services there to help them focus and succeed. Keeping focused on academic persistence and success involves ensuring that students access tutoring services (sometimes requiring it as a condition of receiving postsecondary supports), helping students formulate study groups, and tracking (and helping students track) their academic progress throughout the semester or term.

Design supports to address personal barriers that interfere with college success and help youth finish in a reasonable amount of time.

Again, it is worth emphasizing that traditional support services, although critical, are available to support overall program goals of academic completion. Key support services (e.g., for housing, mental health, or child care) are not provided as a good in and of themselves (although they indeed may do a great deal of good); rather, they are offered in order to reduce barriers and help students marshal the persistence and concentration they need to complete a college program of study. One critical aspect of the design of support services is ensuring a sound financial plan and getting finances in order well in advance of the start of term. This may involve counseling students about the pros and cons of borrowing to enable them to attend college full time and earn a credential in a shorter amount of time. Even with a good financial plan, emergency funds need to be set aside to cover any shortfalls so students do not enter classes without money to purchase needed textbooks and supplies.

Develop authentic preparation and practice activities to guide students through what to expect at each transition point—and to ensure that they are ready and able to tackle each step.

Again, the key factor in preparing and guiding students from GED preparation through college is adequate time. Students must participate long enough for real development to take place. In many *GED to College* programs, this means lengthening program time from six months to twelve or eighteen months or adding

a summer or first-semester postsecondary bridge component with supports strong enough to enable students to persist.

It is also necessary to help students acquire a repertoire of skills and strategies for effective decision making and functioning in the precollege program and eventually in college. These cover a broad range, from completing applications for admission and financial aid, to choosing which college to attend, to balancing study and other obligations, to selecting a major. Transition counselors, skills for success courses, and having a strong case management component in place at the college will help give students time, ongoing support, and consistent messages as they learn and practice the skills needed for college success.

Create ongoing feedback channels for students and staff to ensure that advising is developmentally responsive; use the feedback for program improvement.

Powerful advisement must be conducted in developmentally (and pedagogically) sound ways. Advisors must do more than tell students what to do or give them good advice. They must connect college going to deep personal motivations and goals. They must design ways (and tools) to present information and recommendations in ways that are developmentally appropriate and compelling, ensure genuine understanding, and allow students (with the guidance and advice of their advisor) to make the best decisions about every aspect of college (from what institution they choose, to the postsecondary program of study they pursue, to the courses they select from semester to semester, to when and how they access campus services). Feedback from advisors, students, and college staff is often critical in helping determine whether the provision of information and ongoing guidance are timely and effective and what adjustments need to be made to make advising both powerful and effective.

IV. EVALUATION

Use well-established and predictive indicators of success to select key data points and benchmarks to measure the program's success.

Essential to the success of innovative *GED to College* programming is the identification and tracking of key benchmarks of college readiness and college performance. Here we draw from research and practice, especially using the experience of states working on improving outcomes in their community college system to select benchmarks and outcomes that are most predictive of success in postsecondary settings. For example, research shows that more full-time study (with substantial credit accumulation in the first year) is associated with stronger completion outcomes.

Principles of Powerful Evaluation

- Use well-established and predictive indicators of success to select key data points and benchmarks to measure the program's success.
- Establish benchmarks for each program phase and use them to strengthen each component of the program.
- Develop a partnership between program staff and key college staff to ensure joint accountability for results.

Establish benchmarks for each program phase and use them to strengthen each component of the program.

Programs that establish benchmarks can more easily track progress on readiness, transition, and persistence measures of young people as they move through each program phase. Gains in these areas show that program redesign is working well; results that are not hitting expected targets show that the design needs overhaul or adjustment. Table 4 (*see page 23*) lists selected benchmark goals for each of the three phases of a *GED to College* program (and a note on when the data should be collected). These benchmarks are being collected by a number of *GED to College* programs, particularly programs in the national networks that are part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's postsecondary success initiative.

At least three important benchmarks should be examined before a person enters college:

- Evidence of careful consideration of multiple college options;
- Timely completion of all necessary financial aid applications; and
- Entry into college with no required enrollment in remedial courses.

Also, three benchmarks should be examined during each student's college career:

- Earning grades of C or better in introductory courses;
- Earning a minimum of 20 credits by the end of the first full-time year of study;[11] and
- Being on track for degree completion within 150 percent of the time traditionally associated with the completion of a degree—three years for an Associate's degree and six years for a Bachelor's degree.[12]

It is possible to work back from these indicators to determine patterns of performance within a GED preparation program (e.g., attendance, completion of assignments, group work) and scores on the GED tests that correlate with success in college.

Develop a partnership between program staff and key college staff to ensure joint accountability for results.

GED to College programs run by nonprofits (rather than by the college on its campus) will obviously need to form partnerships with area colleges (likely community colleges) to get access to data critical to assessing the readiness, persistence, and success of their students—particularly once they leave the program and enter college. Many programs begin by building relationships with staff in TRIO or other support programs on the campus with particular interest in the success of nontraditional students. These relationships often become more formal over time, involving additional staff and resulting in MOUs that specify each partner's role and what data can be accessed (and by whom). As partners begin to share data regularly, all parties become more invested in the results.

This leads to both program and college partner staff monitoring all aspects of their programming and making appropriate modifications when necessary. This process is aided by keeping good summaries of all discussions, decisions, and consequences of those decisions as the program develops, as well as maintaining comprehensive descriptions of assessments, courses, and instructional practices. And it should include comprehensive data collection and analysis.

Table 4.
Key Data

These data should be collected for all individuals and aggregated to allow for an analysis of programmatic effectiveness for various groups of students.

Pre-GED	GED	College Prep	College (for at least the first year)
» Demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity; optional: native language)	» Demographic characteristics	» Demographic characteristics	» Academic course schedule
» Attendance patterns and extent of participation	» Attendance patterns and extent of participation	» Attendance patterns and extent of participation	» Attendance patterns
» Initial assessments of reading, writing, and math	» Initial assessments (end-of-term/end-of-cycle assessments for advancing pre-GED students) of reading, writing, and math	» Scores on placement tests	» Extent of the need for remediation
» Initial scores on the GED practice test in social studies	» Initial scores (end-of-term scores for students from pre-GED level) on the full battery of GED practice tests	» Scores on other college-designed assessments	» Performance in remedial courses
» End-of-cycle/end-of-term assessments of reading, writing, and math	» End-of-cycle/end-of-term scores on the full battery of GED practice tests		» Performance in introductory credit-bearing courses
» End-of-cycle/end-of-term scores the on full battery of GED practice tests	» End-of-cycle/end-of-term assessments of reading, writing, and math		» Eligibility for next credit courses in sequences
	» Scores on GED tests (including those obtained through multiple tests)		» Credit accumulation
			» Grade point averages
			» Persistence from one semester to the next

In addition, it would be valuable for programs to document the reasons why students encounter difficulties in continuing productive engagement at one point or another, and perhaps why some students appear able to overcome obstacles. Longitudinal case studies of individual students might be particularly helpful.

PART III.
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: WHAT'S NEXT

The GED field is changing. Innovators are demonstrating that they can—with time and new practices and partnerships—improve college readiness and success. Many are doing so in the face of resource constraints or policy outcomes that focus on attainment of the GED credential and job readiness or placement.

A development with strong potential to drive major changes in the field is the move to establish a more rigorous GED test. In 2009, the GED Testing Service announced that it would discontinue developing a new test formerly scheduled for introduction in January 2012.[13] In explaining its decision, the Testing Service referenced changes in the national conversation about what it means to graduate from high school "career and college ready." The Testing Service explained that it deemed it necessary to introduce "changes and improvements to the GED Test that are aligned with this new direction. . . . Because of the changing national landscape, we have decided to transition directly from the current 2002 Test Series to a new, more comprehensive assessment program."

Recently, the American Council on Education joined with Pearson Education to create a next-generation GED test. The partners will combine public and private resources to create a new, more rigorous test based on common core standards and designed and delivered to ensure that students exit ready for college and career success. Key innovations include learning resources to improve the quality of instruction (including diagnostic information to help GED recipients better understand their learning strengths and improvement areas) and the promotion of transition networks for GED holders (to improve transition supports to college and career opportunities). The new test is expected to be available in 2014.

We can only speculate about what this change will mean for the GED field and for returning students. How can a better aligned and academically challenging GED test work in today's constrained resource environment? How can many more GED practitioners hold students to a higher bar without policy and resource supports for longer-term and more intensive academic preparation programs? How can the field move to higher performance expectations without new incentives, additional resources, and good alignment between state and federal goals and accountability systems? As we raise these questions, we can also begin to imagine how a new test with higher performance standards might propel a host of interesting changes—from the more widespread participation in *GED to College* designs, to new staffing configurations or skill demands, new incentives, or new outcome measures.

Until now, educators working to better align GED programming with the skills and knowledge needed to enter and succeed in postsecondary education have sought to create a strengthened approach despite a host of policy and resource constraints. A new test—even if just a first step—is welcome news. It is likely that the new designs and practices highlighted here will fit well within an evolving, more rigorous second-chance environment and that higher performance expectations will create ground for a reinvigorated look at the future of GED programming.

APPENDIX I. COLLEGE PREPAREDNESS STANDARDS: THE WORK OF THE AMERICAN DIPLOMA PROJECT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMON CORE

The following information is adapted from the Achieve, Inc., website, www.achieve.org and from the Common Score State Standards Initiative website, www.corestandards.org. This information provides more specific evidence that college readiness standards are rising for all high school aged youth. The new standards buttress the point made in Part I of this paper that readying GED youth for college and career success presents special challenges.

AMERICAN DIPLOMA PROJECT

The American Diploma Project, led by Achieve, Inc., developed a set of benchmarks for English and mathematics derived, in part, from a review of actual workplace tasks and expectations of students enrolled in introductory college courses, as well as from interviews with high school teachers and college

professors. Those benchmarks call for a level of student achievement, based on coursework, that would go far beyond the typical goal of most high school courses.

The ADP benchmarks represent ambitious goals for students. In math, they reflect content typically taught in the first two levels of college algebra, as well as geometry, data analysis, and statistics. The English benchmarks demand strong oral and written communication skills because these are staples in college classrooms and most 21st-century jobs. They also contain analytic and reasoning skills that formerly were associated with advanced or honors courses in high school.

A more recent development building on the work of ADP is the Common Core State Standards Initiative, a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. These standards were developed to encourage states to move toward a set of consistent academic standards. These standards aim to provide a clear and consistent framework and national consensus on what students need to know and be able to do to prepare for success in college and the workforce. The following are excerpts of the common standards for English language arts and math.

KEY POINTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading

- The standards establish a "staircase" of increasing complexity in what students must be able to read so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school.
- Through reading a diverse array of classic and contemporary literature as well as challenging informational texts in a range of subjects, students are expected to build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities, and broaden their perspectives.
- The standards mandate certain critical types of content for all students, including classic myths and stories, foundational U.S. documents, seminal works of American literature, and the writings of Shakespeare.

Writing

- The ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone of the writing standards, with opinion writing extending down into the earliest grades.
- Research—both short, focused projects (such as those commonly required in the workplace) and longer term in depth research—is emphasized throughout the standards but most prominently in the writing strand since a written analysis and presentation of findings is so often critical.

Speaking and Listening

- The standards require that students gain, evaluate, and present increasingly complex information, ideas, and evidence through listening and speaking as well as through media.
- An important focus of the speaking and listening standards is academic discussion in one-on-one, small-group, and whole-class settings.

Language

- The standards expect that students will grow their vocabularies through a mix of conversations, direct instruction, and reading.
- The standards recognize that students must be able to use formal English in their writing and speaking but that they must also be able to make informed, skillful choices among the many ways to express themselves through language.

Media and Technology

Just as media and technology are integrated in school and life in the 21st-century, skills related to media use (both critical analysis and production of media) are integrated throughout the standards.

KEY POINTS IN MATHEMATICS

- The K-5 standards provide students with a solid foundation in whole numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals—which helps young students build the foundation to successfully apply more demanding math concepts and procedures and move into applications.
- The standards stress not only procedural skill but also conceptual understanding, to make sure students are learning and absorbing the critical information they need to succeed at higher levels.
- Having built a strong foundation K-5, students can do hands-on learning in geometry, algebra and probability and statistics. The middle school standards provide a coherent preparation for high school mathematics.
- The high school standards call on students to practice applying mathematical ways of thinking to real world issues and challenges; they prepare students to think and reason mathematically.
- The high school standards set a rigorous definition of college and career readiness, by helping students develop a depth of understanding and ability to apply mathematics to novel situations.

The high school standards emphasize mathematical modeling, the use of mathematics and statistics to analyze empirical situations, understand them better, and improve decisions.

APPENDIX II.
BASIC READING AND WRITING COURSE DEVELOPED BY DAVID BARTHOLOMAE AND ANTHONY PETROSKY

In 1977, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, faculty members at the University of Pittsburgh, developed a reading and writing course for freshmen who were deemed unprepared for regular college coursework. They describe the initial course in considerable detail in Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course. *The following excerpts summarize some of what Bartholomae and Petrosky say in their paper about what their course is not. The discussion suggests what is needed within bridge programming designed to truly ready older, disconnected youth for success in college.*

Ours is not a course in study skills. We don't teach students how to find information in a textbook—to skim and scan and read topic sentences. We don't use workbooks; we use real books. Our assignments ask for something other than reports and summaries. Our students write drafts and revisions, not exercises; they work on semester-long projects, not the usual set pieces defined by discrete weekly themes.

We don't have students shuttling information from texts to teachers and back again but shuttling themselves between languages—theirs and ours—between their understanding of what they have read and their understanding of what they must say to us about what they have read. (Our language is the language of written academic discourse, including the peculiar spoken version that passes as "talk" in disciplined classroom discussion. Their language, when they speak or write for us, cannot be simply characterized as the language of the streets or the language of home or the neighborhood. It is something in the margin, belonging neither here nor there and preventing their participation as speakers with place, privilege or authority.)

The authors acknowledge that their course does not look much like most basic skills courses. But their students in 1977, when they created the course, looked like the students enrolled in the more typical basic skills courses. The mean SAT verbal score of the students in the course was 360, with some scores as low as 220. Fifteen percent of the students had scores below 300. On a standardized reading test normed at the 13th grade level, the mean vocabulary and comprehension scores were at the 28th and 35th percentile.

As Bartholomae and Petrosky developed the course, they spent significant time trying to understand what struggling readers and writers believed that reading and writing consisted of, what they did when they read and wrote, and what they thought their problems were. By way of example, they found that most of the students thought that reading was remembering what you had read, that they usually read a whole chapter without making any marks in the book to help them remember, and that they thought that they were bad at remembering, could not concentrate, or had a poor vocabulary. The authors also discovered that many of the students had never read a whole book.

Despite the fact that the students had all of the characteristics of students who needed remediation in basic skills, the authors resisted the temptation to revert back to the traditional model of instruction. They believed that, underlying all of the surface evidence of poor skills, the students' fundamental difficulties were rooted in their inability to "imagine the language, conventions and purposes of academic discourse."

So, what does the course look like?[14] It was designed as a semester-long seminar meeting for six hours a week for a semester. Students focus on a single problem that has been identified as one that they will, to at least some extent, be familiar with from their own experience and knowledge and that also will matter to them. (In the beginning, the topic was "Growth and Change in Adolescence.") The seminar includes reading and writing, discussion and debate, reports and commentary. Students are assigned 12 writing assignments and revisions, for each of which there is a corresponding reading assignment. The assigned texts "move from first-person and fictional accounts of adolescent experience to works by psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists." Students also compile their own individual reading lists and write entries about their reading in a journal. On average, students read 12 books and write 25 drafts and revisions.

Student drafts and revisions are reproduced and distributed to the seminar members and serve as the focal point of seminar discussions. A crucial aspect of the course is the detailed instructions that explain how each assignment is to be completed.

Bartholomae and Petrosky present a convincing argument that their course represents a more powerful approach to welcoming and supporting unprepared students into the kinds of reading and writing they will need to do as college students than does the traditional basic skills model. They claim no easy victories and they acknowledge that, by the end of the semester, most of the students will still have a lot of work to do in order to become versatile readers and writers. One seminar, even a very good one, does not accomplish miracles. But it can lay the groundwork for student confidence and determination over the long run.

ENDNOTES

[1] See American Council on Education: About the GED at www.acenet.edu.

[2] This paper addresses the issues primarily as they relate to young people who enroll in college to obtain an Associate's or Bachelor's degree. Many programs are preparing some young people to enroll in credit-bearing certificate programs (accelerated programs that generally require fewer credits for completion); in this context, staff may discover that these findings need adapting or adjusting. Even so, if individuals are going to acquire sophisticated skills in such programs, they will need to be well prepared for the requisite academic and technical coursework.

[3] Achieve, based in Washington, DC, is an education reform organization created by the nation's governors.

[4] See Cox (2010) for an especially insightful portrayal of many of the profound misalignments between students and community college faculty and staff.

[5] See: http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ged/Truth_About_GED_Test.htm.

[6] For information on computer adaptive testing, see CAT Central, a Web page developed and maintained by David Weiss of the University of Minnesota at http://www.psych.umn.edu/psylabs/catcentral.

[7] While the college placement tests contain some material that is more demanding than that in the GED test, the more significant reason why those who pass it come up short on the college placement tests is the very different format and the quite different ways in which they present content. In general, the GED test presents items in some form of meaningful context, but the college placement tests present items (especially in math) without a context. Individuals who are not very versatile will often fail to recognize that two items, presented in such different ways, are asking for the application of the same type of knowledge. This suggests that, while the placement tests deserve criticism, many GED recipients need to become more versatile than they are. Curricular and instructional models that are grounded in the power of contexts to promote learning should be complemented by a recognition that students need to be competent in a wide variety of contexts and, eventually, demonstrate competencies in at least some decontextualized situations.

[8] *A Professional Learning Path to Rigorous and Relevant Instruction: Key Lessons from the Transfer School Institute*, from the New York City Department of Education's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, contains an interesting description of an adaptation of Bloom's taxonomy to inform the development of higher-order thinking skills.

[9] Information was not available on how long participants were enrolled or the number of individuals who participated in programs but did not take the GED tests.

[10] In the case of programs for disconnected youth or older adults who have not completed high school, it is probably also essential that teachers have deep-seated convictions about the importance of the work they are doing.

[11] See Adelman (2006).

[12] These are the timeframes utilized by the U.S. Department of Education for its IPEDS reporting system.

[13] In all likelihood, this new test was to have been developed in a manner consistent with previous tests. For more information on altered plans for a new GED test, see *National Needs Alter Plans for GED® 5th Edition Test: Frequently Asked Questions*, at http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ged/GEDTest_NatlNeed_FAQ.htm.

[14] From a review of the University of Pittsburgh Web page, it appears that the course continues to be offered by the English Department.

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