

A Report to the Basic Academic Skills Advisory Committee,
Bellingham Technical College

**HAND ME A SHOVEL:
CLEARING A PATH TO ADULT BASIC
EDUCATION**

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Hand Me a Shovel: Clearing a Path to Adult Basic Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2007, the Basic Academic Skills Advisory Committee of Bellingham Technical College (BTC) began to examine groups of adults in Whatcom County who are underserved by Adult Basic Education. In response, educators affiliated with Western Washington University and Bellingham Technical College designed a mixed-methods (primarily qualitative) research project to support the Advisory Committee's inquiry. The purpose of this pilot study was to gather preliminary information on adult learners in order to guide outreach efforts and future research.

This study was organized around the following research questions: (1) How do ABE/GED-eligible adults in Whatcom County define community membership? (2) What are key characteristics and needs of communities that are underserved by ABE/GED? (3) What prevents members of underserved communities from taking ABE/GED classes? Thirteen students in GED classes were asked to characterize adults who are not enrolled in Adult Basic Education. Through written comments and focus-group interviews, the students described educational needs within communities to which they belonged.

Three communities emerged most prominently in the students' descriptions: **Caregiver Community** (single mothers and other parents who focus on making better lives for their families), **Friends and Family Micro-communities** (adults who socialize with small numbers of associates), and **Clean and Sober Community** (alcoholics or substance users who are in a recovery program). Each of these communities has unique perspectives and concerns that have specific implications for ABE/GED outreach.

Beyond their differences, these communities share some common traits. Individuals across communities tend to have similar life goals (e.g., find better employment, make life more secure for one's family). These goals appear to be consistent among people who seek further education, as well as among those who do not. Additionally, adults in each community tend to face multiple challenges (e.g., health problems, lack of child care) that make it difficult to return to school.

The findings highlight three "perceptual catalysts" that influence one's perception that she/he can overcome life challenges to achieve a better life through education. (1) Adults who pursue ABE/GED generally have a **robust commitment to education**, which includes a willingness to break from past life patterns. (2) They also have some **sense of self-efficacy**, leading them to believe that they have sufficient intelligence and ability to

achieve their goals. (3) These adult learners additionally recognize some sort of **logistical path** that will allow them to advance; or, at least, they have faith that such a path exists. It appears that people who do not to pursue further education generally lack one or more of these perceptual catalysts.

The three perceptual catalysts are shaped, in part, by interaction with “core people.” These can be friends, spouses, relatives, work associates, or even one’s children – generally people who are closest and most trusted by the adult learner. In the best circumstances, core people provide sound advice and living examples of success through education. However, it is more common for core people to be less-than-helpful influences. If an individual wants to change her/his life, the presence of one positive core person may be sufficient to build a robust commitment to education, foster a sense of self-efficacy, and find a logistical path.

These findings support the following outreach strategies: (1) face-to-face recruiting and use of peer representatives, (2) developing marketing strategies targeted to specific communities, (3) communicating program flexibility and supports, (4) emphasizing personal and familial benefits of education, (5) collaborating with human service and health care professionals, (6) offering affordable and reliable childcare.

There are significant limitations to this study. The research design does not directly examine the target population of adults who are not enrolled in ABE/GED. Instead, conclusions are based on information provided by current students, who describe people who are not enrolled. In addition, the sample of study participants is small and non-random. Consequently, the external validity of the findings (i.e., the extent to which the findings can be generalized to a larger population) has not been established. It is strongly recommended that further research be conducted to verify the findings.

INTRODUCTION

“Hand me a shovel because I’m tired of digging this hole I’m in with my hands.” I thought that’s a perfect saying because sometimes that’s just how you feel when you’re really down and you feel you can’t get out of the hole you’re in. You’re just [saying], “Can you help me out of this?” So I really think this is the best thing I can do for myself and my children’s lives.

Pamela - single parent and GED student

Individuals who need instruction in basic academic skills often feel stuck. Many struggle to deal with day-to-day challenges, all the while feeling that they are going nowhere with their lives. Pamela didn’t expect others to pull her out of her predicament as she tried to support her family on a low-wage job. Rather, she wanted someone to give her a basic tool that she could use to get herself and her children onto firm ground. For many in Pamela’s situation, that tool is ABE/GED education. Pamela felt fortunate to have come this far. There are many other adults in Whatcom County who need basic skills instruction but, for a variety of reasons, have not enrolled in a program. This raises some fundamental questions for adult educators: What segments of the regional population are not sufficiently served by ABE/GED? What pathways facilitate access to programs? And what tools do adults need to get onto those pathways?

Existing research suggests that the need for ABE/GED is substantial. In Whatcom County, nearly 14 percent of adults age 18 to 24 and more than 11 percent of adults age 25 and over have less than a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey). Based on these statistics, we estimate that almost 17,300 area residents over the age of 18 do not have a high school degree or equivalent. These descriptive statistics give some indication of the scope of need. However, the numbers do not reveal why people do not pursue additional education. To address this fundamental question, research must consider the needs and concerns of adult learners from their perspective.

To this end, a team of educators affiliated with Western Washington University and Bellingham Technical College conducted a pilot study of adult learners in Whatcom County, Washington. We set out to identify groups of adults in Whatcom County who qualify for ABE/GED instruction but are generally underserved by existing educational programs. In particular, we attempt to document education-related concerns from the perspective of group members. A key feature of this study is that it analyzes how adults define and participate in communities.

Our approach is informed by situated learning theory, which posits that all learning is inherently social in nature (see Heany, 1995). We draw particularly on the notion of “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991; see also “community as relationship”, St Clair, 1998). As Hansman and Wilson put it, communities of practice are “self-organized and selected groups of people who share a common sense of purpose and a desire to learn and know what each other know” (2002, p. 143). Our premise is that, in studying naturally occurring patterns of affiliation (i.e., who adults choose to congregate or identify with), we might identify better ways for ABE/GED programs to reach target groups and to serve their needs.

PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This pilot phase of a broader research project was conducted with current GED students at Bellingham Technical College. Because these individuals were already in an adult education program, they were not the target population. We decided to start with current students because they were readily accessible and they were likely to know peers who have not enrolled in adult basic education. We hoped these students would point us toward underserved communities – eligible adults who were not in classes. Working in consultation with Bellingham Technical College, we selected two GED classes (one day and one evening). All students over the age of 18 were invited to participate.¹ A total of 13 students from the two classes agreed to participate. Of these volunteers, most were female (8 people), European American (11), native English speakers (11), between the ages of 25 and 34 (6). Others identified themselves as Native American (2) and Latina (1). Other first languages included Spanish (1) and Russian (1). Because this was a small non-random convenience sample, we do not claim that our quantitative findings are generalizable to a broader population of adult learners. The main value of this study is to provide a fine-grained qualitative description of learning from an emic (or insider’s) perspective.

Data were collected in five parts administered over two days with each class. Beforehand, the instructors talked to their classes about the processes and purpose of educational research. On each data-collection day, two researchers introduced the research activities and provided assistance to those who asked for help. The five parts included various written tasks (e.g., short-answer, multiple choice, extended narrative) leading to semi-structured interviews with individuals and small groups of

¹ We acknowledge those under age 18 are an important and growing sector of adult basic education. However, our human subjects protocol limited our study to adults over the age of 18.

students. This sequence led participants from describing education in individual terms (i.e., citing one's own experience) to describing education in sociological terms (i.e., making generalizations about groups of people). The five steps of data collection are described below:

Part One – “Tell Us About Yourself” The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather basic demographic information about the students. It also asked them to consider what had helped them get started in an adult basic education program, as well as what motivated them to continue their participation.

Part Two – “Someone You Know” The format of this questionnaire was similar to Part One, except this instrument asked students to describe an adult who might benefit from adult basic education but had not previously enrolled in a program. Questions about education-related challenges were intended to lead students into a broader narrative story in Part Three.

Part Three – “Extended Narrative” This instrument consisted of one essay prompt that asked students “to tell us the story of the person described in Part Two.” Students were asked, in particular, to explain why this person had not taken classes. The intention was for students to provide a more holistic/naturalistic explanation extending beyond what they had provided in Part Two. Describing an individual's characteristics prepared students for the next step, which was to describe characteristics of groups.

Part Four – “Types of Communities” This questionnaire asked students to identify “the three most important areas that make you feel a connection with people outside of your family.” Respondents could choose from listed categories (e.g., social activities, faith/religion, language/culture, children's caregivers) or they could make up their own categories. Once they identified categories, they were asked to describe each of the chosen categories (e.g., “housekeeping with friends,” “basketball team,” “volunteer in my daughter's school”). We inferred that these descriptions reflected the most important communities for the respondents. This information was used to form focus groups (Part Five) based on similar community types.

Part Five – “Discussion of Communities” Individuals and focus groups derived from Part Four were interviewed using a semi-structured format. Some generic questions were prepared in advance (e.g., What are some things that make it difficult for community members to take adult education classes?). Other questions were tailored on the spot to suit the particular community

(e.g., How does your community of single mothers balance child care and education?)

We analyzed the data recursively after each day of data collection (see Miles and Huberman, 1984). After administering Parts One through Three in the first class session, we reviewed the data for evidence of how the participants define community. These initial findings helped us to refine our explanation of Part Four and our interview questions for Part Five. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each member of the research team reviewed the transcripts and added interpretive commentary. We then coded and sorted the interview data and written narrative data (Part Three) in a two-stage process: first into non-interpretive categories and then into interpretive categories (see Bogdan and Biklen, 2006).

TYPES OF COMMUNITIES

The study participants identified communities to which they belonged. Specifically, they were asked to categorize and rank-order communities with which “you feel a connection” and you “share some common interests.” After receiving oral instructions and examples, the participants completed a written instrument (Part Four) which allowed them to choose from various categories (e.g., social activities, language/culture) or to add their own categories. Their responses (see Table 1) were given a weighted score based on the number of times a given category was chosen and the degree of affiliation indicated by respondents. Representatives of the three most prominent categories (Friends and Family, Caregivers, Clean and Sober communities) were selected for interviews. The resulting taxonomy of communities does not include the category of “education.” While a large majority (nearly 70 percent) of respondents cited education as one of their communities, we decided to omit this category as this did not fit our objective to identify communities of underserved adults (i.e., people who are not already in adult education). The types of communities included in our taxonomy are discussed in reverse order from least to most prominent.

Incidentally Mentioned Communities

Some types of communities appeared only incidentally in the tally. Each of these was cited by only one or two respondents, who did not see the community as their primary affiliation. We were particularly surprised that language/cultural communities were among these incidental categories. One individual wrote:

My culture is mixed but my Native blood is stronger
 especially vision & dreams & although I've never met my
 people the Arapaho I study about them

Obviously, this individual identified strongly with his/her Native culture. However (perhaps because he/she had no personal contact with other cultural members), the respondent rated the degree of affiliation as a “three” (one being the highest on a three-point scale). It is interesting to note that, of 13 respondents, two others identified themselves as ethnic minorities and/or immigrants who speak a language other than English. Neither of these individuals cited membership in a language or cultural community in Whatcom County. In a separate interview, a Russian immigrant was asked if she had contact with the local Russian community. She explained that she had some contact with other Russians at work but, in general, did not have much communication with Russian immigrants. Our research design did not allow us to explore whether it was by choice or necessity that individuals did not affiliate with language/cultural groups. Due to our small sample size, we cannot make claims about language/cultural communities in Whatcom County. It would be worthwhile for future research to examine issues of access and cohesiveness among language/cultural communities in Whatcom County.

Table 1 ~ Types of Community Ordered by Frequency and Degree of Affiliation

Categories	Written Comments from Students
Friends and Family	“People to talk w/ or do something w/” “Friends help me keep my reality in check” “My family is very close”
Caregivers	“Neighbors and friends who love my kids” “Finding someone trustworthey, dependable”
Clean and Sober	“support group to continue with sobriety education” “AA/NA meetings I’m around sober people”
Faith/Religion	“Very important to me, Drumming etc.” “I do try to go to church at [church name] and my boys have been involved in kid church club”
<u>Incidental Mention</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Work ○ Language/Culture ○ Where You’re From ○ Where You Live ○ Social Class 	

Faith/Religious Communities

Also somewhat surprising was a relatively low degree of affiliation with faith/religious communities. While almost 40 percent of respondents cited this category, no one rated a faith-based community as their primary affiliation. This is not a reason to dismiss faith-based communities as potential sites to reach adults who are eligible for ABE/GED. On the contrary, we believe that faith-based communities are promising sites for future study and outreach. Several respondents referred to church-based clubs or social groups for children. An English language learner explained in an interview: “My sister: she working 8 hours. After work, she going to church, or, like, she have a Bible school... She take a Bible class; she go for singing or something too.” Such comments suggest how religious institutions serve as social hubs, as well as spiritual gathering places.

Clean and Sober Community

This is a community of recovering alcoholics and substance-users. The “clean and sober” category was not listed on our questionnaire, and it only came to light through student write-ins and interviews. About 30 percent of respondents claimed membership in this community. We find this proportion surprisingly large and probably not representative of adult learners in Whatcom County. (Additional research would be needed to verify this.)

Members of the Clean and Sober Community have a number of things in common other than addiction. Some in our sample lived in a “clean and sober house” and all were regular members of a support group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Some had serious health problems, not all of which were due to substance abuse. Several talked about experiencing low points in their lives. One individual wrote about a friend in recovery:

This person couch surfs in the Maple Falls area. He has just started a part time job in town. He has also just started to attend N.A. meetings do to a history of drug abuse. The only sports this individual partakes in are skate boarding and paint ball. He is attempting to stay clean and away from those people who could be his downfall. So at this time he is hanging with a handful of people who are clean and sober. He is not living in his home currently but has limited communication with his siblings. This person does suffer some A.D.H.D and some other mental health issues and he is trying, thru worksource, to get his G.E.D. but getting into Bellingham is not always easy.

In some respects, this description is emblematic of Clean and Sober members. Individuals felt that their downfall could be one drink away. “If I drink again, I die,” said one student bluntly. “It’ll be the last trip. It will be my last bender, for sure!” All were making a concerted effort to distance themselves from people and habits associated with substance abuse.

The Clean and Sober students in this study believed it was their strong personal initiative that distinguished them from other addicts who were not seeking to improve their lives through education. Indeed, they were critical of their peers who lacked initiative. As one individual put it, “The people in [my clean and sober house] all just complain about money and don’t want to do anything about it!”

Existing research suggests the Clean and Sober Community is one segment of a larger group of substance addicts in Whatcom County. According to the Washington State Department of Health and Human Services, there are nearly 15,500 adults in Whatcom County who need treatment for substance abuse (2003, p. 3). Almost half of this population (7,400) lives at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. While additional investigation is needed to confirm specific educational needs, we suspect that a sizable portion of those needing treatment could also benefit from ABE/GED education. Reaching this population is a considerable challenge for ABE/GED recruitment. A promising strategy, we believe, is to focus recruitment efforts on Clean and Sober individuals who are currently in (or have completed) treatment programs. Generally speaking, it is easier to reach groups of people who have an institutional affiliation and a common gathering place. According to the Whatcom County Substance Abuse Advisory Board, more than 1,200 adults in Whatcom County are admitted annually for outpatient treatment, which is the most common of various treatment options (2007, p. 51). Among those who receive treatment, approximately 72 percent have a 12th grade education or less (degree completion rates not indicated) (Whatcom County Public Health Department, 2006).

Caregiver Community

This was the largest single category chosen by those who responded to our questionnaire (62 percent). Representatives of the Caregiver Community identified themselves as single mothers, stay-at-home parents, and caregivers to siblings. At least one was male. While their world focuses on the home, the Caregivers are not socially isolated. Rather, their community includes childcare professionals and others who help out – or, as one individual wrote, “neighbors and friends who love my kids.” In this

respect, this community is more than a confederation of nuclear families. The Caregivers come together in certain places (e.g., schools, daycare centers); they share certain values and beliefs. A strong shared sentiment is pride in parental devotion. The Caregivers in our sample spoke of the value they placed on spending sufficient time with their children. But this devotion took a toll, as evident in this written narrative:

She's a fulltime mother. That have's no help from the father. Like she feed's bath, changing diaper's other thing are she cooks clean's house by herself. My male cousin all he does is support them. So she have's no help with that stuff and that sound's like it's harder to do then having a regular job.

Many Caregivers, whether they have a partner or not, feel burdened by the responsibilities of taking care of children and maintaining a household. Finding trustworthy childcare is a major source of frustration and worry. Some individuals feel these day-to-day worries are nearly overwhelming. Some interviewees expressed thankfulness for having partners who could relieve them occasionally. All felt some degree of resolve to make better lives for their families.

Evidence suggests that the Caregiver Community is an important constituency for ABE/GED programs in Whatcom County. One indicator is the status of single female householders. Of the nearly 46,000 families living in the county, almost 6,000 (13 percent) are headed by single females (U.S. Census, 2005). Within this population, 52 percent do not have a high school degree/equivalent and 38 percent live below the poverty level. These rates are alarmingly higher than corresponding statistics for female spouses in married-couple families: (5 percent without a high school degree/equivalent and 3 percent living below the poverty level) (U.S. Census, 2005). The need for ABE/GED education among single female householders in Whatcom County may be sufficiently acute to warrant specific marketing efforts and/or specific programs aimed at this demographic. Additionally, it may be useful to investigate the needs of other segments of the Caregiver Community, such as women with partners. Even though the incidence of non-degree completion appears to be substantially lower among married females compared to single female householders, the absolute number of married females without a high school degree/equivalent is most likely higher.

Friends and Family Micro-Communities

This is not a unified community but rather a loose category of independent groups. A sizable portion of respondents (62 percent) identified small

groups of friends and family members as a community. The number of people who chose this category and the relatively high value they assigned to it made this the most prominent composite category in our taxonomy of communities.

It is common for group members to do a variety of social activities with one or more close associates. One person wrote, “[I] have had a close friendship with my best friend for fifteen years and now live just blocks away.” Another explained, “We hang-out after work and watch movies and stuff like that ... just like my boss and me, or my boss, me and another coworker.” In some instances, these small social units are brought together by proximity (e.g., neighbors, co-workers) or life-long association (e.g., childhood friends). In other cases, individuals are related by blood or marriage. One student, for instance, listed “all of my family, mother, stepdad sister, etc” as an important community. Like the Caregivers, the Friends and Family people feel closely tied with their immediate families. However, unlike the Caregivers, the Friends and Family people in our sample did not derive their identities primarily from their parental role. This may have been because representatives tended to be young and did not have children. But this was not categorically true. Others referred to children as well as close friends, as evident in this written narrative:

My friend did not graduated from High School and dropped out in like the 10th grade, up until then she had had a ruff childhood so she then lived out of her home with friends she got jobs like Restaurant work or Babysit. She has never got her drivers license and dose not drive There is a fear there that she has not been able to deal with at 24 she got married she already had 1 daughter with her husband and about a year later she had a little boy. She has many medical problems and thinks it holds her back I hate to see her give up and settal but she dose say she’s happy at home with her kids so i support my friend with that i love her like a sister but would also support her with school to.

As this narrative suggests, the Friends and Family people generally do not see dire conditions in their lives. For the most part, representatives in our sample reported being at least moderately comfortable and satisfied with the *status quo* (which was in marked contrast to the Clean and Sober Community and the Caregivers). This is, perhaps, the biggest challenge that Friends and Family people face in pursuing further education. Feelings of complacency sometimes make it difficult for them to see the need to break out of old habits and to push themselves in new directions.

Admittedly, the “Friends and Family” label is problematic in its nebulousness. We originally intended to screen out tiny social networks

with only a few members (e.g., nuclear family unit). Consequently, we stipulated that communities should be “outside of your family.” Despite our instructions, respondents added the category of “family” more frequently than any other write-in category. The trend, we felt, was too distinct to ignore. Additionally, we found that a large proportion of respondents who cited family as a community also cited “friends” as a community. This led us to merge these into one category. It is difficult and not very productive to make extensive generalizations about the diverse groups that constitute the Friends and Family category. The groups do not share a common physical location, and they are not in contact with each other. It is not clear whether the groups have any demographic commonalities. In short, there is no unified social entity that can be called a common community. However, the small social units described by respondents are internally cohesive with common characteristics, beliefs, and meeting places. It would be accurate to describe these as micro-communities. We somewhat reluctantly use the term “Friends and Family” as a broad categorical label to describe many independent micro-communities. While our label is imperfect, we feel this miscellaneous category is important to name as it suggests that many GED-eligible adults do not identify or affiliate with broad social entities (e.g., clubs, civic organizations, neighborhoods) that are traditionally identified as communities.

The Friends and Family micro-communities present a unique marketing challenge for ABE/GED programs in Whatcom County. Because the micro-groups are widely scattered with no common gathering place, it is not practical for educators or human service professionals to make face-to-face contact. Similarly, word-of-mouth is not likely to take place unless one person in the micro-community is aware of ABE/GED opportunities. And even then, the message is likely to spread only among that handful of people. More traditional means of marketing (e.g., mailings, media advertising, fliers) are likely to have limited effect for reasons discussed later in this report.

REASONS FOR PURSUING EDUCATION

Study participants identified a variety of reasons for pursuing ABE/GED. Some cited external forces (e.g., family pressure, DSHS requirements) that nudged them back to school (see Table 2). Most people, however, were intrinsically motivated to make better lives for themselves and their families; they hoped that ABE/GED would help them move on to better employment or further education. As one student observed, “[My current job can] support us and keep us where we’re at financially, but I’ll never get ahead. And we’ll never have better things and we’ll never be out of debt.”

Table 2 ~ What Motivated You to Start This Class?

Reasons	Respondents Who Selected Category
Additional career, education, job training	77%
To go to a 4-year college	31%
My family wanted me to come	23%
DSHS Requirement	8%
Labor & Industry Requirement	8%
Other (e.g., escape poverty, desire to be a nurse)	16%
Wanting more to life	Category not quantified. Appeared in interviews and not in the questionnaire

Initially we speculated that people with specific life goals (e.g., obtaining a certain type of job) would be more likely to pursue education. However, our findings did not bear this out. Students in our sample acknowledged that peers who were not pursuing education generally want the same things that current students want – namely better jobs and better lives for themselves and their children. It appears that the specificity of one’s goals is not a good predictor of educational decisions in this population.

Interestingly, some adult learners are motivated by highly abstract goals. A number of individuals in our sample expressed a desire to achieve something more meaningful in their lives. “I’m just coming out of fifteen years of a severe mental illness, and I didn’t want to go back to being a janitor,” explained one current student. “I’m going to be forty . . . [and] I want to do something that has value to me, rather than just to make money to pay the bills.” Beyond wanting a livable wage, this individual sought work that would be more fulfilling. This prompted some existential pondering:

There's got to be a questioning, a wondering: This is it? There's nothing more to life? This is it? Just go to work, get the job done, come home have a couple of brews, you know, get up and do it all over again? There's got to be more to life.

This sentiment has intriguing implications for ABE/GED instruction. Traditionally, basic skills instruction has promoted utilitarian goals (e.g., preparing students to be self-sufficient, gainfully employed, etc.). In our view, this focus is entirely appropriate, given the predominant desire among students to obtain “additional career, education, job training.” At the same time, we wonder how basic skills instruction can address the more abstract yearning for “more to life.” It would appear that at least some adult learners have concerns at opposite ends of Maslow’s hierarchy (1970). At one end, students want security for themselves and their families (see Maslow: “biological, physiological, safety needs”). In addition, they want to overcome “personal problems” and “low self-esteem” (see Table 2; see also Maslow: “belongingness and love needs”). Simultaneously, at the other end of the hierarchy, students want a form of self-actualization. Can (or should) these foundational and high-level concerns be addressed concurrently?

LIFE CHALLENGES

We use the term “life challenges” to refer to the barriers and conflicts that students encounter in their daily lives. These barriers make access to education difficult or impossible. Our findings suggest that adult learners often deal with multiple challenges simultaneously. We refer to this as the “multiple whammies” conundrum. An individual who is dealing with limited childcare, for instance, may also be experiencing physical or mental health issues that compound the childcare problem. As one student explained, “It’s like a big tug-of-war with your life. Instead of two ends of the rope it’s like you’ve got six pieces of rope going both ways and you’re—you know, it’s a never-winning circle.”

The “multiple whammies” phenomenon is evident in Table 3. Students in our sample were asked to identify a person who could benefit from adult education but did not attend. Next, they noted challenges that make it difficult for that person to start an adult education class. The numbered columns in Table 3 indicate the responses of each of the eleven respondents. Eight respondents noted three or more challenges. These findings suggest that adult learners tend to face some combination of internal and external challenges. Internal challenges include health difficulties, personal problems, and affective issues (e.g., low self-esteem). External challenges (e.g., financial problems, transportation, work,

childcare) have to do with environment and circumstance. Our interview findings suggest that internal and external challenges, not only co-occur, but oftentimes are inter-connected. Consider one student’s predicament:

I have a severely under-active thyroid that I’m not being medicated for currently. So I don’t always have the energy to stand up. . . . So I’m like, “They [my husband and children] trashed the house! . . . Please give me an energy boost tomorrow so I can clean up when I get home from here.” And sometimes I stay up late and do it. So then I feel like I wouldn’t let this happen if I weren’t going to school.

In this case, a health problem (internal challenge) made it difficult for the student to balance housework and school (external challenge), which raised tensions with family members (external challenge) and made the student feel inadequate as a homemaker (internal challenge). This is what makes the multiple whammies conundrum complicated and difficult: The individual, not only faces multiple challenges, but also those challenges tend to exacerbate each other, creating a vicious cycle of failure.

Table 3 ~ Challenges Faced by Someone You Know

	1*	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
INTERNAL											
Personal problems (8)	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
Low self-esteem (5)	■		■				■	■			■
Health difficulties (4)	■	■		■		■					
EXTERNAL											
Financial problems (6)	■	■	■	■		■				■	
Transportation (4)	■	■	■	■							
Childcare (3)		■	■						■		
Work conflicts with class schedule (3)	■		■		■						
Family situation is difficult (3)	■				■			■			
OTHER CHALLENGES (5)	■	■		■	■		■				

*Numbered columns indicate responses from individuals

We suspect that the frequency of challenges (Table 3) was under-reported. Respondents described challenges faced by people whom they did not necessarily know well. Some students indicated that they weren’t sure if certain challenges (e.g., health difficulties) were pertinent. Additionally,

most respondents (73 percent) based their estimates on a male acquaintance. We suspect this decreased the number of reported child-related challenges. Childcare concerns emerged with much greater frequency in the interviews.

Despite discrepancies in our findings, we believe that certain challenges warrant special consideration. These include health and childcare issues.

Physical and Mental Health

Representatives of all communities in this study cited physical and mental health issues as a formidable barrier to further education. Individuals frequently referred to health problems that prevented them or others from advancing in life. One woman described a friend: “She’s got a degenerative tissue disease in her legs so she’s got really bad ulcers at times and so I think that holds her back a lot from wanting to go out there and get either back in school—get her GED.” Another described an ex-partner: “[It’s] his mental illness that keeps him back.” In some instances, health problems impair one’s physical ability to pursue education. In other cases, the effect is less direct: The health challenge erodes one’s self-confidence, which makes people doubt their ability to succeed in education. This issue was addressed at length by a male student who belonged to a schizophrenic support group. He described the anxiety that he and others felt in venturing beyond the safety of the support group to deal with the outside world.

Such comments lead us to believe that there is a connection between attracting adults to ABE/GED and promoting physical/mental health. It is, of course, beyond the expertise of educators to address health-related issues. The Basic Academic Skill Program at BTC may already have contacts with health care professionals in the community. If so, it may be worthwhile to foster these partnerships.

Childcare

Although the need for childcare was mentioned infrequently in questionnaire responses, this was the most prominent single challenge mentioned in the focus group interviews. This was particularly true in the Caregiver Community. As one woman put it, “I wouldn’t even be able to come to school if I didn’t have someone I trusted, that I can afford [to] watch my kids.” Another explained the predicament of mothers in general: “They’re trapped. So, they just give up... If you can’t secure, like good day-care, you [can’t] do anything essentially.” This was a widespread concern among mothers in our sample: finding trustworthy,

competent, and affordable childcare that will allow them to go to school and/or work. Some relied on a partner or paid caregivers. Many others were not as fortunate.

While there is no single solution to the multiple whammies conundrum, we believe that providing trustworthy and affordable childcare would alleviate numerous challenges for adult learners with young children. We suspect that childcare is a considerable financial burden for many parents and a considerable source of anxiety in families. It remains to be seen what standards of childcare these parents would find acceptable. Many mothers in our sample prided themselves on their parental devotion and they were highly cautious in selecting childcare.

PERCEPTUAL CATALYSTS

Despite facing an array of life challenges, adults regularly make their way to GED programs. As noted earlier, this process typically involves overcoming external hurdles such as finding childcare and reliable transportation. Just as significantly, the process often requires profound internal change. Individuals must build up sufficient resolve to overcome multiple whammies in their lives. Our findings suggest that there are perceptual catalysts (i.e., certain frames of mind) that foster this resolve. These include (1) the robustness of one's educational commitment, (2) one's sense of self-efficacy, and (3) seeing a logistical path. These factors influence how individuals interpret the likelihood of overcoming life challenges and ultimately achieving gains through education.

Robustness of Educational Commitment

This perceptual catalyst involves the strength and nature of one's conviction to pursue additional education. Some students in our sample speculated that, compared to non-attending peers, they were more strongly motivated to pursue a better life through education. Others, however, challenged this assumption, arguing that external circumstances might prevent some adults from going back to school even if they believe strongly in the importance of education. The general consensus was that, though having robust goals does not guarantee that one will pursue education, it is an important component of that process. Another dimension is the nature of one's educational commitment – particularly one's willingness to break from the past. Representatives of the Caregiver and the Clean and Sober Communities were keenly aware of negative influences in their personal histories. Some spoke of family members who

discouraged them from pursuing education. Others described unsavory peers who dragged others into destructive lifestyles. One explained:

If you have a rough childhood or if you feel ignored – not necessarily a bad childhood – but you don't have attentive parents – parents that push you to do well – I really think that makes a big difference in your going to school, continuing school, you know. And in turn, I think it's a cycle because then your kids see you like that and they either flake off school or don't think it's important so they don't want to, you know, go on to college or whatever.

Some individuals in our sample consciously resolved to use education as a means to break out of a harmful cycle. For people who “more or less have been at the bottom and are trying to come back up, . . . they can see [education] as, as a stepping stone, another rung in the ladder.” This willingness to make substantial life changes is a crucial factor distinguishing those adults who pursue further education and those who do not. Current students described non-attending peers as being “stuck in a rut” and “afraid of change.” In their view, those not attending school are “afraid of leaving [their] safe little world.” One person put it succinctly, “They're afraid to step out of that comfort zone and go to the next step, which is getting a job, or going to school.”

This type of anxiety involves more than a fear of the unknown. These adult learners believed that pursuing further education would likely necessitate “breaking from the past” – essentially cutting themselves off from familiar patterns of life. They believed that pursuing education would change not only what they know, but how they lived and who they were. Students in our sample generally looked forward to this change with hopeful anticipation. We suspect that other adults who need further education find this transformative potential to be utterly intimidating.

Sense of Self-Efficacy

Another powerful perceptual catalyst is one's perceived level of self-efficacy. Individuals might have ambitious dreams of improving their lives but, if they don't believe they have the ability or intelligence to achieve these dreams, they will not act. Some students in our sample had vivid memories of being told by family members and others that they were “not smart enough” to succeed in personal ventures. Not surprisingly, many experienced failure in school. One older student recalled, “I was told I wasn't very smart growing up, so I thought that, ‘What's the point?’ You know, ‘Why should I get an education?’” Another speculated that some adults “feel like they're too . . . far down on the totem pole . . . [they]

just don't think they're smart enough to, to do it." The link between self-efficacy and self-esteem is explained at length by this single mother:

Well, I would think if I just compared my life to some of the other single parents, and if they had it just as rough as I did or even rougher, I could see how they would feel lost. They would give up on themselves. . . . Like if you would give up on yourself, you'd feel like other people give up on you too. So where's the – Why even bother? You know, no one's gonna want to help me because I've let myself down. . . . And I think that's what a lot of people do is they feel they've either let themselves down or other people have let them down. And they feel they can't get the help anywhere. . . . It brings down your self esteem and you feel like you don't even want to do it anymore. You feel, OK, well I may not be making it very well but at least I'm makin' it so I'll just live this life, you know. . . . I would say at least half the people in my same situation are probably so down and so low that they feel that they just can't do it. And maybe the other half has motivation and just hasn't found – or are in school like me.

It is clear that a lack of encouragement and support can have caustic effects on one's self-esteem, which ultimately can contribute to paralysis. What we find remarkable is that people can overcome these debilitating conditions, sometimes through sheer determination. Some individuals in our sample made a conscious decision to reject negative messages that they heard earlier in their lives. "You shouldn't listen to what they say!" exclaimed one mother of two. "You should just try your hardest and see what you actually feel about how smart you are." Indeed, some individuals drew strength and resolve from adversity, as evident in this woman's account:

We moved around a lot so we weren't stable all the time. My mom was a single mom working her butt off all the time. And sometimes she wasn't in the greatest relationships with, you know, 'gentlemen.' So that took a toll on us, as well. And I think that, in the long run, my sister just got lost. . . . I kind of sunk into my own shell and thought school was my only way out. I gotta finish high school. I gotta finish high school.

In cases such as this, the prospect of accomplishing a difficult goal, such as earning a GED, was a powerful motivator. Consider these written comments:

Knowing that I have my G.E.D. will make me feel better about myself.

I am enjoying the education – and self discovery. I love to find that I am a lot smarter than I thought.

These statements illustrate that a vicious cycle of disempowerment and failure can be replaced with a hopeful cycle of empowerment and success.

Perceiving a Logistical Path

Before individuals commit to pursuing education, they generally need some assurance that there is, in fact, some sort of institutional mechanism that will lead them toward their goals. Students in our sample varied greatly in their level of institutional understanding. Some had little inkling of how the GED coursework fit into a broader educational system. Others were fairly sophisticated in their knowledge of educational options and resources. The common thread among these students was that they had faith that there was a navigable pathway through the educational system. This understanding was far from given among adults who needed ABE/GED. As one woman explained, “[My mother] never even talked to me about college or anything. You know, I didn’t even know what that was until I heard other people in high school talking about it!”

Having a clear logistical plan is particularly important for members of the Caregiver Community, who have to factor in accommodations for their families. One student described how overwhelming the logistics can be:

I have a neighbor, and she hasn’t done anything because she has a special needs child. He has a mental disability, . . . and you have to know how to deal with him. . . . So, she’s just like, oh well, I’m not gonna do it; I can’t do it. It’d be too hard, you know. Cause think about how overwhelming it is, you know, like the whole college thing and school thing is intimidating in the first place, even if it was just you. And then, to have to deal with all the extra – I think that’s a lot of the reason why people just don’t do it.

Some mothers in our sample were quite proactive in seeking out resources for childcare and education. Others simply assumed that resources were not available. Whether they were empirically correct or not in their assessment, these individuals placed a great deal of weight on the perceived availability of support.

Those who had an intimate understanding of institutional bureaucracy faced their own challenges. Many students on public assistance complained that government programs did not offer a viable pathway to long-term advancement. There was a common perception among study

participants that public programs do not “help you get out of poverty,” but rather direct people into dead-end jobs:

I think DSHS - if you went in and said, ‘OK, I want to go to school’ and you say you want to be in the health field, they’ll say, ‘OK we’ll send you to school for your CNA [Certified Nurse Assistant].’ And you say, ‘No, I wanna be a practical nurse.’ Oh, no, we won’t send you to school to be a practical nurse, which is twice, three times the pay . . . but we’ll send you so you can be a CNA and work your living butt off for the rest of your life. You’ll probably never make more than eleven bucks an hour doing that job. . . I’m not even there and I’ve been doing it for almost twelve years. So, you know, it’s hard. You know, you wanna do something better. You wanna make a better life for you and your kids, but to find the help. . . . Everyone wants you just to do – they just want you to be a laborer.

In only a few instances did students credit human services agencies for helping with educational advancement. However, in these instances, the outside contact was pivotal. One student spoke about the counselor who helped her find a viable, logistical path for returning to school: “I had no idea any of this was available until I went to Work Source and met (individual’s name), and I was like, ‘Who are you and where did you come from? I love you, ya know.’ She made me feel like I can do whatever.” Some students in the Clean and Sober Community also reported that they had found the help they needed through human services programs.

ROLE OF “CORE PEOPLE”

This study has highlighted three perceptual catalysts (robustness of educational commitment, sense of self-efficacy, perceiving a logistical path) that influence one’s resolve to overcome life challenges that block the pursuit of education. Our findings suggest that these enabling factors are shaped in positive or negative ways by peers and other close associates. This influence is often quite strong and warrants close investigation. Typically, students in our sample had at least a small cadre of close associates (i.e., two or more) with whom they interacted on a regular basis. As one student put it, “I kinda have the core people and then I have acquaintances. . . They are kinda on the outside of that circle.” Typically, these are friends and family members who “most helped you to get started in this current class.” The following written responses suggest the central importance of core people:

My best friend has a knack for getting me to do the things I need to do, and she babysat.

My husband has always encouraged me to come back to school.

My ex-girlfriend did and myself. I got her pregnant and I want better for my kids and to do that I need an education

Core people sometimes act as mentors, giving explicit advice on how to pursue education. At other times, they provide encouragement and moral support. In the best circumstances, close associates provide living examples of how to succeed through education. A male student explained that it is very helpful to “[see] your friends do it.” In his view, adult learners are inspired by seeing “somebody else that went [through it, somebody] that can go out and accomplish something.” Similarly, another individual commented:

All my friends have their degrees. They’re in college and they want me to succeed as well. They said I was smart enough, and they encouraged me to do so. They still do. They’re really proud of me. Some of my family is, too. They tell me every day that they’re proud of me. It makes me feel good.

This type of situation is ideal for fostering the perceptions that lead one to pursue further education. In this particular case, the adult learner saw multiple examples of people succeeding through college education. These examples illustrated a clear logistical path for the learner. Receiving encouragement from friends and family helped to bolster this individual’s commitment to education and sense of self-efficacy.

Unfortunately, not everyone has this type of support. Indeed, for many adult learners, the social environment tends to discourage further education. A young woman described her brother’s situation: “He’s also very influenced by a group of friends. Whatever’s cool with them, he’s doing. . . . He has a problem with doing whatever is supposed to be cool at the moment.” This tendency led her brother to drop out of school. Another student commented, “My parents used to make me feel like they were disciplining me by sending me to school. So I mean, in a way of striking back, I wouldn’t go. So that’s one of the reasons I quit.”

Adult learners sometimes turn to core people to counteract negative influences in their lives. We documented at least two ways that individuals do this. One strategy, which was most common in the Clean and Sober Community, was to seek out people who are positive influences. As one man put it, “[I’m] trying to eliminate people from my life that I considered having negative traits and to surround myself with a

more positive group of people.” For Clean and Sober individuals, the support group was a vitally important assemblage of core people. The support group helped to foster a commitment to life change and sense of self-efficacy, enabling them to exercise control in their lives. These individuals deliberately sought out people who could show them a logistical path to a better life.

Another strategy, which was most common in the Caregiver Community, was to resist negative messages for the sake of one’s children. Some caregivers in our sample consciously resolved to raise their children differently than how they, themselves, had been raised. “You’ve gotta teach your kids it’s good to go to school,” explained one father as he criticized his own upbringing. “It’s important. You can’t send your kids to school as torture.” Essentially, one’s children were core people for these adult learners. While they did not provide advice or mentorship, children served as an inspiration and positive focus for their parents. These individuals felt obligated to model self-efficacy and educational commitment for their children. They wanted to impress on them that education is an important pathway to a better life. As one mother explained, “I want to show them that even though I didn’t go to school right after high school, I’ve gone back now, . . . and mom’s gonna go to school and become a nurse.”

We observed at least one common theme across all communities in response to adversity: Many believed it was important, not only to *have* role models of educational success, but also to *be* a role model to others. “The biggest thing: You teach by example,” explained a recovering alcoholic. “A lot of times I don’t come out here [to school] for myself; I come out here for someone” (i.e., another recovering alcoholic). This comment hints at the last step of a Twelve Step program to “carry this message to others.” More broadly, this comment reflects a desire expressed by many in this study to accomplish something that is meaningful in life.

IMPLICATIONS

It is clear that Adult Basic Education is a powerful means to help adults lead more productive and fulfilling lives. The students in our sample were enthusiastic in their praise of the Basic Academic Skills Program at Bellingham Technical College. Unfortunately, not enough adults know about the resources that are available to them at BTC. We offer the following recommendations to reach those who are not yet enrolled.

Face-to-Face Recruitment and Use of Peer Mentors

Study participants consistently said they were most influenced by examples set by people who were close to them. This went beyond simply drawing inspiration from success stories. Many of the adult learners relied on peers or family members to advise them on how to pursue education. It seems that word-of-mouth is an important and trusted means of communication among “core people” within all of the communities in our study.

The apparent reliance on oral information within micro-communities could be useful for purposes of marketing and recruitment. We suggest that strategies utilize peer-to-peer and face-to-face means of publicizing ABE/GED programs. Information sessions, drop-in peer counseling, and other live events might be conducted at community sites, providing a non-threatening setting for those who are leery of going to the college to obtain the information.

Our findings suggest that efforts to encourage and train current students or graduates as peer mentors or informal spokespeople will help other students make the decision to transition into adult educational programs. Peer-to-peer recruitment will have to be well crafted to counteract negative influences from “core people” and others who dissuade the adult learner from pursuing education. It is likely that peer spokespeople will need training in how to represent the ABE/GED program. Additionally, we recommend that peer spokespeople be accompanied by program staff or faculty who can do more formal advising.

Marketing Strategies Targeted to Specific Communities

We recommend that the Basic Academic Skills Program develop targeted marketing strategies for specific communities in need of ABE/GED. Several factors influence the choice of communities: (1) scope of need – how many adults potentially need additional education, (2) severity of need, and (3) logistics of reaching this community.

The Caregiver Community, for instance, is large in Whatcom County, and there is acute need for further education among single, low-income mothers. Moreover, Caregivers tend to frequent predictable locations, such as daycare centers. This combination of factors makes the Caregiver Community a prime candidate for specific marketing. Friends and Family micro-communities are collectively a large group of people. However,

they are widely dispersed and isolated, making it difficult to reach them through face-to-face means. Consequently, this community is a less viable candidate for targeted marketing. The Clean and Sober Community – particularly the population of people in recovery programs – is relatively small. However, they have established meeting places and are disposed to pursuing positive life changes. This makes the Clean and Sober Community a strong candidate for targeted marketing.

We suggest customizing messages and strategies for each target community. This will involve identifying places that each group frequents and establishing contact with community leaders (if any). Additionally, customizing recruitment efforts to include families, friends, and mentors of potential students could further help to attract them to education.

Communicating Program Flexibility and Supports

Many students reported they were unaware of programmatic features and supports (e.g., transportation vouchers, childcare options) that make it easier for people to go back to school. It is important to emphasize the availability and flexibility of these supports in advertising and recruiting efforts to show potential students that education can be incorporated into their lives. This message can be particularly potent if demonstrated by a peer who has used these supports to successfully overcome challenges.

Emphasizing Personal and Familial Benefits of Education

Adult educators well understand that the content of promotional messages should communicate the benefits of education (e.g., better employment, socio-economic stability, role modeling for children). Additionally, promotional messages should move beyond generic benefits to show specific examples of personal success. Again, real peer examples are likely to be most convincing to adults who are anxious about the unknowns of education. It is also worthwhile considering promotional messages that emphasize how education can promote personal pride and sense of fulfillment, as well as the accomplishment of practical goals.

Collaboration with Human Service and Health Care Professionals

Human service and healthcare agencies (e.g., DSHS) are key points of contact for adults who need additional education. We suggest that the Basic Academic Skills Program continue to work closely with key human service personnel to jointly develop strategies to reach, advise, and assist eligible adults. Additionally, given the prevalence of physical and mental

health challenges among adult learners, the Basic Academic Skills program might work with healthcare professionals to consider joint programs that promote health and education.

Affordable and Reliable Childcare

A lack of childcare is a potentially unsurpassable obstacle to attending school for parents, especially single parents. Helping parents access or pay for childcare will allow many more people to seek out further education.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Conducting this project has been an enriching experience for our research group. We appreciate the opportunity to glimpse the world of ABE/GED in a community/technical college setting. As outsiders, we understand that ABE/GED educators know their learners far better than we do. Many of our findings, we suspect, are not new to instructors and administrators. Our role in this project has been to make the familiar unfamiliar – to use a systematic methodology to re-present concepts that may be unarticulated or taken for granted. In this way, we hope this report has shed new light on phenomena that are right on the institutional doorstep. In particular, we hope we’ve called attention to the complex challenges faced by adults who have not yet made it back to school. Achieving a better understanding of this constituency will help educators to make Adult Basic Education even more accessible.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Part 1: TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF

Please tell us about yourself, but DO NOT write your name

Gender Male Female

Age Under 18 25-34 45-54 65+
 18-24 35-44 55-64

Race/ethnicity: First language: Other languages:

1. Is this the first time you have enrolled in an adult education class?

Yes No

If no, please list other adult education class that you've taken in the past:

Class: _____ Place: _____ Year _____

Class: _____ Place: _____ Year _____

Class: _____ Place: _____ Year _____

Class: _____ Place: _____ Year _____

2. What is your goal?

- GED
- Improve math
- Improve reading and writing
- Improve computer skills
- Other: _____

3. Who or what most helped you to get started in this current class? Please explain how this helped you.

4. What motivated you to start this class? (Check all that apply.)

- Want a better job
- Want additional career education / job training
- Want to go to a 4-year college
- My family wanted me to come
- I was required to come by _____
- Other reasons (explain): _____

5. What motivates you to stay in the class?

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about yourself?

Part 2: SOMEONE YOU KNOW

Think about an adult you know who needs ABE/GED education, but has not taken classes in the last four years. We'd like to hear about someone who is typical of people you know. ***DO NOT tell us the person's name.***

This person's gender Male Female

This person's age Under 18 18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+

This person's race/ethnicity:

This person's first language:

Other languages:

1. How do you know this person?

2. Has this person ever taken an adult education class?

Yes No Don't know

3. Many things can make it difficult to start an adult education class. What challenges do you think have made it most difficult for the person you're thinking of? (Circle the number that most applies.)

	Not a problem	Somewhat of a problem	Definitely a problem	Don't know
Transportation	1	2	3	4
Childcare	1	2	3	4
Work conflicts with class schedule	1	2	3	4
Financial problems	1	2	3	4
Health difficulties	1	2	3	4
Family situation is difficult	1	2	3	4
Personal problems	1	2	3	4
Low self-esteem	1	2	3	4
Other reasons:	1	2	3	4

Part 3: EXTENDED NARRATIVE

Tell us the story of the person you described in Part 2. Help us understand why this person has not taken adult education classes.

Part 4: TYPES OF COMMUNITIES

You probably share some common interests with people in Whatcom County. Put a number (1, 2, 3) next to the three most important areas that make you feel a connection with people outside of your family.

Please write a few words to describe each of the numbered areas.

_____ Friends	_____
_____ Children’s Caregivers	_____
_____ Social Activities	_____
_____ Faith/ Religion	_____
_____ Language / Culture	_____
_____ Where you’re from	_____
_____ Where you live	_____
_____ Your work	_____
_____ Social Class	_____
_____ Political Beliefs	_____
_____ Education	_____
_____ Other:	_____
_____ Other:	_____

Part 5: DISCUSSION OF COMMUNITIES
(Focus Group Interview)

(Research note: The researchers will review responses from Part 4 and will divide students into small groups [3-8 per group] according to common/similar responses. One researcher will facilitate each group interview. Additional questions will be added to probe topics that emerge from student responses to Parts 1 – 3.)

Let's assume that a community is a group of people who feel a connection with each other because they share common interests.

Would it be fair to say that the areas you chose in Part 4 describe one or more communities?

Let's talk about the community you identify with the most.

Roughly how large is your community in Whatcom County?

Where do community members typically gather?

What are some common educational needs of adults in your community?

What are some things that make it difficult for community members to take adult education classes? (Probe for: transportation, childcare, work, conflicts with class schedule, financial problems, health difficulties, etc)

What are some ways that Bellingham Technical College can help adults in your community so they can get the education they need?

What are the best ways for Bellingham Technical College to reach adults in your community to let them know about educational programs that can help them?