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Betsy Bowen

*Fairfield University*, [bbowen@fairfield.edu](mailto:bbowen@fairfield.edu)

Kathryn Nantz

*Fairfield University*, [knantz@fairfield.edu](mailto:knantz@fairfield.edu)

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# What Is the Value of the GED?

**Betsy A. Bowen and Kathryn Nantz**

*One of the defining characteristics of the United States is its promise of a second chance; this promise is central to our vision of ourselves and to our economic and civic dynamism. When we are at our best as a society, our citizens are not trapped by their histories.*

—Mike Rose, *Back to School* (xiii)

**C**armen stands up to tell her story, after being invited to represent Mercy Learning Center,<sup>1</sup> a literacy center for women, at a meeting with local community members. Having recently attained her GED after more than two and a half years of studying, she exemplifies the success of the Center's students. A room full of people listens as Carmen tells her story of early hardships—the deaths of her mother and sister, being sent to live with relatives she did not know, her guardian's decision to take her out of school in ninth grade—and of her recent commitment to study for the GED while working and raising three children on her own. Since passing the GED a few months earlier, she explains, she has completed a certificate program in medical technology and hopes soon to take her state exam.

**Betsy A. Bowen** is professor of English at Fairfield University, where she teaches courses in composition, literacy, and English education. She has served as a tutor at Mercy Learning Center. Her research on adult literacy has been published in *Community Literacy Journal* and *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Learning, and Service Learning*. She was recognized as the 2010 Connecticut Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. **Kathryn Nantz**, professor of economics at Fairfield University, teaches courses in applied micro theory, labor, and comparative economic systems. She is passionate about interdisciplinary teaching and learning and provides courses for the women's studies, Russia and East European studies, and honors programs. A series of successful grants from the Davis Educational Foundation, National Science Foundation, and U.S. Central Asia Education Foundation have allowed Professor Nantz to work with teams to develop a vibrant teaching and learning center on campus and to engage in a wide variety of interdisciplinary faculty development projects.

Once she gets her Section-8 voucher, she continues, she and her children will move out of the shelter. Then, she feels confident, she will continue her education and move ahead in a job.

Like other women at the Center, Carmen had been willing to make enormous sacrifices to attain the GED, a credential that is, by definition, a “second-chance” degree, designed for adults who, for some reason, have not completed high school in the conventional way. After being out of school for more than a decade, Carmen needed more than two years of tutoring at Mercy Learning Center and repeated attempts at the GED to pass the exam and attain her degree. For part of that time, Carmen worked with Betsy in a writing class designed for students who had failed the essay portion of the GED. Located in an urban area in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Mercy Learning Center provides what it describes as a holistic approach to adult education. The stars of the Center are the women studying for their GED degrees. Most take classes five hours a day, five days a week; a few work with tutors. Graduates’ names are inscribed on a plaque in the lobby, and photos of recent GED recipients decorate the walls, material evidence for both the Center’s students and its funders, of the Center’s success. Yet Carmen’s story illustrates some of the complexities of the GED. Without the GED, students like Carmen have no chance at moving on to postsecondary education or, in many cases, obtaining employment; yet, even with it, many remain, as Mike Rose puts it, “trapped by their histories” (xiii) in a tight labor market where jobs that pay sustainable wages are limited.

Many of us in higher education have thought deeply about the complexities of developing and assessing literacy. We have been vocal about the risks of high-stakes testing, whether that is in K–12 state exams or in college placement exams for first-year composition. But we have largely overlooked what may be the ultimate high-stakes test of literacy: the GED. In this article we argue that the GED represents a confluence of issues with which English studies is, and must be, deeply involved: definitions and assessment of literacy; access to higher education; and the needs of multilingual learners. We contend that the GED is significant for English studies not only because of the large number of adults who take it, but also because of what it reveals about what literacy means to and for adults who lack educational credentials. Further, we question the implicit definition of literacy in the test as reductive, and we warn that the use of automated essay scoring, scheduled to begin in 2014, may push GED students and their teachers toward even more formulaic writing. Recognizing that literacy practices are embedded in the material conditions in which they occur and, in turn, have economic consequences, we use Mercy Learning Center as a case study, examining the relationship between the literacy demands embedded in the GED and the economic and other value that it holds for those who seek it. In doing this, we are taking up the challenge that Deborah Brandt posed of “bringing economic issues more fully into view” (7) so as to account for the material conditions

that shape and constrain the pursuit of literacy. Because we focus on a community-based literacy center that serves low-income women, many of them immigrants with limited schooling in their home countries, our study provides information about those who Rose calls “the least educated and those who work with them” (50).

Our case study of this adult learning program for low-income women in an urban environment highlights the importance of a holistic approach to literacy programs, an approach that engages not just the learner but also the learner’s family and community. In such a setting, women are able to focus on their own educational attainment and also build the life skills and self-esteem required for success in any academic program. In such a setting, women attain literacy and life skills that will enable them to achieve both economic and noneconomic successes that are important to them as individuals and to the communities in which they live, work, and raise the next generation.

We come to this work from two distinct disciplinary perspectives: as a composition specialist with more than ten years of experience at Mercy Learning Center, and as a labor economist. As such, we are able to examine the interaction between literacy and economics in ways that previous studies of adult learners have not done, integrating interview data, participant observation, and census and economic data. Our collaboration reveals some fundamental differences in the disciplinary perspectives and tools that we bring to this research. Economic research is inherently involved with material conditions, using modeling software that has been constructed to examine local or regional impacts of changes in market conditions. It frequently involves large data sets, analyzing them for correlations and trends; thus, availability of data can direct the agenda that economists follow. By contrast, research in composition has more often studied the particulars of lived experience of individuals, using interviews, observation, and survey methodology, as well as textual analysis.

Although an increasing number of studies in English take into account the material conditions surrounding language use and pedagogy, composition scholars have sometimes had to borrow terms and tools from other fields to pursue those investigations. We found, too, that our fields differed in the degree to which they drew conclusions about the political implications of the phenomena they observed, with composition scholars more likely to argue from a political perspective. Our research was made easier by the fact that we had collaborated during a twenty-year period on a wide range of projects, from team teaching first-year students to providing faculty development to business faculty in Central Asia. As the trend toward short-term “tactical” initiatives grows in composition, our research offers a counternarrative because it draws from and is deeply grounded in relationships—between researchers, and with Mercy Learning Center—that have developed over the course of a decade of shared intellectual experience. It is part of what Eli Goldblatt describes as “long-term investment in the neighborhoods where we work and the centers with which we form partnerships” (283).

In this study we conducted a series of semistructured interviews of seven GED seekers and recent GED recipients at the Center. Candidates for the interviews were selected in consultation with the president of Mercy Learning Center so as to provide a representative sample. All of the women interviewed spoke two or more languages. Five of the seven were born and raised outside the United States (one from Ghana; one from the Democratic Republic of Congo; three from Mexico). The two women born in the United States had been raised in Puerto Rico, at least in part. Interviews lasted between twenty and forty minutes and included questions on the speaker's experience at Mercy Learning Center, motivation for seeking education, support for literacy in early life, and being a role model. Once the interview data were collected, we did content analysis to identify and extract key themes, and then matched those themes to the economic and noneconomic factors identified in the research on GED recipients. We supplemented these data with information from onsite observations and material from a GED preparation class that Betsy had taught at the Center.

Carmen's story and those of other women like her raise questions about the value of the GED for those who seek it and for their local communities. What does the GED represent for these students? What impacts, economic and noneconomic, do they anticipate from attaining it? What value does it actually provide? We begin our analysis by reviewing information on the GED and the implicit assumptions about literacy present in the test. After describing Mercy Learning Center and its population of learners, we assess the economic and noneconomic impacts of the GED degree for them. Because the students at Mercy Learning Center differ significantly from the national norm of GED seekers, being all women, older, and largely immigrant, they offer insight into the value of the GED for those who are particularly disadvantaged in seeking this credential.

### LITERACY AS ECONOMIC RESOURCE

We approach this study of the value of the GED indebted to Brandt and others whose work examines the material conditions and value ascribed to literacy. Like Brandt, we view literacy skill

primarily as a resource—economic, political, intellectual, spiritual—which, like wealth or education, or trade skill or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers. To treat literacy this way is to understand not only why individuals labor to attain literacy but also to appreciate why, as with any resource of value, organized economic and political interests work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy for their own competitive advantage. (5)

Brandt is not alone in her interest in the economic value of literacy. Michael Pennell, for instance, examines “the connectedness between literacy, economy, and place” (346) in the Midwest, focusing on what he calls “labor market intermediaries,” institu-

tions such as temp agencies, unions, and adult education programs designed to prepare adults for the workplace. Pennell is interested in the relationship between adult basic education and opportunity, focusing on institutions rather than individual students.

Much of the research on literacy in the community has come from those involved in community-university projects. By now, the relationship between composition and community engagement is too well known and too lengthy to recount here. Starting with early calls by Ellen Cushman and others for those in composition to take a public role on issues related to literacy, this relationship developed through community-university partnerships and service-learning projects. Some, like those by Linda Flower and colleagues at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh, have offered multidimensional, multiyear projects with a strong theoretical base. Others are short-term projects, some with limited impact on the community.

Recent studies have foregrounded two issues related to our project: reciprocity and the political dimensions of community-engaged work. Goldblatt, for instance, draws on the work of community organizer Saul Alinsky to identify principles that might enable community organizations and universities to develop reciprocal relationships. Goldblatt notes that “universities and colleges seldom develop plans based on suggestions that originate off-campus” (275). Instead, these projects more often reflect the agendas and schedules of university scholars. Goldblatt’s call resonates with us. The study we describe here originated with a query from the president of Mercy Learning Center. How, she asked, could she document the value of the GED for the Center’s students to funding agencies and possible grantors? Though she knew the national figures on the GED and employment, she wanted more sensitive figures that took into account the Center’s special population, the local economic conditions, and the less tangible consequences of the GED. We began our work together, a literacy scholar and an economist, in order to answer her question.

A second issue emerging from recent work on community literacy is the way in which community members define their own goals for literacy. The recent study by Paula Mathieu, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rousculp investigates what they call *community publishing*, projects “based on the informed hope that writing can inform civic dialogue and produce change.” Such writing, they contend, “emerges directly out of community’s effort to combat the self-interested frameworks of larger institutions that often claim to act on the community’s behalf” (1–2). Examining self-sponsored writing that occurs in the community, or at least outside of school, Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp call for “the consistent effort to develop pedagogies and practices which allow marginalized individuals and groups to self-organize and gain a platform to speak publicly on their own terms to the larger community” (10). The community publishing projects they present are fundamentally different from the context we study, but we value their insistence on the ability of marginalized writers to define and articulate their lives and communities.

Despite this widespread interest in community literacy and a concern for basic writing that dates back to Mina Shaughnessy, there have been surprisingly few studies in composition of GED students. Perhaps best known of the longer studies involving GED seekers is the work by Jeffrey Grabill and by Mike Rose, particularly in *Back to School*. Grabill examines community literacy programs, focusing on definitions of literacy and issues of power as they are revealed in curriculum. In his analysis of Western District Adult Basic Education, Grabill notes the tension between his view of literacy and that revealed in the GED program, commenting that “what is for me a functional view of literacy over-determined by assessment practices beyond exams is for [these GED students] just what they wanted and needed” (41). Grabill’s observation challenges us to think deeply about how we understand the political dimension of literacy learning. Frustrated by what looks like acquiescence to narrow, test-driven notions of literacy, we may not recognize the degree to which adult students are exercising autonomy, making savvy choices to realize important goals they have defined for themselves.

In *Back to School*, Rose offers a comprehensive and compelling argument to increase funding for, and attention to, second-chance education. Rose notes that, at present, most adult literacy programs fail to provide the support services adult learners need; as a result, problems such as “inadequate housing, sporadic or no employment, family disruptions, problems with immigration, [and] the criminal justice system” (51) force students to forgo their second chance at school. Rose also notes the risks for the most disadvantaged learners in recent efforts to upgrade the GED, asking what will happen to the least prepared students when the GED is redesigned to match “college and career readiness” standards. Rose cautions that, although attention to the GED is increasing, discussion of the exam and the students who take it has been narrowly focused on ROI, or “return on investment” (47). Instead, he calls for studies that “combine interviews and other on-the-ground information with analysis of numerical data” (14). Our study is a response to Rose’s call.

#### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE GED, 1942–PRESENT**

This is a particularly apt time to look at the GED, which in 2014 was revised to reflect the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education, an effort intended to “forge a stronger link among adult education, postsecondary education, and the world of work” (Pimentel 2). At the same time, a stagnant labor market has created increased competition for low-wage jobs, particularly disadvantaging those who lack a secondary school credential.

Initiated in 1942 to serve veterans of World War II, the GED is a series of tests, taking seven and one-quarter hours, designed to assess adults’ knowledge of subjects commonly taught in high school. In 2012, more than 700,000 adults took

the GED; of those, approximately 418,000, or 69 percent, passed (GED Testing Service [GED], *2012 Annual* 10). Since its inception in 1942, about 20 million adults have passed (GED, *2012 Annual* 5). Nearly half of those who pass the GED enroll in some form of postsecondary education (Zhang, Guison-Dowdy, Patterson, and Song, vii). In short, GED recipients are in our college classrooms now, and their number is likely to increase as the pressure grows for educational credentials in even low-skill jobs. The stakes for the GED are arguably higher than those for any other test. The GED can determine not only who has access to postsecondary education, but also who gets a job or a pay raise, even who can be licensed as a beautician or Certified Nurse's Aide. Other consequences of attaining the GED, though less easily measured, are no less important. These less tangible rewards include serving as a role model for one's children and dissolving some of the shame that many adults without a high school degree have been made to feel.

The 2014 revision of the GED reflects widespread trends in public education. Previously administered by the American Council on Education (ACE), the GED recently became a joint venture between Pearson Publishing Company and ACE. The new version, inaugurated nationally in 2014, is aligned with the Common Core State Standards for K–12 schools that have been adopted in forty-three states and Puerto Rico. In addition to the regular score, test takers will now also receive a score indicating whether they have demonstrated “the knowledge, skills, and competencies [of] students who are able to successfully complete credit-bearing first-year college courses with a grade of C or better” (GED, “FAQs: Automated Scoring Engine”).<sup>2</sup> Further, the essays on the GED exam will now be scored by computer, much like some K–12 assessments aligned with the CCSS. Although the GED Testing Service maintains that this is not “mechanical” scoring, but rather “an automated scoring engine that replicates human scoring [. . .] us[ing] sophisticated algorithms in the replication of human scoring processes” (GED, “FAQs, Automated Scoring Engine”), we believe that it raises the same problems that Les Perlman and others have identified in the use of Automated Essay Scoring (AES) in high-stakes tests in K–12 schools: an increasingly formulaic approach to teaching “extended responses,” or essays, that may actually leave GED recipients less prepared for college-level writing. These changes to content and delivery of the exam, along with the broader national conversations about “completion” agendas and “the college for all” debates, mean that the GED is likely to take on added importance to those outside of adult education, including those of us who will eventually teach Carmen and her peers who go on to postsecondary education programs.

The GED is of interest to those of us in English because much of it is designed to assess language skill. The new version of the GED, introduced in January 2014, is comprised of four tests, treating reading and writing in a single, 150-minute test. It requires an essay in both the Reasoning through Language Arts test and the Social



Studies test. Because no data from this exam were available at the time of our study, we examined data from the GED exam used between 2002 and 2013. In that exam two of the five tests focused on language, Language Arts: Reading and Language Arts: Writing. The writing test, which required test takers to read short passages, answer questions about usage and correctness of language, and write a brief essay on an assigned topic, reveals the GED's implicit assumptions about literacy. Much of this test does not involve "writing" at all. Instead, it presents test takers with multiple-choice questions on grammar and usage. The essay, which is worth 35 percent of the test, gives test takers forty-five minutes to write an expository essay in response to a prompt. Writing is the gatekeeper: those who do not achieve the minimum score on the essay must retake the entire Language Arts, Writing test, even if they pass the multiple-choice section. The impact of the essay as gatekeeper was clear at Mercy Learning Center, where most of the students are nonnative speakers of English. All the students in Betsy's supplementary class had failed the essay section of the Language Arts, Writing test at least once; some had failed it several times. No matter how high their scores on other sections of the GED, nor how well they had done on the rest of the Language Arts, Writing test, they could not pass the GED without a passing score on the essay.

The GED Testing Service does not include sample essay prompts on its "Sample Test Questions" page, but Steck-Vaughn, a major preparer for the GED exam, provides some that give a sense of what is required. For instance, "Why do people love to watch sports? Write an essay explaining the reasons" (125) and "What are some tips for saving money? In your essay, offer advice on stretching an income. You may want to include both 'dos' and 'don'ts'" (126). If writing is, as Perlman notes, "foremost a rhetorical act, the transfer of information, feelings, and opinions from one mind to another mind," this is writing devoid of context, designed to display skill rather than convey information. The test takers we interviewed seemed aware of that themselves. Dianne, for instance, described making up material about a celebrity's charitable work when she faced an essay prompt asking her to write about an emotional connection to a celebrity:

I was like, "OMG, what am I going to write about?" and I thought: Sandra Bullock! I love Sandra Bullock. They're not going to ask you for information; they're not going to ask you for proof. If you can make it up, make it up. So I did. So I just basically wrote how she helps the homeless and I help at a soup kitchen, and how she goes, how she's very interested in the environment and how I help in my environment [. . .] I don't think it's true. I don't even know.

Clearly, Dianne felt that the form of the essay mattered more than its accuracy. Her passing score on the essay suggests she might be right.

Nationally, we know a fair amount about those who seek the GED. That population differs in significant ways from the students at Mercy Learning Center

who seek the GED. Even among test takers who are, by definition, educationally disadvantaged, the Center's students are particularly disadvantaged, being older, out of school longer, poorer, and more likely to be nonnative speakers of English.<sup>3</sup> We also know about those who pass the GED. They are disproportionately the young, male, and white candidates.<sup>4</sup> Overall, test takers older than fifty, women, and those who have been out of school more than eight years are less likely to pass (GED, *2012 Annual* 4–5, 67–71). That is precisely the population that Mercy Learning Center serves. There, 67 percent of the students are unemployed, 98 percent are low income, and 82 percent do not speak English as their primary language. These students are also older, with 63 percent between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, and another 17 percent between forty-five and fifty-nine. Consequently, they have been out of school longer than the norm for GED seekers. In addition, 63 percent of students are Hispanic/Latina, 28 percent identify themselves as Black/African American, 6 percent are white, and 3 percent are Asian (Mercy Learning Center, *2011–2012 Annual Report*).

Nationally, the writing test has a particularly high failure rate; in 2011 the average standard score on any of the five sections of the GED exam was 528, and the average score on Language Arts, Writing was 509. (GED, *2011 Annual*) This is particularly important at Mercy Learning Center, where most of the students are nonnative speakers of English. A large body of research exists that supports the proposition that females and African Americans tend to score lower on standardized tests in general than males (see King, Nofle, and Robins, 2013; Santelices and Wilson, 2010). Though many of the women at Mercy Learning Center are determined to pass the GED, these findings suggest that the test itself mitigates against their success. The demands of the GED test, however, go beyond writing skill and language fluency. A staff member at the Center explained that one student failed the essay section after being asked to write an essay about “collections” that the student had or would like to have in the future. Because this student knew of collections in the context of bills, not hobbies, she wrote about bill collection and failed the writing test.

Nationally, adults who take the GED attribute both practical and personal value to the exam. According to the GED's *2012 Annual Statistical Report*, nearly 62 percent of test takers sought the GED for educational reasons, such as access to a two- or four-year college, vocational training, or a certificate program. Over half said that they wanted to improve their chances of getting, keeping, or progressing in a job. A few sought the GED as part of their military service, as a condition of receiving public assistance, or in response to a court order. (It is worth thinking about the complications of linking an educational credential to the judicial system.) But less tangible reasons were also important to GED seekers: more than 25 percent said they were motivated by a desire to be a positive role model for others, and nearly 50 percent identified personal satisfaction as a motivation for seeking the degree (35–36).<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that the most frequently identified reasons for seeking the GED were the prospects of advancement, either through education or on the job. Since its start, the GED has been designed to enable adults to move into the labor force, as well as into higher education. The need for such a credential remains acute. Currently, 39 million American adults lack a high school degree and are not enrolled in any educational program (GED, *2012 Annual 3*). For these individuals, job prospects are bleak. In March 2014, the unemployment rate for people twenty-five years and older with less than a high school education was 9.6 percent, compared with 6.3 percent for those with a high school diploma or equivalent and 3.8 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or higher (US Department of Labor Table A-4). Economic research shows that there are clear returns on investment in education, but for students who have failed to negotiate the education system in the past, or who are new to the American system, making these investments is difficult at best.

This is an important time to consider the role of the GED in helping to improve the quality of life for many Americans, particularly for those who live and work in cities such as Bridgeport. The effects of the recent recession continue to be felt in the current jobless recovery. Table 1 (Bureau of Labor Statistics) indicates that, although labor market prospects improved between March 2013 and March 2014, unemployment rates increase and labor force participation rates decrease as educational attainment decreases. Among those with less than a high school degree—that is, potential GED seekers—in March 2014, only 46 percent were in the labor force, and 9.6 percent were unemployed.

**Table 1: Employment Data, 2011 - 2014**

	<i>Labor force participation rate, March 2013</i>	<i>Unemployment rate, March 2013</i>	<i>Labor force participation rate, March 2014</i>	<i>Unemployment rate, March 2014</i>
<i>Less than hs</i>	45.9	11.1	45.9	9.6
<i>HS, no college</i>	58.7	7.6	58.8	6.3
<i>Bachelors and higher</i>	75.3	3.8	74.7	3.4
	<i>Labor force participation rate, 2011</i>	<i>Unemployment rate, 2011</i>	<i>Labor force participation rate, 2012</i>	<i>Unemployment rate, 2012</i>
<i>Foreign-born women (16+)</i>	54.6	9.5	54.8	8.9
<i>Native-born women (16+)</i>	58.7	8.3	58.2	7.7

Source: Adapted from Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

These adults need a credential in order to move ahead in school or at work. However, educational services for vulnerable populations such as the women at Mercy Learning Center are limited at best. ProLiteracy America reports that annual government expenditures per enrollee in adult literacy programs were \$310 in 2003, as compared to \$7,500 for K–12 students and \$16,000 for higher education students. In Connecticut, federal and state investment in adult basic education decreased between 2009 and 2010 (“Tapping” 1). In short, as Rose says, “[R]ight at the point when they are most needed, our second-chance institutions are being threatened with severe budget cuts. Across the country, community colleges, adult schools, and literacy programs are reporting record enrollments at the same time they have to trim staff, classes, and services [. . .] Nationwide, hundreds of thousands of people are on waiting lists or simply denied admission” (19).

With the GED as virtually the only option for credentialing K–12-level learning, we have to ask, is the GED a second-chance, or a second-class, credential? Are the returns on an investment in the GED worth the costs for many people who are candidates for this degree? If not, then how can the returns on the degree be increased so that the GED opens the door to real economic opportunity? We can begin to answer some of these questions by looking closely at the impact and value of the GED at one community-based literacy center. In what follows, we present a portrait of the Center and its curriculum, drawing on demographic information and observation. Subsequently, using the interview data, we present findings on the value that students there anticipate and receive from the GED.

#### CASE STUDY: MERCY LEARNING CENTER

Mercy Learning Center sits at the corner of Park and South Avenues in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in the shadow of I-95. Now twenty-five years old, the Center has served 8,000 women and their families in that time, including more than 770 in 2012–13. According to its mission statement, the Center “provides basic literacy and life skills training to low income women using a holistic approach within a compassionate supportive environment” (Mercy Learning Center, *2011–2012 Annual Report*). In a combination of classes and individual tutoring, the Center provides English language instruction, adult basic education (ABE), and GED preparation. About 80 percent of the students meet with tutors twice a week for two hours at each session. About 22 percent of students participate in the intensive study program, meeting in class for five hours each day, five days a week (Mercy Learning Center, *2011–2012 Annual Report* 3). Classes in the intensive study program include ESL; ABE I, II, III; and GED preparation.

Unlike Grabill’s Western District adult literacy center, which was part of the state education system, Mercy Learning Center is community based, funded largely

by grants and donations, staffed primarily by volunteers, and deeply rooted in the neighborhood. Perhaps because of its integration into the community, the Center addresses students' needs beyond the classroom with a range of supplementary services. In 2011–12, for instance, it sponsored twenty-four enrichment programs that addressed topics including children's health, voter registration, and stress management. Preliteracy programs enrolled 163 children between the ages of three months and five years. Parenting, children's health, and dental workshops were provided to help students improve their parenting skills. As Rose notes, financial and practical problems can derail education for the most vulnerable adults. One indication of that is the assistance the Center provided in 2011–12 to students who would otherwise have been unable to continue their education: 728 bags of groceries, 434 bus tokens, 324 packages of groceries, and over \$10,000 in gift cards for groceries and medicine (Mercy Learning Center, *2011–2012 Annual Report* 3–5). The economic needs of the Center's students reflect the economic problems of the city overall: loss of industrial base and suburban flight; underperforming schools; high rates of poverty and crime; and a declining tax base.

Not all students who seek the GED at Mercy Learning Center began with that as a goal. Several came to the Center to learn English and needed a sponsor to encourage them to believe that they could aspire to the GED. Julia recalled that, when she first came to the Center, about fifteen years after immigrating to the United States from Mexico, "My goal was only studying English." Instead, she said, the bilingual receptionist "told me, 'No you can do it more than learning English. You can do your GED.' And I say, 'No, it is very hard to do it.' She say, 'No you can do it. After you study English, you can study for your GED.' And I say, 'Okay.' [. . .] So I start to continue come every day until GED class."

Samples of the students' writing from a GED preparation class reveal the distance these students have to travel in order to be ready for the GED exam. Asked to write a profile of herself in a GED preparation class, Julia wrote,

I considered a determined person. Why? because I try to persuad my goal or my dreams. I'm a hard working person? For instant for get my ged diploma I try come every day at school, or I try to write for ten minutes every day at home. Not long time ago my goal was to get my driving linces, and I get with plenttly effort. I am aunt of A---. she is a beutiful girl. My niece is amazing person in my life. I love her alot. Even with her short age she is a huge person in my family.

Given the criteria by which the GED assesses essays—relevance, organization, use of supporting details, mastery of conventions, and word choice—it is easy to predict that Julia would struggle to pass the essay section of the Language Arts, Writing test. Her situation was made harder by having to drop out of the GED prep class to take on more hours at her job. As a single mother raising two children on her own after

leaving a violent husband, she needed the short-term income even more than she needed the GED class, which would lead to benefits only in the long term.

As Grabill has noted, the nature of the GED exam means that much of the writing done in a GED preparation class seems formulaic, even anodyne; yet some of these students' writing reveals a more political consciousness. In response to a question about a change she would like to see in her city, another student in the GED preparation class began her essay this way:

If I could make a change in my city I'm sure that I should make a lot of change. But one important think that I should make if I could is to bill more bilingual school. I think that is important because we have a lot Hispanic people in this city. Also we have two bilingual school in our city. Building more bilingual schools give our kids more oportunities to have a job. Also help them to have better communication with their parents.

Although this essay is not overtly political, it shows the writer understands that the situation she and her children—and many other children in Bridgeport—find themselves in is the result of structural problems that require remedies from unresponsive institutions.

### *The Value of the GED*

Given the demands involved in preparing for the GED and the difficulties these students face in an economy that demands educational credentials, we need to assess the value, both economic and noneconomic, of the GED. One potential gain is clearly economic. Historically, high levels of unemployment provide opportunities for education and training; if jobs are not available, workers have time to obtain the credentials needed to reenter the workforce at a higher level. Attaining the GED is particularly important for the students at Mercy Learning Center because unemployment rates are significantly higher and labor force participation rates lower for foreign-born women than for native-born women.

The noneconomic value of the GED is also important. As education researchers Lennox McLendon, Debra Jones, and Mitch Rosin note, “[Although] the most easily quantified benefit from investing in adult education is financial, [. . .] what is also true is that the benefits of having a smarter, better-educated, and skilled workforce go far beyond the numbers into areas that can also be supported empirically, but which may be difficult to quantify—such as self-esteem, happiness, and hope for the future” (20). Drawing on survey research done by Wei Song and Yung-chen Hsu, we can anticipate three kinds of noneconomic benefits from the GED: *political and social participation* (applying for citizenship, registering to vote, and engaging in volunteer work); *family literacy* (using the library, providing children with early childhood education, engaging in the learning processes of children, and creating

a family literacy environment in the home); and *health* (improving overall health, increasing the amount of health information, and using health services to maintain health). In the sections that follow, we examine, first, the economic and noneconomic benefits that women at the Mercy Learning Center expect from the GED, and then, the actual economic and other value that they realize.

### *Anticipated Value of the GED*

We can get some idea of the economic value of the GED by looking at the national data on GED recipients. The direct impact of the GED can be found first in wage effects. Nationally, according to Song, the average increase in weekly wages for those who attain the GED is \$115, and the average increase in annual household income is \$3,500. Preliminary results of a pilot survey conducted in 2009 by the American Council on Education indicate that GED credential recipients enrolled in post-secondary education at a significantly higher rate than did non-passers. Women with a GED credential enrolled at a higher rate than did male GED credential recipients. GED credential recipients with the intention to enroll in a two-year college or a four-year college when testing were more likely to actually do so, compared with GED credential recipients who did not state these goals (14). Wei Song and Margaret Patterson found that GED recipients indicated greater job satisfaction than did non-high school graduates (15).

Measuring the value of the GED to individual workers and to society is difficult. Economists consider the private return on investment that accrues to an individual who improves her or his human capital; they also consider the social rate of return that accrues to society as a whole as an “external benefit” of private investment decisions. Daniele Checchi provides examples such as the positive impact of a better-educated workforce on labor force participation rates and unemployment rates, and on the ability of an economy to productively incorporate new technologies (195). She further discusses the “dynamic consequences” of current education choices; parent investments in education and training increase the probability that future generations will make similar and even greater investments (215). GED recipients are also likely to be healthier than adults without a high school degree or equivalent. A study of health literacy using data from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that 49 percent of adults who lacked a GED or high school degree had “below basic” health literacy levels, compared to only 14 percent of adults with a GED or high school diploma (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, Paulsen, and White 13).

The interviews conducted at Mercy Learning Center provide more detailed information about the tangible benefits, economic and educational, that GED seekers anticipate. Like GED seekers nationwide, these students stated a clear hope that their education would result in improved job prospects. Carmen explained, “I have to finish school and I have to get a job. And, you can’t always depend on your spouse, the

person you're with. They choose to pick up and go sometimes." Similarly, Dianne, who learned that she had passed the GED on the day of our interview, said, "I just want to do something where, five years I'll have a job, ten years I'll have a job. It won't diminish as time goes on." Having dropped out of school after becoming pregnant in the eighth grade, Dianne knew firsthand the difficulties of keeping a job without a high school degree or equivalent. "I was working and I kept getting laid off," she explained. "I worked in offices, I worked in factories, I worked in fast food, and I'm like, well, I need something stable, at the end of the day. I can't keep bouncing back and forth and I was like, Well, I'm collecting [public assistance] and getting income, so there's no reason why I shouldn't do it. I might as well take advantage of the two years that Obama gave us and run with it. I think I'm going back to school."

Students also saw the GED as a stepping stone to more education. Grace, for instance, had come to Bridgeport from Ghana, where she had had to leave school because her parents could afford tuition for only some of their children. She said it was her husband who initially encouraged her to come to Mercy Learning Center; she reported that he had told her, "Now that we're starting to have a family, I should go to school and improve myself." After progressing from tutoring through ABE I, ABE II, and the GED class, Grace had been scheduled to take the GED exam but missed it because of a problem with transportation. Still, she knew what she wanted to do once she attained the GED: "I would like to go to college and see what I could be in the future, for my family and for myself."

Like Grace, Carmen also hoped to go to community college once she passed the GED: "I knew I wanted to finish the GED in order to go to college and get, you know, any type of class so that I could have a good job towards the future." Like several of the students, Carmen saw college as a ticket out of dead-end jobs, even if she had no clear idea of what she would want or need to study there. The fact that GED seekers view college as important, but may have little idea of what exactly it will entail or offer, could account for the high attrition rate among those who enter postsecondary education. Margaret Patterson, Wei Song, and Jizhi Zhang found that approximately a third of all GED recipients who enrolled in postsecondary education persisted for only one semester, and only 2.4 percent of these students completed a short-term certificate program in that time (19).

The interviews also provided some evidence that the noneconomic factors cited by Song and Hsu were at least as important to these students as the economic factors that are usually assumed to motivate adult learners. Like GED seekers across the country, the women we interviewed believed that attaining the GED would bring benefits beyond those that could be measured in dollars. Some sought self-esteem. The personal cost of not having a high school degree in a society that takes that for granted is steep because, as Kirk Branch notes, "adults who cannot read break cultural assumptions not only about literacy, but about adulthood" (221). All of the women



interviewed had been able to read when they began studying at Mercy Learning Center, but they had still suffered from the widespread assumption that those who did not complete high school are deficient as adults.

In talking about her motivation for seeking the GED, Saramata made clear the pain she felt. She explained that, as a teenager in the Democratic Republic of Congo, she had had to leave school and marry in the tenth grade in order to support her mother and family. Later, during the civil war, Saramata's husband fled the country after being beaten by political adversaries. She fled with her three children, supported herself and the children by working as a "house girl" in Zambia, and eventually sought asylum in the United States. Despite having the strength to survive war, exile, and relocation, as well as having a remarkable facility with languages, Saramata felt that, without the GED, she was incomplete. She explained, "I always wanted to be somebody, that's why I go to school. Every time I walk in an office, no matter where it can be, a police station whatever, if I see a lady behind a desk, that used to make my day so sad. If she could be there, why not me? So I—God heard my cries, and coming to America is one of the keys, and one day I'll be one of those ladies I used to see behind a desk."

Above all, these students reported that they wanted better lives for their children through education, what Brandt describes as "the capacity to parlay the resources of literacy into economic assets and intergenerational security" (203). Although Julia had had to drop out of Mercy Learning Center to take a job as a home health care aide, she explained that she still hoped to take and pass the GED. She wanted to do it "for my kids especially, because I don't want them to lead the life [I had] when I was little with my parents. I don't know; I want something good for them, for my sons." Similarly, Grace commented, "I have three children. One thing I pray for, I want them to have the best education in their life and if I'm alive, I will do whatever, I will do whatever."

### *Actual Value of the GED*

In fact, we have some preliminary evidence that students *are* able to achieve long-term benefits for themselves and for their families from their GED degrees. Using demographic data on Bridgeport and the Mercy Learning Center GED cohort from 2012, we estimated the increase in lifetime earnings for the average student to be \$78,514.<sup>6</sup> For the twenty-two women in this cohort as a whole, \$1,727,308 in earnings is potentially generated as a result of this one program. This means families will have access to resources that can make a real difference in the education programs available to them.

Mercy Learning Center's *2011–2012 Annual Report* provides additional evidence of the economic impact of its programs. The full-time intensive study program enrolled 141 students, while the part-time tutoring program enrolled 501 students

(6). Altogether, twenty-five women earned high school diplomas after completing programs that year (3). Sixty-three students entered the workforce and/or earned job promotions, up from forty-six the previous year (4). Thirty-six Mercy Learning Center graduates continued their educations by attending college this year (4). The Center benefitted tremendously from the time, effort, and talent of more than 480 volunteers, whose time was valued at \$1,352,843. It is clear that economic value was generated by the Center's programs and by the successful completion of GED preparation and testing. Individuals benefit economically when adults attain the GED; the costs of impaired education are steep for the state, too. A report on high school dropouts in Connecticut concluded that each adult who fails to attain a high school diploma or equivalent "costs the state an estimated \$517,893 (compared to a high school graduate) over his/her lifetime, in lost fiscal contributions and increased costs associated with more severe health issues and higher incarceration rates, among others" (Rath, Rock, and Laferriere 1).

Attaining a GED may have more economic benefit for students at Mercy Learning Center than for GED test takers at large, because earning a GED has been found to have more effect on income for women than for men. Using National Longitudinal Study 79 data, Richard Murnane, John Willett, and Katherine Boudett found that, five years after receipt of a GED test credential, low-skilled male credential holders have wages 6 percent higher and annual earnings 10 percent higher than low-skilled, uncredentialed adults. The coauthors estimate that, controlling for other on-the-job or off-the-job training, by the tenth year after dropping out of high school, a female GED test credential recipient earns \$1,328 or 25 percent more in annual earning than a woman without a GED test credential (Song 2). Thus, the women at Mercy Learning Center may have a more significant return on investment than might be expected for the entire population of uncredentialed adults.

Yet the age of students at Mercy Learning Center puts them at a disadvantage in leveraging the economic benefits of the GED. Because the Center's students are generally older than the average GED recipient, their age-income profiles are shorter; they have fewer years of employment during which to reap the rewards of schooling. Also, they have less time to accumulate seniority, promotions, job-specific skills, and other benefits to longevity in the workforce. Shorter life expectancy, poor health, and dangerous living conditions in their home neighborhoods may also decrease the return on investment that Mercy Learning Center students expect to realize.

The fact that a high percentage of students at Mercy Learning Center are immigrants is likely to have both positive and negative impacts on their success. Many of these students have had limited and disrupted education in their home countries, and have to learn English as a second language before beginning their GED preparation. Moreover, some of the Center's students are undocumented immigrants. This means that their work future in the US labor market is less certain and so decreases

the expected return on investment. Even if successful GED students are able to find employment, mobility and upward mobility in the labor market will be less probable. Irregular immigration status also limits access to higher education by making these students ineligible for grants and loans they need to make even community college affordable.

The interviews and participant observation also provided information about the three noneconomic values identified by Song and Hsu—political and social participation, health, and family literacy—that the Center’s students realize. Most concretely, in the area of political and social participation, twenty-six students at the Center passed the US citizenship exam in 2012–13. Julia attained both her driver’s license and green card; soon she hoped to pass her citizenship exam. All of that, she hoped, would enable her to support herself and her two sons. There was also some evidence of increased social participation. Several respondents, for instance, spoke of mentoring others. This finding is noteworthy because adults who lack a high school diploma or have only a GED are often represented as needing mentors, not as being mentors themselves. Instead, we found that students at Mercy Learning Center were already serving as what Brandt calls “sponsors of literacy” and are self-aware about their roles as mentors. Candela, for instance, had lived in the United States more than fifteen years before beginning the ESL class at another literacy center. Having dropped out because “my husband don’t let me go to school,” she eventually found her way to Mercy Learning Center, where she attained her GED. Candela saw her success as offering encouragement to others:

I have a friend here. So she say, “I want to get my GED one day.” But she works in Greenwich, she has two kids. Her husband died like two years ago. So now she has to pay bills; she has to pay for her daughter’s education. She stopped in [at Mercy Learning Center] one day; she registers; and now she’s here! If I did it, you can do it. So don’t stay there. Try and try.

In the area of health, too, there was clear value to the programs provided by Mercy Learning Center leading to the GED degree. That is important for the population at the Center because adults with low literacy skills and those who speak a language other than English before starting school typically have limited ability to obtain, understand, and use information related to health. By contrast, Julia noted a change in her own behavior as she studied for the GED. Now, she explained, “I try to get books from the library and I was reading about health, about my diet. I read like four books because it was very interesting for me and my children, what can I give for eat. I learn a lot of things, a lot of fruit, vegetables, water, and my son says, ‘Mommy, what you doing now?’ because I want to care health, their health. Me too, I want to care [for] myself.”

The greatest benefit was in family literacy. Almost all of the students mentioned that, through their studies for the GED, they had demonstrated to their children

the importance of education and had modeled intellectual activity. Carmen noted, “I tell [my daughter] to go read a book instead of watching TV. You see, the more you read the more you learn. You know, I tell her, so I encourage her.” And Julia said, “when I’m doing writing, or writing, and he’s [her son] always with me with his pencil every time.”

More poignantly, at the same time that these GED seekers described themselves as encouraging their children, some reported that their children took on the role of encouraging and supporting them. One of ten children from a village in Mexico, Gloria had left school after ninth grade when her parents were unable to afford to send all the children to school. Now, after six years at the Center, she was studying to take the GED for a second time. When she spoke about her seven-year-old son’s reaction to the news that she had failed her first attempt at the GED exam, Gloria described herself as both a role model for him and in need of his encouragement:

When I didn’t pass my test for the first time and I say look, I didn’t pass and he gave me a hug and he say me, “Don’t worry, Mommy, Next time you can do it. It’s not too bad.” And now he told me, “Keep working hard, keep working hard. I want you to go to the college. I want you to be something.” [. . .] Sometimes I think he is putting pressure on me, but sometimes I say maybe he told me because he wants somebody to follow. That’s why sometimes I think that he’s so proud of me, but if I get some diploma or something like that, he’s going to be more proud of me and he’s going to say, if my mommy can do this, then I can do it.

Saramata, too, was aware of her daughter’s role in supporting her: “My kids are very supportive. Sometimes I say I feel sorry for them [because] sometimes I’m just too tired. I complain to them, I say, ‘I feel guilty because I’m not a mom to you because I’m too busy.’ My daughter, my second-born, she’s kind of a partner now, sometimes she tells me, ‘Mom, after all this time you’ve struggled, this not the right time to quit.’ Yeah. She’s so helpful now; she’s really helpful. I think she’s the one who really goes along with me, yeah. When I say I’m tired, she tries to be grown up.”

#### IMPLICATIONS

We conclude that there is significant economic and noneconomic value to the GED degree for students who work to achieve it, for their families, and for their local communities. Although our research reveals limitations and flaws in the design and delivery of the test, once a learner is past high school age but without a high school diploma, the GED provides virtually the only access to further education and job opportunities. Without it, poor residents in cities like Bridgeport, Connecticut, will continue to be denied opportunities of many sorts. Whatever its flaws, the GED is an essential credential for the women at Mercy Learning Center and for many other men and women who need and deserve a second chance.

Our research suggests two additional points. First, given what is at stake for adults seeking a high school degree, those of us in postsecondary English need to increase our attention to the GED because we have expertise in writing and issues related to computer assessment of writing. Recent research has examined other forms of secondary-to-postsecondary articulation in English but has overlooked the GED. As Kristine Hansen and Christine Farris note, these efforts usually aim to speed up education, or at least credentialing, by taking care of college English requirements while students are still in high school. The GED represents a different kind of articulation, where test takers are, in essence, taking care of high school requirements as adults. We need to weigh into conversations about the exam—its construction, administration, and scoring—just as we have begun to do with other forms of testing such as the SAT and the CCSS. With approximately 700,000 adults likely to take the exam this year, the GED is too important to ignore.

Second, many of the adults who attain the GED will become our college and university students. We need to be prepared to teach and support them as they navigate the gap between the writing demands they have encountered in GED prep classes and in the GED itself, and the writing they will be expected to do in college. If there is a mismatch between what the test signals and what we really value, then college English and writing instructors will have a difficult time managing students' expectations. To help students like those at Mercy Learning Center find their way in classes composed primarily of traditional students, we must understand how their expectations about the reading and writing in academic life have been shaped by the GED.

Public discussion of the GED has already begun. The 2014 revision of the exam, designed to align it with the CCSS, has generated policy and public discussion about the role of the GED in promoting and certifying a skilled workforce. Those discussions promote the GED for its economic impact on others, in the form of higher tax revenue and lower costs for public spending on health, welfare, and prisons. These discussions reveal what Hansen describes as inherent tensions in education: as a public good, designed to promote social efficiency (particularly a skilled workforce) or democratic equality (engaged citizens); or a private good, designed to promote social mobility for the individual (3–4). Adult education programs such as those at Mercy Learning Center, programs that provide not just academic and vocational services but also family social services, help move us toward the socially optimal quantity of education. As Rose notes, “Many of the people we’re discussing are facing hardships beyond what education alone can remedy, including inadequate housing, health care, child care, and, ultimately, employment—just a decent wage and a few benefits” (19). It is within this context that successful adult education programs must operate, and it is this list of challenges that Mercy Learning Center has attempted to limit.

## NOTES

1. We are grateful to the staff and students at Mercy Learning Center for their generosity in welcoming us into the Center and telling us their stories. Students are identified by the pseudonym they have chosen. This research received IRB review and exemption. We also thank our colleagues Elizabeth Boquet and David Sapp for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. Evan Anderson provided valuable economic data analysis.

2. Other changes are slated to occur when the new test is introduced. It will become a computer-based exam, resulting in a rise in the cost to test takers. Nationally, the cost of taking the GED now ranges from no charge to \$80. When the exam becomes computer based, the cost will be \$120, although some states, including Connecticut, will subsidize the cost. Our study deals with the test in use prior to 2014.

3. According to the *2012 Annual Statistical Report on the GED® Test*, the average age among those who took the exam in 2012 was slightly over twenty-six, the average last grade attended was tenth, and the average time out of school was eight years. Nearly 22 percent of those who took the exam were young, between sixteen and eighteen; less than 4 percent were fifty or older. The overwhelming majority of the test takers were native English speakers (Institute of Education Sciences).

4. In 2011, 80 percent of US test takers aged sixteen to eighteen passed, compared to 65 percent of those aged thirty to thirty-four and 51 percent of those aged fifty to fifty-nine. More men than women took the GED (56 percent and 44 percent respectively). According to self-reported data, the ethnic makeup of GED seekers nationally was White, 44 percent; African American, 24 percent; Hispanic, 15 percent; and others, 16 percent (GED, *2012 Annual 3–5*). (Percentages do not equal 100 percent due to rounding.) Approximately 72 percent of male test takers passed the exam in the United States, compared to 65 percent of women.

5. Responses total more than 100 percent because test takers were permitted to identify multiple reasons for seeking the degree.

6. The 2012 cohort included twenty-two women, average age thirty, with thirty-five years of expected labor force participation. This figure is in 2012 dollars, and does not include regular wage increases that would be expected over time, advancements in position or promotions, or returns to additional schooling.

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#### ERRATUM

In the July 2014 issue of *College English*, a citation was misidentified in "One Train Can Hide Another: Critical Materialism for Public Composition," by Tony Scott and Nancy Welsh. The Steven Fraiberg citation should have read:

Fraiberg, Steven. "Composition 2.0: Toward a Multilingual and Multimodal Framework." *College Composition and Communication* 62.1 (2010): 100–126. Print.



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