

COMMENTARY

To Get More College-Ready Students, Drop the GED



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

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I teach in, and coordinate, a General Educational Development program at a community college just south of Chicago. Every week I say hello to a student I had in a class and who has been taking classes with us for the past year and a half. This student knows exactly what he wants to do: get his commercial driving license (we have a great program on campus) and find employment driving trucks. He's hard-working, smart, punctual, and respectful. He'd have no trouble getting through the

program. There is only one thing standing in his way: the GED exam.

He took the exam the year before it drastically changed in 2014, and he passed every subject but missed passing the essay portion by just a few points. When the exam changed to supposedly align better with college-readiness standards, the sections he passed no longer carried over, and he had to start from scratch. But the new test is harder — a lot harder — and much more expensive, going from \$50 to \$120. The higher cost is especially daunting considering that the majority of students in such programs have low incomes. I have confidence he'll pass it eventually, but every semester that he's delayed, so are his earnings and his future, all in the name of "high school equivalency."

But what makes having a GED relevant any more? In this new economy, we are constantly being told that a high-school degree is not enough: Students and adults need some type of postsecondary training to make a sustainable living. If this is true, then it seems to me that the GED itself is outmoded. The only thing it's doing is making it more difficult — and since the revamp, much more difficult — for students and adults to gain access to more advanced training and certification courses. Not only that, it is an artificial barrier to getting into college.

Some of our GED students do enroll in college courses. We are a smaller community college, enrolling about 5,700 students in credit and noncredit courses, full and part time, and since the fall of 2011, we have had about 150 graduates of our GED program enroll in credit courses at the college. I would guess we would have easily doubled that if students did not have to pass the GED to enroll in credit classes (and be eligible to receive financial aid); and no, this would not mean that those students would somehow be less ready to take college courses.

In fact, the opposite may be true. "Focusing our program's efforts on teaching college-readiness skills to those students who aspire to earn a college diploma would be more valuable to them than preparing them for an exam that guarantees nothing."

Of course, some students want a GED so they can get a better job right now — but there are other, much more reasonable tests on which those students could demonstrate basic work skills, such as the National Career Readiness Certificate, which measures applied math and reading skills that employers believe are critical to job success. Perhaps without the GED, more students would be convinced that a high-school diploma is not enough and that they need more advanced training in the long run.

Having to pass the GED exam to enroll in college makes even less sense now that more and more graduates from high school aren't even ready for college. As at most community colleges, students here must take a placement exam that tests their academic levels in math and English. Many of them test into remedial courses in those subjects — courses that, content wise, overlap with the material we teach in the GED program (except our classes are free, whereas students — many of them low-income — must pay for remedial courses at community colleges). Also, for those high-school graduates who are so underprepared that they do not even test into remedial classes, the college will send them to the adult-education program to receive free tutoring.

Really, then, the only difference between the students in the remedial courses and the ones in the GED program is that those in the latter group do not have their high-school diplomas. However, this means that the student in our program who does pass the GED exam and wants to enroll in college must then turn around and take the college-placement exam. Efficiency experts have a term for this: redundancy.

So wouldn't it make sense to combine these pools of students into one federally funded program whose sole focus is on college and career success? Such a program would allow GED students to rub elbows with "real" college students, and, conversely, rather than enrolling in remedial courses that have been shown to largely fail in helping students graduate from either community colleges or four-year colleges, such students could enroll in credit courses while receiving free support classes with the GED students.

In fact, the nonprofit advocacy group Complete College America has recommended this type of approach. If we really want more students to succeed in college or in advanced vocational courses, then we must consider a free program — one whose sole purpose is exactly this, not one subservient to a test that does not actually help students prepare for either college or careers, and certainly not one that financially penalizes underserved students for being underprepared for college.

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