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Identifying and Reaching Communities in Need of GED Instruction

Stanford T. Goto
Connie Martin
Gail Goulet
Beth Robinson
Michael Furtado

Abstract

It is important for adult educators to consider the needs of adults who want additional education but have not yet pursued their educational goals. This article describes a particular approach to understanding this large and diverse group. A qualitative, inductive research methodology was used to identify communities in a northwestern Washington county. The findings illustrate the usefulness of understanding how adults define their own communities. The study suggests that face-to-face communication is an important vehicle of affiliation in some communities. Adult educators can draw on this finding to develop targeted means of outreach to local communities.

Introduction

What can educators do to better attract and serve adults who need a high school equivalency degree? Traditionally, GED programs have re-

Stanford Goto is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Western Washington University. **Connie Martin** is an ESL Instructor of the Korea University Cultural Program at Western Washington University. **Gail Goulet** is a Postgraduate Student, Department of Adult and Continuing Education, Faculty of Education at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK. **Beth Robinson** is an International Student Advisor at Whatcom Community College. **Michael Furtado** has an M.Ed.

lied on non-targeted means of bringing in new students. Oftentimes, programs are promoted through brochures, public service announcements, or other marketing vehicles designed to make educational opportunities visible to wide audiences. Strategies such as these may not be sufficient to attract eligible adults who are particularly challenged in returning to school. Michael and Hogard (1996) argue that more active approaches are needed to improve recruitment. Programs would benefit from the systematic study of local constituencies. With this knowledge, adult educators can develop targeted means of reaching underrepresented groups. One challenge is to identify which populations are underserved by ABE/GED programs. A more vexing challenge is to determine why adults are not pursuing additional education.

Direct documentation has proven hard to come by. While there is an abundance of research on current ABE/GED students and graduates (Porter, Cuban, Cummings, & Chase, 2005; Kleiner, Carver, & Hagedorn, 2005; Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000), there is far less documentation on eligible adults who do not pursue adult basic education (hereafter referred to as "non-attending adults"). Some evidence comes from national and state sources. For instance, U.S. Census (2008) data show that 14 percent of adults over the age of 25 had less than a high school diploma in 2007. Descriptive statistics indicate the size and characteristics of groups that need basic skills instruction. However, quantitative data do not reveal how eligible adults affiliate with one anther and how they act upon education-related beliefs. These are important considerations for the purpose of targeted outreach and program marketing.

To address these issues, a team of university and technical college educators conducted a study to analyze characteristics of adults who might benefit from GED education. In particular, we set out to identify groups of adults who not only want further education, but also are likely to be receptive to outreach. This study utilizes a qualitative, inductive lens to identify communities of adults who are good candidates for educational outreach. Here, we make a distinction between communities (groups of people who voluntarily affiliate with one another and share some common identity) versus populations (groups of people who have some common geographic or demographic characteristics and who may or may not affiliate with one another). For purposes of program outreach, we believe it is important for educators to understand how adults interact and affiliate with others in their communities. This aim, we would suggest, is best pursued using an inductive approach that seeks to document educational beliefs from the perspective of those being studied (as

opposed to a deductive, hypothesis-driven approach; see Belzer and St. Clair, 2005). Furthermore, this aim is best achieved through qualitative methods, which are likely to yield richer and more contextualized insight than could be achieved through quantitative findings alone. Our study draws particularly on situated learning theory (Wenger, 1998), which describes how people organize themselves in communities of practice. This body of theory prompts us to consider how adults develop and spread educational beliefs within their communities. In describing our methodology and findings, this article points to strategies that adult educators can use to reach out more directly to community members who have not yet pursued their educational goals.

Challenges of Studying Non-Attending Adults

Generally, existing research on GED-eligible adults has focused on the demographic characteristics of those who did not complete high school. Beder (1990), for example, identified four predominant reasons why adults without a high school degree do not return for additional education in Iowa. These include low perception of need, perceived effort, situational barriers, and dislike for school. The study found that the perception of need declined with age and that situational barriers (e.g., full-time employment, having children) were most prevalent in mid-life (i.e., 40s and 50s). These findings led Beder to conclude that the proportion of eligible adults in Iowa who were willing and able to pursue additional education may have been smaller than previously assumed. This sobering prospect reminds educators that, even when underserved populations are identified, there are no guarantees that targeted marketing and accommodations will actually attract members of these populations.

Another line of research focuses on the characteristics of adults who return for additional education. When juxtaposed with studies of non-attending adults, the research on returning students points to segments of the adult population where there are good prospects for GED recruitment. One study conducted by Wayman (2001) highlights four predictors of degree completion among high school dropouts. The findings suggest that adults are more likely to complete a high school degree or equivalent if they are (1) closer to age 18 at the time of dropout; (2) have higher achievement scores in math, reading, or vocabulary; (3) have higher socio-economic status as indicated by family income, or (4) have one or more children. Wayman refers to these as "robust" factors that are documented with some consistency in the literature. Given this

information, one might predict that individuals who drop out of high school at a later age, have relatively high achievement scores, and/or come from higher socio-economic backgrounds would be most likely to return for a GED. Classifying adults by age at drop out, test score, or socio-economic status provides a broad-based means of estimating the likelihood that a given group will pursue GED education. However, this approach does not yield many clues about what supports are needed to get adults back in school.

Beyond these findings, the cumulative research on GED (non)participation tends to be rather mixed. This is true of studies that attempt to correlate ethnicity and GED completion. King (2002), for instance, found no significant difference between African-Americans and European-Americans in rates of GED participation, a finding that differs from other works (e.g., Denny, 1992). Studies of gender have likewise reached different conclusions. Some (e.g., Johnstone & Rivera, 1965) suggest that women are likely to face more constraints than men, limiting their participation. Other studies, however, suggest that women are more likely to persist (Vann, 1995). Varying conclusions among similar studies do not necessarily indicate shortcomings in the research. Rather, it appears that education-related behaviors vary from one context to another. We agree with King, who argues:

> It is reasonable to suggest that deterrents to participation in adult education programs… are multidimensional and that analysis of barriers to participation among different subgroups is required to fully understand the construct (2002, p. 154)

This observation has important implications for educators who wish to approach underserved populations in targeted ways. In order to respond effectively to educational deterrents, educators must recognize the needs of their localized groups.

While statistical analyses are helpful in this regard, they are limited by what Belzer and St. Clair (2005) describe as a "hypothetico-deductive" logic. Deductively driven studies of adult learners typically begin with a hypothesis predicting which demographic characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, income level) correlate with a particular outcome (e.g., dropping out of high school). Researchers then gather evidence that either supports or refutes this hypothesis. A problem is that categorizing people by some common characteristic does not guarantee that those individuals

actually affiliate with one another. One cannot assume, for instance, that adults living below poverty level in a given area necessarily know each other or come together.

The issue of affiliation is particularly important for purposes of marketing and outreach to adults who are not yet enrolled in GED. Babchuck and Courtney conclude that "word-of-mouth was the single most cited source of obtaining information regarding adult education programmes" (1995, p. 396). To capitalize on this phenomenon, educators must have a sense of where and with whom adults interact. This is particularly important for programs that don't have budgets for media advertising or other means of mass marketing. In such cases, the most viable outreach strategies often involve meeting with potential students or leaving information in places frequented by eligible adults. Reaching people who are not yet familiar with educational opportunities might very well require program representatives to venture out to community settings. Knowing where to go and how to approach people requires a level of understanding that cannot be achieved solely through the review of hypothetico-deductive studies. For this purpose, educators would benefit from an inductive approach to analyzing how non-attending adults define and participate in communities.

Identifying Communities

Adult educators have worked extensively with notions of community. One area where this is evident is in the literature on on-line communities. A good deal of research has focused on learning communities organized by educators in institutional or workplace settings. Some studies consider how participation in on-line communities influences learning outcomes or attitudes (e.g., Wiesenberg & Willment, 2001). Other studies examine the effectiveness of particular instructional approaches in on-line environments (e.g., Revill, Terrell, Powell, & Tindal, 2005). A common characteristic of these works is that they describe communities that are mediated by professional educators. This is generally true of the literature on learning communities, whether on-line or face-to-face; the term "learning community" is most often applied to communities organized around formal learning activities sanctioned by an institution or agency (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Our intention in this study was to focus on communities organized by community members without intervention from educators. For this reason, we chose not to use the notion of learning communities as a conceptual lens for our study.

Other studies of on-line communities are more relevant to our purposes and population. These works focus, not on the actions of educators, but on the perceptions and actions of learners. Conrad (2008), for instance, shows that employees value the transfer of knowledge that occurs in an on-line work environment. Renwick (2001) describes an on-line community organized around a work-based training program in Australia. Members of this community were facilitators from various institutions and government offices that had not collaborated previously. Renwick uses the term "community of practice" to describe the collaborative body that members wish to achieve.

This conception of community is most relevant to our study as it describes how members of a group organize themselves, in effect defining their own community.

This terminology comes from situated learning theory, which posits that learning is inherently social in nature (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; see also "community as relationship" in St. Clair, 1998). As Heany puts it, "all learning is situated not only in space and time, but also inextricably in relation to social practice" (1995, p. 2). Hansman and Wilson explain that 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). According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice are distinguished by three characteristics: mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise. In varying degrees and capacities, members of a community of practice engage in performing some collective set of tasks.

These principles are illustrated in a study of Latinos/as in Colorado (Sparks, 1994). Although the researcher does not specifically cite situated learning theory, her conceptual framework is comfortably compatible with the ideas of Wenger and others. The Sparks study examines clusters of Mexican-Americans who congregate in urban areas. Specifically, the researcher uses the term "communities of assistance" to describe mutually supportive ties within these groups. It is not surprising that this term resembles the more generic notion of communities of practice. According to Sparks, community members provide various forms of support to each other, particularly if those in need are family or they come from the same region of Mexico (mutual engagement). Through these interactions, community members build common beliefs about education and strategies for success (shared repertoire). The tight-knit groups share a sense of collective responsibility (joint enterprise). The Sparks study il-

lustrates the usefulness of using "community" as a unit of analysis in studying groups of adults. In documenting ways that people define their own communities, the researcher necessarily takes into account naturally occurring lines of affiliation. This might be characterized as an inductive, emic approach that defines the study population from the perspectives of the subjects.

Drawing on situated learning theory, our research team set out to identify communities of practice whose members (1) have widespread need for GED education, (2) generally have a robust desire for such education, and (3) are disposed to communicate their educational beliefs with each other. Presumably, communities meeting these criteria would be the best candidates for future outreach efforts. We realized that such communities might be organized around a wide variety of social activities (e.g., sports, worship, work, hobbies) that were not necessarily related to formal education. Consequently, we decided to focus on communities whose shared repertoire included beliefs about education (even if these beliefs were not central to a community's existence). In particular, we wanted to identify communities whose members saw value in completing high school. We assumed that individuals with a sense of joint enterprise would congregate or, at least, communicate with each other. This was crucial for our future outreach plans. Ultimately, we hoped that our findings would allow representatives of the GED program to meet with adults in community settings and that, through those meetings, individuals would spread the message about educational opportunities.

Design and Participants

In taking an inductive approach to identifying communities of practice, our team could not determine in advance which segments of the adult population to study. Consequently, we conducted the study with current GED students. Our intention was to have them characterize educational needs within their communities. Working with the technical college, we selected two GED classes (one day and one evening). All students over the age of 18 were invited to participate. A total of fifteen students from the two classes agreed to participate. Of these volunteers, most were female (66 percent), European-American (80 percent), native English speakers (87 percent), between the ages of 25 and 34 (53 percent). Others identified themselves as Native-American (2 individuals) and Latina (1 individual). Other first languages included Spanish (1 individual) and Russian (1 individual).

There are notable limitations to our methodology. Conclusions are based on information provided by current students, rather than by people who are not yet enrolled. In addition, the study sample is small and non-random.

Data were collected over multiple days with each class. One of the GED instructors developed an instructional unit based on the theme of "community." The data collection activities complimented this curriculum, thereby minimizing disruption of the course. First, the student volunteers were asked to complete two brief questionnaires: one regarding their own background and educational experience and the other regarding an adult acquaintance or relative who might benefit from further education. The students also wrote a short narrative further describing the acquaintance/relative. The instructor and researchers were available to help individuals with the writing if they requested assistance. These activities were designed to identify points of contrast between adults who pursue a GED and those who do not.

The first data set was analyzed using a process of domain analysis (Spradley, 1979). We began by coding the data in non-interpretive categories (i.e., themes derived directly from the words of the informants; see Miles & Huberman, 1984). The data set was divided between two pairs of researchers, who identified emerging themes. The pairs then exchanged their work and verified the coding of the other pair. This double-checking process was used at each stage of data analysis to build inter-rater reliability.

The next round of data collection moved from discussions of individuals to discussions of communities. We administered another questionnaire that we developed in light of our initial analysis. This instrument asked students to identify "the three most important areas that make you feel a connection with people outside of your family." This prompt was designed to probe lines of affiliation, a key characteristic of community membership (Wenger, 1998). Individuals could write in their own categories or they could choose from listed categories (e.g., social activities, faith) that were derived from the earlier data set. In reviewing the responses, we looked particularly for similarities. Students who affiliated with similar communities were placed together for an interview. For each interview group, we developed customized interview questions to probe characteristics of that type of community. The 30- to 60-minute interviews were semi-structured in the sense that they included some predetermined questions, while leaving room for extemporaneous follow-up questions. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed

verbatim. The purpose of the interviews was to test earlier findings and to probe emerging themes more deeply. This triangulation of data sources served to improve the robustness of our findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

All data were pooled in the final stage of data analysis. Using Spradley's design (1979), we shifted our analysis from the ways that the students categorized communities to the tacit meanings that they attached to those communities. This signaled a shift to interpretive coding (i.e., sorting the data into categories that are derived inferentially; see Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Communities Identified

Table 1 shows a taxonomy of communities derived from the students' descriptions. Some communities appeared only incidentally in the analysis, while others were strongly prominent. These proportions most likely do not represent the relative size, robustness, or diversity of communities in the local area. It seems suspicious to us that some obvious types of communities (e.g., faith, language, area of residence) were mentioned only incidentally by students. We attribute this primarily to sampling error. It is likely that these communities would emerge more prominently in a larger, randomly-selected sample. We are more confident in our analysis of communities that emerged most prominently in the data. Three communities (Friends and Family, Caregivers, Clean and Sober) were mentioned frequently and appeared in multiple data sets. These are discussed in reverse order from less prominent to most prominent.

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.

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:

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

Categories of Communities	Written Comments from Students
Friends and Family	"People to talk w/ or so 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 trustworthy, dependable"
Clean and Sober	"Support group to continue with sobriety education" "AA/NA meetings I'm around sober people"
Incidental Mention	Faith/Religion Work Language/Culture Where You're From Where You Live Social Class

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 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 the local area. There are nearly 15,500 adults in the county who need treatment for substance abuse (Mancuso, Gilson, & Felver, 2005). Almost half of this population (7,400) lives at or below 200 percent 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. More than 1,200 adults in the county are admitted annually for outpatient treatment, which is the most common of various treatment options (Whatcom County Public Health Department, 2007). Among those who receive treatment, approximately 72 percent have a 12th grade education or less (degree completion rates not indicated).

Caregiver Community

This was a common category chosen by respondents (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 is 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 the local area. 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).

Friends and Family Micro-Communities

This is not a unified community but rather a loose category of independent groups. Originally, when we asked individuals to identify their communities, we told them not to count tiny social networks such as one's immediate family. Despite our instructions, a considerable number of respondents (62 percent) indicated that they affiliated closely with a small group of friends or family members. The trend was too strong to ignore, so we created a catch-all category to describe many micro-communities. It is not very productive to make extensive generalizations about the diverse groups that constitute the Friends and Family category. These 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 demographic commonalities. In short, there is no unified social entity that can be called a common community. However, the small social units are internally cohesive with common characteristics, beliefs, and meeting places.

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 to 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 this set of respondents 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 members of these communities 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.

Student Ideas for Program Marketing and Outreach

Study participants were additionally asked to suggest ways that the college could make the GED program more visible to adults who need additional education. The students came up with a variety of ideas ranging from media advertising to face-to-face outreach. Some suggestions were similar across the various communities. Others were specific to particular communities.

Many students felt that print materials would be appropriate to promote the GED program. Some suggested advertising in the local newspaper or posting notices in public places. Brochures were a common suggestion. "Hand them out in lower-income neighborhoods or at housing programs," advised one student. Some individuals felt it was important for print materials to feature successful students "where you can see here's a real person." It is interesting to note, however, that none of the study participants, themselves, recalled seeing a brochure or other printed item for GED programs prior to enrolling. Local GED programs do, indeed, have promotional literature, including a brochure that features successful students. For years, these items have been distributed at events or left in many of the public places mentioned by students. It would seem that, in this service area, printed information is available but not entirely effective in reaching potential students.

Students also reported that face-to-face meetings are an effective means of attracting adults who need GED instruction. Some suggested that the technical college could host an open house or community barbecue on campus. As one person put it, "You're going to get… those people that want to go school but haven't felt that they could. You're going to get those people who want that help to come to (events) like that." Others were more enthusiastic about off-campus outreach. "You have to physically go out and contact these people," explained one man. "You can't just sit back in your office and hope and pray, 'Well, maybe this flier will bring someone in'." Many respondents observed that GED-eligible adults often congregate in offices of the Department of Social and Health Services. In general, they felt that offices serving low-income adults are prime sites for recruitment to GED programs. Beyond this, study participants tended to suggest places frequented by members of their communities. Those of the Caregiver Community pointed to day-care facilities, schools, and other sites where parents congregate. Friends and Family people suggested churches, blood donation centers, food banks, and shelters. Clean and Sober members mentioned Alcoholics

Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, but they stopped short of inviting educators to support group meetings. Instead, they suggested that current GED students who attend support groups can "talk up" the GED program at appropriate times.

These suggestions illustrate the power of word-of-mouth communication. A number of study participants suggested that adults are most likely to be swayed by peers who talk about their own educational success. "It seems to be word of mouth which is very good," said one individual. You "find out from someone you actually know who's doing it." Another gave an example: "My neighbor, she sees how hard I'm working.… She's like, 'Wow, I can do that!' And I go, 'Yeah, you can and you should!'… Now, my other neighbor, she's going to go to school, too. And, you know, it's just kind of inspirational." One implication is that face-to-face communication is not necessarily sufficient in and of itself. Adults may not be swayed by a stranger who lectures them about the benefits of going back to school. It is far more compelling to hear that message from a trusted peer whose personal example of success proves the viability of further education. These findings are consistent with Babchuck and Courtney (1995).

Discussion

If it is generally true that GED-eligible adults prefer face-to-face oral communication, this tendency would have important implications for program marketing and outreach. Traditional forms of marketing (especially print media) are likely to be marginally effective in reaching non-attending adults, particularly if they are not already looking for educational opportunities. This would present a considerable challenge for programs with limited marketing budgets and staff resources. Face-to-face promotion is labor intensive and reaches a relatively small number of people. If GED educators go this route, they would be well-advised to study their constituencies carefully in order to develop targeted outreach strategies that maximize chances for successful face-to-face meetings.

Qualitative inductive inquiry is well-suited to helping educators understand those they serve. As this study illustrates, inductive methods can be used to analyze how adults organize themselves in communities. More specifically, the analysis of voluntary affiliation can reveal where community members congregate, how they interact, and how receptive they are to pursuing additional education. This information adds a crucial dimension to program planning and marketing. For example, our findings

on the local Caregiver Community suggest that members are generally open to pursuing further education if the outcomes benefit their families. Moreover, Caregivers tend to come together in predictable places, such as schools or daycare facilities. U.S. Census (2005) data additionally show that, in this local service area, there are many female householders with less than a high school degree. In light of the qualitative and quantitative findings, GED educators might conclude that Caregivers are an important constituency to target in the local service area.

Our findings additionally suggest that population size is not necessarily the most important consideration in developing a targeted outreach strategy. Traditionally, GED educators have assumed that marketing efforts should focus on the largest local constituencies. This is a logical approach when using broad-based means of promotion, such as print advertising or broadcast media. However, overall population size is less of a concern in planning face-to-face outreach. For this purpose, educators are more interested in reaching a large number of people at a given event. This would be a consideration with the Clean and Sober Community, for instance. There are a relatively small number of people in recovery programs in the county (Whatcom County Public Health Department, 2007). However, our qualitative findings suggest that members come together regularly, they are highly motivated to make positive changes in their lives, and those who succeed in education are inclined to tell others about their success. Given the likelihood of success, GED educators might decide that face-to-face outreach should be a priority with such a community, despite the small population size.

The biggest challenge may be in reaching communities whose members are not closely affiliated. This is evident with the Friends and Family Micro-Communities, which are tiny, isolated social groups. There is no common gathering place frequented by community members, so there is no obvious location for GED educators to make face-to-face contact. There is no communication between micro-communities, so individuals who learn about educational opportunities are not likely to disseminate their knowledge through word-of-mouth. It would be logical for GED educators to conclude that face-to-face contact would not be an effective means of reaching members. Yet, it would be problematic to ignore these adults, who collectively made up the largest group in our sample. To what extent does this phenomenon occur elsewhere? Is it common for large portions of GED-eligible adults to be unaffiliated with social groups larger than a few peers or family members? These questions deserve further investigation.

Perhaps the most viable strategy is to expand the network of word-of-mouth communication. Individual GED programs typically do not have the resources to conduct extensive community-based outreach. However, it is feasible for GED educators to develop contacts with human service offices, city government, non-profit groups, and other agencies that deal with adults with limited education. Together, these agencies can coordinate efforts to guide GED-eligible adults to appropriate programs. Another intriguing possibility is to develop programs that actively promote word-of-mouth communication by training student ambassadors to disseminate information in their communities.

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