The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences of 12 adult online General Educational Development (GED) students to determine the role of program and personal factors that influenced their successful passing of the GED or their dropping-out of the program. Through surveys and interviews, we discovered that desire was the key factor for success. Teacher support also played a very important role. Our findings support the interest in adult online GED programs and provide insight to factors of persistence.

Online delivery of instruction is rapidly expanding throughout the field of education, yet few studies have investigated the topic of Internet use and online learning for Adult Basic Education (ABE) or General Educational Development (GED) students (Askov, Johnston, Petty, & Young, 2003; Porter & Sturm, 2006; Prins, Drayton, Gungor, & Kassab, 2012; Silver-Pacuilla, 2008). We define online learning as students using a computer specifically to access the Internet in order to receive their assignments, study content, take quizzes, and track their progress. Likewise, teachers use computers to send assignments, track students’ work, and communicate via email. Online learning is not to be confused with distance learning, which may include other non-Internet based communication. Our paper focuses on online learning.

In 2001, Department of Education leaders from 15 states started a consortium to support each other in their efforts to effectively implement distance education programs for adult learners. One Midwestern state from the consortium was selected to participate in this study. Approximately 2,000
students throughout the state enroll in the online GED program during a calendar year. Of these, approximately 75% study entirely online, while 25% use a blended model (i.e. online and on-campus). Online students are required to study 20 hours a month or five hours per week.

The online GED program is taught by five full-time, state licensed educators. Each teacher guides the learning of 100-150 students per month. They have many responsibilities including welcoming new students and communicating with local adult education centers for students' Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) results; their primary responsibility is to teach. In addition to the instructors, there are two staff members who provide technology support to students as needed.

The online GED program utilizes two technological platforms: Blackboard and Skills Tutor. A Blackboard site was developed by a team of adult educators in the selected state. This continually updated curriculum covers all five subject areas of the GED: social studies, science, mathematics, language arts reading, and language arts writing. Most Blackboard material asks students to read about a concept and then take a quiz. Occasionally, links to additional material or videos are available to enrich the learning of students. The majority of enrolled students work with this curriculum. Skills Tutor by Houghton-Mifflin offers language and math practice. Skills Tutor is more interactive and sequential than the Blackboard curriculum; additionally, the program gives students immediate feedback on their assignments. Based on TABE testing, if students have low scores in one or more math/language areas, the teacher will often place the student in Skills Tutor. However, if the students score high in these areas, the teacher will place the students into the Blackboard curriculum. Both Blackboard and Skills Tutor are used fluidly; teachers may move students into or out of either program based on students' current needs. Further, students independently progress through the lessons setting their own pace. Based on the combination of completed lessons and TABE testing, the teacher and student discuss when the student is ready to take the GED test.

Although this state's online program may differ from other states, research conducted about online and/or distance education students shows specific characteristics about successful students (i.e., those who completed the program). These students were able to work independently (Askov et al., 2003; Porter & Sturm, 2006; Shaw, Mikulecky, & Pilliner, 2013) and possessed some basic computer skills (Askov et al., 2003; Shaw et al., 2013). Askov et al. (2003) stated students who were most successful had reading skills at a seventh grade level or higher; Prins et al. (2012) said that students who studied through a distance education program were more academically prepared than those who studied in a classroom or a blended model. Successful online/distance education students possessed a goal as well as the ability to organize and had a fairly structured life (Askov et al., 2003).

Previous online/distance education research also shows that teacher-student communication and feedback is important (Askov et al., 2003; Petty, 2005). According to Askov et al. (2003), online teachers said it was more difficult to develop a relationship with students and support them without face-to-face interaction, yet they found alternative ways to build rapport such as sending individual emails rather than group emails and calling students to talk. Online and/or distance education students found teachers to be qualified instructors who provide motivation and support through frequent contact (Petty, 2005).

One area that needs further investigation is to learn more about factors that influence online
student success (Porter & Sturm, 2006), which helps educators be better prepared to motivate and support students in their online education (Askov et al., 2003). Our study informed this need by surveying and interviewing 12 adults who were previously or currently participating in the selected Midwestern state’s online GED program. Our small sample allowed us to look more in-depth at the role of program and personal factors that influenced students’ successful completion of the GED or their dropping-out of the program. We specifically sought to answer, “What program and/or personal factors did the students identify as important, and was either program or personal factors more essential?”

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

To frame this study, we selected Vroom’s (1964) expectancy-valence model. This model solicits students’ expectations regarding the upcoming experience or program; additionally, it measures the worth, or valence, of the program through the students’ eyes. This combination of expectation and program value potentially determines adults’ participation and success. While this model has been used successfully (Quigley, 1992; 1993) in research, there are also more questions to be answered; specifically, how dispositional barriers interact with program factors. According to Wigfield and Eccles (2000), there are three types of value in motivation. First, utility value: when students believe what they are learning is useful or when the learning will help them reach their goal. Second, importance value: when students believe the material is valuable to who they are or how they view themselves. Third, cost value: their sacrifices or expenses are worth completing the academic task. One study, completed with distance education GED students, found the participants to be highly motivated. Likewise, the students said they were strongly supported by their teacher. In reference to the expectancy-value model, the students believed the program had high utility and importance with moderate cost (Wolters, Karabenick, Johnston, & Young, 2005).

These three values in motivation are especially important in adult literacy programs and developmental college courses as they particularly struggle with high attrition rates (Alamprese, 2009; Comings, 2009). Affective research on competence, motivation, and self-efficacy states it is not unusual for people to avoid or discontinue frustrating and embarrassing situations in which they have previously been unsuccessful (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2000; Pressley, 2006), and educational programs where they perceive little likelihood of cost-benefit return (Beder, 1991). Students cite various reasons for discontinuing their adult education programs, most of which can be attributed to either institutional or personal factors (Beder, 1991; Tracy-Mumford & Baker, 1994; Quigley, 1997). For example, class location/schedule or the pace of instruction is considered an institutional reason for incompletion (Perin & Greenberg, 1994). Personal factors attributed to incompletion include family challenges, health issues, and non-instructional support services (Perin & Greenberg, 1994; Taymans, Swanson, Schwarz, Gregg, Hock, & Gerberg, 2009).

Persistence has been defined as “adults staying in a program for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must drop-out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands of their lives allow” (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone 2000, p. 2). Research on persistence has often occurred in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Fritz and Alsabek (2010) incorporated several structural elements into their campus-based English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes.
to increase students’ attendance and persistence. They created the classroom to be a democratic place with student voice and participation, adjusted the curriculum to meet students’ interests and demands, and helped students understand the development of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness skills. Fritz and Alsabek found these practices made a positive difference in persistence rates. Kefallinou (2009) implemented an intervention project while simultaneously conducting research on GED classes. To more effectively support student persistence, teachers discussed barriers with students, helped students monitor their learning progress, provided an orientation specific to persistence, and attempted to contact students who had dropped-out of the program. Kefallinou’s results showed positive learning gains, and more importantly, an increased sense of community. They defined completion as finishing the coursework in June or achieving a set academic goal. As a result of the intervention, the completion rate for students rose from a previous average of 46% to 65%.

In sum, although we know the importance of persistence, we have more to learn about the complex interplay of personal and program factors, specifically of students enrolled in online classes. Our research contributes to the field by identifying the perspectives of 12 students. While the sample size is small, these 12 are representatives of numerous students pursuing their GED through an online option. Our specific research question was, “What program and/or personal factors did the students identify as important, and was either program or personal factors more essential?”

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Based on our goal to understand the influence of personal and program factors for successful completion of the GED, we desired to sample all possible types of participants: those who passed/graduated, students who were currently enrolled, and those who dropped out (Sandelowski, Holditch-Davis, & Harris, 1992). Therefore, each of the five online teachers was asked to identify six volunteer participants: two students who had passed the GED, two students who were currently enrolled with anticipation of completing their GED within a few months, and two students who had dropped out of the online GED program. The goal was to receive data from 30 students with 10 in each category. However, teachers were only able to receive 21 volunteers. Despite repeated invitations, only 12 of the 21 adults participated in the study. The response rate was 57%. Table 1 shows the students and their characteristics.

**Materials**

A survey and interview questions were created by the first author based on prior studies (Porter & Sturm, 2006; Prins et al., 2012). Permission was granted by the aforementioned authors to use portions of their data sources. Once the survey and interview questions were drafted, they were shared with the co-authors, the online GED director and instructors, and an outside expert: an adult literacy consultant. The survey comprised of 36 questions soliciting students’ perspectives on the curriculum, contact with their teacher, self-evaluation of their organization, family support, and academic and life challenges. The survey was created and disseminated through an online engine called Qualtrics.

For the interview, we took the basic sections of
the survey and expanded questions for our particular study. For example, we used initial questions from Prins et al. (2012), “How often do you have contact with your online teacher? How (email/phone) do you communicate? Do you wish for more/less contact? Have you had any difficulties communicating with your teacher?” After these initial questions, we used follow up questions such as “How connected do you feel with your instructor and why?” In this way we attempted to not just get numbers or facts about communication, but ascertain the type of relationship between the student and teacher.

**Design**

We have used a mixed-methods research framework (Creswell & Clark, 2007). As Creswell and Clark (2007) said,

> By mixing the datasets, the researcher provides a better understanding of the problem than if either dataset had been used alone... In short, it is not enough to simply collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data; they need to be “mixed” in some way so that together they form a more complete picture of the problem than they do when standing alone. (p. 7)

This framework is appropriate because we began collecting basic information from 12 students through the use of a survey. We wanted and needed more information from students that simple multiple-choice or rated questions were not able to provide. Therefore, in addition to the quantitative survey, we asked 12 open-ended questions during an interview. We were thus able to provide opportunities for students to freely express themselves and we could truly hear the students’ voices. In this manner, we were able to gather insightful views from our students.

**Procedures**

The teachers provided the 21 students’ names and email addresses to the first author, who personally contacted each adult multiple times. The first author sent personal emails with an invitational link to take the survey and to set up an interview. Within a six-week period of time, this invitational email was sent up to four times, pending response. The students were asked to contact the first author after completing the survey to schedule an interview, which 12 of the 21 respondents did. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted over the phone or through Adobe Connect, an online video-conferencing program which is used by the students. Responses from the 12 students were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

**Data analysis**

As suggested by Creswell and Clark (2007) we brought our two datasets together by merging the data. First, we looked at the descriptive statistics provided through Qualtrics. This provided overall information about program and personal factors that provided us some tentative results. Second, we reviewed the qualitative data for themes to see if the findings converged or departed from the survey results. The interviews were analyzed through a case study approach where insight, discovery, and interpretation were sought (Merriam, 2009). The first author read through each of the transcribed interviews multiple times to identify themes. The third author read through anonymous interviews to identify themes. Inter-rater response between the first author and third author was 95%. Member checking (Creswell, 1994) occurred to ensure the information and conclusions were accurate. Finally, by merging survey and interview results we identified several findings, which are presented below.
RESULTS

We provide the findings for program factors followed by personal factors. Since we merged the qualitative and quantitative data to discover our findings, both survey and interview data will be mixed throughout the results section of this paper.

Program factors

We identified three themes that surfaced in our review of program factors: students’ experience with the online curriculum (Blackboard/Skills Tutor), their connection with their teacher, and their interaction with peers. The findings will be presented in bold followed by support for the finding.

Students were satisfied with the online curriculum. According to the survey, eight students (67%) said they were very satisfied, two students (17%) were satisfied, one student (8%) was somewhat satisfied and one student (8%) was dissatisfied. The survey results showed slightly more student satisfaction (i.e. “very satisfied”) with Blackboard than Skills Tutor. During the interview, students repeatedly said both Skills Tutor and the Blackboard Curriculum were user-friendly. Michelle [in reference to Blackboard] said, “All in all it was very easy. Easy to navigate and learn from the content.” Matthew [Blackboard user] said, “What I like about the quizzes, if the quiz is low, like a low grade, I can ask her [teacher] to reset it and redo the test and then I can study again and see what I missed.”

Ellen, who solely studied online, thought Blackboard was a great program. Ellen completed 139 hours of study time over four weeks and was greatly appreciative. She said:

I thought it was a win-win. I had no problem applying myself to what I needed to do. It was an all-around good experience. I never had a problem that Susan [teacher] wasn’t available with. I liked when she gave me links and I could figure it out. To me that is better…I just read and figured it out. I’m one of those people, you can explain something to me, but until it clicks in my head, I just have to do it myself…I didn’t have to sit in class. It saved me a lot in travel time and gas money.

Two of the 12 students, Tammy and Danielle, enrolled in both on-campus classes and online classes. They used the online option to supplement their campus learning. Both of these women preferred the on-campus learning because they felt more connected with the teacher, and they liked the explanations of concepts the on-campus teacher provided rather than relying on Blackboard to teach them. Danielle said the Blackboard math lessons were too short and they did not explain why or how things happen. Tammy used Skills Tutor and said she never had an issue with it. She printed off materials and found a way to make the program work for her, meaning she was able to take the content presented in an online platform and change the format (i.e., print material) to her preferred style of learning.

Hope planned to attend campus-based classes because she thought they would be easier. However, Hope enrolled online because the campus-based classes did not work into her schedule. During her interview, Hope said she tried Skills Tutor once or twice, but it made her feel remedial and like a child. She recognized that some may need to learn that way and that is okay. “I loved Blackboard. It was user-friendly, definitely easy to figure out, had a great lay-out. All your extra-curricular study guides were on the side bar and they gave you all you needed. There were quite a few errors like broken links, and there was a site you would submit a claim. Within a few hours they [links, videos] were fixed. The tech support was great. The same day or next day it was fixed.”
Overall, some (25%) students had preferences for one curriculum more than the other, but never once did an interviewee say s/he quit because of curriculum. Students noted that the online curriculum was imperfect – links or websites did not open, or students sometimes wished for more explanation about a concept, but the comments were not a prevailing part of the interviews and were common for any type of program analysis.

The majority of the students were very satisfied and positive about their interaction with their teacher. According to the survey, five students (41.6%) reported they had teacher contact about 2-3 times per week, another six students (50%) had teacher contact about 2-3 times per month, and one student had contact less than once a month. All used email as the primary means of communication, while four of the 12 students (33%) also used the phone. Through interviews, the students reported all five teachers responded very quickly to their inquiries, within the same day or the next day. Several students mentioned the teacher would call them to go step-by-step through the information, to explain a concept in more than one way, or to provide additional Internet resources. According to students, teachers did more than offer academic help. Teachers also provided support through encouragement and building the students’ confidence. When students were asked how connected they felt with their online teacher, three (25%) were not very connected. Tammy, who used a blended model of online and on-campus learning, said, “I didn’t know (online teacher) much. It was different from (on-campus teacher).” She further commented that the teacher was both accessible through phone and email as well as responsive. However, Tammy only contacted the teacher via email, which she chose to do on limited occasions. Two students (17%) said their connection was about average. The remaining seven students (58%) felt a strong connection with their online instructor. Matthew said, “I am very connected with my online teacher. It’s amazing how we connect. I never had that with the teachers in school.” Ellen said:

I had a lot of connection with Susan [teacher]. Both academic and emotional. She was always encouraging. She said, ‘I know you can do it!’ She was impressed with my test scores. We discussed some personal issues. It was a very good experience. Susan is a very good teacher. She’s a human. She speaks to you as a human.

Tess told about a time she had pneumonia and Susan “allowed me the time to get back. The support was great.” Hope, who spent about six weeks studying “like crazy,” had almost daily contact with her teacher. Hope said:

If I had questions I emailed her. She always responded within the same day or the very next day at the latest. She went the extra step so she would call me on the phone and go over step-by-step like math. It blew my mind because she had over 200 students and she always took the time I needed.

Peer interaction was not very important to these online students. Students were asked if they had any contact with peers, and whether this made a difference in their online academic experience. Three students (25%) responded they had a family member or friend with whom they met to study, and this was both encouraging and supportive. These select students found their strengths complemented their partner; one person would explain a difficult concept to the partnering student(s) who struggled with the concept. For the students (75%) who did not interact with a peer, one or two students suggested peer support would be beneficial, but the majority said
peer interaction was not important. Michelle said:
I’m very independent. I didn’t speak to anyone but the teacher. I think it was easy enough to do it alone rather than with others. Sometimes more is too much. I have to say if I didn’t have as much support [husband/family/teacher] as I did have, I would want more contact with others to know and believe I could do it.

**Personal factors**

**Motivation was key to student completion.**

According to the survey, 91% of the students said their personal desire was the most important factor for successful completion of obtaining a GED. Motivation out-ranked all the other personal factors, which ranged from 16-25%, and included their ability to organize and discipline their study, support from family, and no major life events that interrupted their learning. Desire and motivation seemed to be the greatest factor for success. Throughout the interviews, all the students who had completed or those who were almost ready to complete their GED discussed the role of this personal factor. Michelle (graduate) said:

I’ve been out of high school for 10 years. I haven’t had the opportunity or time. It was always an excuse to go to work or to do something else. Even though I had all that to do now while I was doing online, I was able to succeed because I had that push to do it.

Danielle (currently enrolled) said:

I’ve grown up and realized what is important. I’ve never thought of dropping out this time. I tried and dropped out twice before – 8 years ago. This time I am determined to do it. I want to prove I can do it. One thing I believe you need to do is believe in yourself and stick to it. You have to do it for yourself. If you don’t want to do it for yourself you’re not going to get it.

Hope (graduate) said,

I think you have to do this for yourself. If you don’t have your mind made up, you won’t succeed. This program changed my life, my outlook on everything. I have confidence that when I go back to school I won’t struggle as much as I thought. That fear is gone thanks to Tara [teacher] and the program.

Seven out of 12 students (58%) had previously participated in GED classes prior to this online experience. The most common reasons they dropped out of those classes were due to family situations or schedule challenges. They shared comments such as, “it was hard trying to fit it all in,” or “[father-of-my-child] was not a good influence on me.”

While being interviewed, we specifically asked if students thought about dropping out of this particular GED program. Some students, like Matthew, said they had no time or thought about dropping out or stopping. Four of the 12 students considered dropping out mostly due to lack of motivation or exhaustion. For example, Derise said she became quite ill and considered dropping out because her health came first. However, she realized how important this goal of obtaining her GED was for herself and her children, so she continued her studies while going to the doctors. Her teacher was also encouraging, which helped her stay. Two of the 12 students actually dropped out during some period of their study before we collected data. Tabitha told about her increasing work demands and how it got in the way of her study time. Bob, frustrated with the initial communication delay with his teacher, said his work schedule and making money to support his family were reasons he needed to stop.
Both program and personal factors played a role in students’ success, but personal factors, specifically desire and motivation, were essential. During interviews, students were asked about the role of personal and program factors. They unanimously agreed the factors were mutually essential. Tess said, “They both are important. I was determined I tell you. That helped. I had goals. I knew what I wanted…But the teachers really helped…They were very supportive, very encouraging.” Hope said:

I think that they are both very important. I think having the encouragement from the instructor and even if you have all the studies/programs, most people going back to get a GED have issues. They had problems in school and didn't finish or else they had life issues that made them so they couldn't finish high school. Anyone who goes back for a GED has huge emotional issues to face. Having someone there to keep you going plays a huge role in your success.

Conversely, the two students who dropped out had different reasons. Tabitha said, “I dropped out for personal issues I had to deal with. The program online was great. You have to make the time and have the energy.” Bob said, “I’ve started the GED several times and had to drop-out. I’m in my mid-40s and my family comes first…I had family support and I was going to do this [online] program. I just had the job situation off/on again and then waiting for the teacher for weeks.”

**DISCUSSION**

Adults who pursue a GED have a variety of challenges in their life including past school failures, work obligations, family commitments, and more. Their lives are complex, and yet they desire to obtain a GED for their own self-efficacy among other reasons. Minimal research has been conducted on adults who prepare for their GED online. We endeavored to better understand the complexity of adults’ lives and their academic experiences, including personal and programmatic factors that influenced students’ completion or their drop-out of one state-wide online GED program.

As data were collected, relationships among factors were apparent. Figure 1 shows how the positive and negative may appear through the interconnection of both personal and program factors. The dominant themes are listed in each circle, with the size of the circle depicting frequency of response. An outlier, whose comment was mentioned by one student, was randomly placed on its own outside of the diagram. This indicates that all factors are valid, but only those with repetition among students are listed as dominant themes. Desire, the heart of motivation, was placed in the center since this factor was the most important. Again and again, students said that desire had to be present, or they would not have made it this far in their program or to the passing line. All factors played a role, but making up one’s mind and pushing through doubts and challenges was the most essential component. That said, it is clear that student-teacher relationships not only existed, but were important. Through email and phone interaction, teachers could build students’ efficacy and provide support to boost students’ internal desire. While the decision to stay or drop-out ultimately resided with the student, the teacher played a central role. Teachers who transition from face-to-face interaction to an online setting often fear less connection with students, but the data in this research clearly shows teachers are still involved and importantly so. In this way we can believe that support was a very important second factor for students’ success.

As we evaluated the 12 online students’ persistence
in relation to the expectancy-value model (Vroom, 1964), and three types of values in motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), we saw all three values - utility, importance, and cost - to be quite high for those who currently studied or completed their GED. For Tabitha and Bob who both dropped-out of the program, it seemed that the cost value was lower than importance or utility. Tabitha said she moved up the ranks at work to be a manager and case manager, but she was not monetarily compensated for the advancements due to her lack of education. Work demands increased and she did not have time to study anymore. Thus, she knew obtaining the GED was a useful goal that would increase her value (importance), but the sacrifices (cost) were too heavy. Likewise, utility and importance seemed high to Bob; he was challenged by the cost. In this study, Bob showed he had a lot of motivation, but providing a home and food for his family were more immediate needs and thus he had greater motivation for them than for school.

Although not directly questioned, most students offered the fact that they would not have pursued their GED if they had to attend classes on campus. Their surveys unanimously showed that flexibility to study on their own time was a primary reason they enrolled online. Therefore, we can infer that the online option is sought after and necessary for some adults. Also, age does not directly matter in students’ success as our population was slightly older than some previously studied online populations (Porter & Sturm, 2006). We recommend students be able to change advisors if they have sufficient reason for a change. This could be determined by the program director. The teachers have very heavy loads, and Bob may be one of several students who were misplaced. When Bob made his initial application and inquiry with the teacher, he was told it would be the following week before he could get started with coursework. Something transpired and Bob's paperwork did not get processed in a timely manner. In Bob's case, he then took a passive approach and waited for months rather than being proactive and following up with Jennifer [his teacher] a week later. That said, if students have a situation where an instructor change would be beneficial, there may be a process in place to support students.

Zacharakis, Steichen, Diaz de Sabates, and Glass (2011) conducted focus groups from 25 adult learning centers with a total of 104 students. They identified six themes that impacted students’ persistence and retention: empowerment, exigence, personal barriers, program challenges, program strengths, and self-perception. While our study did not specifically test these six themes, they often surfaced in the interviews. For example, Stacy did not believe she could pass the GED so her self-perception was low. Hope was empowered to believe she could continue her education. Sickness and a change in work hours were cited by students as reasons to consider dropping out, thus demonstrating exigence: a force outside of a person that impacts the participant's behaviors and choices. Overall, Zacharakis et al., found the teacher-student relationship crucial to adult learner success, which we found to be true as well. Like Zacharakis et al., our students overcame personal challenges and the experience of persevering and succeeding through a difficult time helped them be empowered. We believe that educators should be familiar with these six themes and have healthy discussions about the role of these themes in their own programs. The instructors can even present these themes to their students and provide an opportunity for students to identify which factor(s) may be impacting them. This openness may be a tool to assist students in working through negative forces that impact their ability to
persevere and succeed in passing their GED. This idea parallels Kefallinou (2009) who discussed barriers with students and orientated them to persistence. Comings et al. (2000) identified four supports that should be in place for student persistence. Likewise, we found examples in our data confirming their findings. First, Comings et al. said teachers should help students be aware and manage the positive and negative forces that occur in their lives during their period of study. We saw this when Derise and Tess were faced with health issues and their teachers were encouraging, allowing them extra time to finish their work and believing they could complete it. Second, teachers should help students build self-efficacy. An example is Angela who felt she wrote a poor essay and her teacher gave her a much-needed emotional boost. Another example is Hope who talked about how her teacher played an important role in her newfound confidence. A third support for students is having established goals. Tess spoke on how important setting goals were for her success and other students alluded to this as well. Finally, students need to see progress towards their goals. This happened when students could see their scores/progress and receive feedback on Skills Tutor, Blackboard, and via email. Also, the TABE testing that took place every three months provided an opportunity for more formal progress monitoring. While it is encouraging to see these supports in place from our research, again, like Zacharakis et al. (2011), we suggest adult educators find ways to be transparent in providing and communicating support. Due to the heavy teacher load and numerous demands, perhaps the teachers’ focus was to provide the actual support (e.g., “You can do it!”) without discussing the reason (e.g., “Your self-confidence is low, but according to your practice scores I can see you are ready to take the test. After you pass the test, your self-confidence will increase and you can remember this situation when you are faced with other challenges”). If students can learn to identify factors and support as they pursue their GED, perhaps they can then learn to identify these in other settings, which will continue to propel them forward toward their goals. Another idea is to place examples of these themes and supports into the orientation that is required of students. This may provide a common area where students become initially familiar with the ideas; they can look for ways the factors and supports play out in their experience throughout their program of study.

As with any study, this research has its limitations. Due to a convenience sample and small sample size, particularly of drop-out students, we only offer tentative findings. Statistical analysis was not possible and interviews were self-reported data. We also did not collect academic records or their achievement level when they started their program. Limitations can also be areas for further research. One obvious need is to conduct a similar study with more drop-out students than successful students to hear their voices and gather their perspectives. We also should repeat this study with other programs/students to see if the findings differ among student/program groups. It would be enlightening to conduct this same survey and interview with students who attend class on campus to see if desire is the most important factor, or would the scale tip a bit more to other aspects such as teacher interaction and peer support? We would also like to meet online students and shadow their study/interaction experiences. Triangulating their experience while shadowing their teacher and other peers could be an informative ethnographic study. Minimal research has been conducted on the role of peers, and it would be interesting to further investigate this type of interaction and support.

From the findings of this study, we are able to
conclude the 12 students were independent learners who were satisfied with the curriculum to prepare for their GED. The majority of the students felt an average or above-average connection with their teacher and valued their teacher’s influence on their academic life. They also believed the support of their personal family/friends was important to their success. Peer interaction did not seem to be a necessary component for this select group of students. Organization with disciplined study and no life crises seemed to be influential personal factors. However, motivation and desire was the sole personal factor that repeatedly surfaced as most critical in both the survey and interviews. While program factors were important, we can conclude that personal factors play a very important role in perseverance, perhaps more so than program factors.

We offer two educational implications. First, this study provides understanding of the perspectives and experiences adult education students have about their online program. In an educational era where technology is an important tool for learning, we have discovered that online GED programs are a powerful and realistic option for many students. Thus, resources should be devoted to developing and improving online GED programs. Second, the findings document the need for adult literacy education centers and teachers to find a balance between maintaining a solid curriculum, but realizing success often relies on personal factors. Educators can have healthy discussions and implement practices about ways they can support their students. Adult literacy programs should empower students to be lifelong learners.
REFERENCES


Table 1—Participant characteristics

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• Internet links did not always work
• Math was the most challenging content

• Timely response from teacher
• Program was easy to navigate
• Learning content was not as hard as expected
• Flexibility of study time

• Life situations can discourage or sidetrack goals
• Insufficient study time due to work and family responsibilities

• Self-disciplined
• Liked to study independently
• Organized
• Family members provided emotional support
• Determined despite life challenges

• Initial delay in starting

Desire