

GED FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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Boone and Winnebago Counties
Workforce Investment Board

303 N. Main
Rockford, Illinois 61101

Prepared by

Karen Lytwyn
815.395.1343

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Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This report, which was completed for the Boone and Winnebago Counties Workforce Investment Board (WIB), presents the results of focus group discussions regarding information relevant to GED attainment or lack of GED attainment among area residents.

Focus groups are small groups of individuals formed to discuss a topic of common interest; in this case GED attainment or lack of a GED. For this study, ten population groups were targeted in order to gain knowledge about barriers and incentives to obtaining a GED, high school experiences, possible benefits from receiving a GED, and GED marketing strategies. Focus groups afford an opportunity to hear the views of certain target groups, especially at-risk individuals, who might not otherwise be heard from in other aspects of the study.

Methodology

Focus groups were organized for eight of the ten target populations identified by the WIB as those likely to be in need of a GED. Unfortunately, two of the ten groups - workers and Boone County Hispanics - were not able to be organized despite numerous attempts. Additionally, two of the focus groups, ex-offenders and recent or soon-to-be GED recipients, required two sessions. Minutes for these groups' multiple sessions are combined into one set. Individuals in all focus groups except for the Rock Valley College GED students and young adults were not in a GED program at the time of the focus group. The young adults interviewed had just begun their GED program.

Table 1.1 lists the eight focus groups which were convened as well as the number of individuals participating in each session.

Table 1.1
FOCUS GROUPS WITH NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

Group	Participants	Group	Participants
African-Americans	9	Senior Citizens	9
Ex-Offender	10	Unemployed Individual	12
Hispanics	10	Young Adults	8
Public Housing	10	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	78
Recent GED Recipients	10		

Area agencies and organizations were asked to help identify individuals who would be willing to participate in the focus groups. Most potential focus group participants were contacted directly for participation by a representative of the convening organization. A total of 78 individuals took part in the eight groups. The sessions were convened at sites throughout Winnebago County.

The format for conducting each focus group was similar. Group participants received a brief review of the purpose of and confidential nature of the discussion. Most of the sessions lasted about 30-45 minutes. A \$15 stipend was given to each participant at the end of the meeting as appreciation for taking part in the session.

The questions asked of the focus group participants include the following:

1. Please share briefly your experience with high school (or your highest level of education) and the reasons that you were not able to complete high school.
2. Have you participated in any kind of adult education in the last five years?
3. Today, do you feel that you would like to finish high school or complete a GED?
4. How might you benefit from getting a GED?
5. Would your family, friends or significant others be supportive of your pursuing a GED? If working, would your employer be supportive?
6. Now, I'd like to ask whether certain things would pose a barrier or obstacle to

GED completion for you. Would these keep you from seeking a GED even if you want to?

- a) Family responsibilities, child care or lack of free time.
 - b) I don't feel confident in my ability.
 - c) Don't know how or where to get a GED.
 - d) Transportation
 - e) Do not have the necessary knowledge, good language skills, will need a lot of help.
 - f) Do not like learning situations, classes, being with others.
 - g) Have a disability which needs to be accommodated.
 - h) Cost associated with getting a GED.
7. What would be the one thing that would persuade you to pursue a GED?
8. Would any of these ideas make you more likely to give GED a try?
- a) Classes include other people that you know.
 - b) Classes are someplace where you are comfortable like your workplace, church, in your neighborhood.
 - c) Child care is provided.
 - d) Classes are on weekends.
 - e) Transportation is provided.
 - f) Classes are free or nearly without cost.
 - g) The instructor is someone who dropped out, completed a GED.
 - h) You receive some kind of reward for completion.
 - i) The program moves at a slow pace.
9. How do you feel about the use of technology like computers and learning software in a GED program? Would you be more or less likely to participate?
10. Would you be willing to attend a short talk about the GED and local programs and meet some people like you who completed the GED.
11. Would you be willing to take a practice test to see how you might do?
12. How would you like to receive information about area GED programs?

For certain focus groups, questions may have been modified to reflect the experiences and views of the particular group. This report contains an overview of the results for all groups collectively, as well as the minutes for each group, which are found in Appendix 1. For a better understanding of the discussions, the reader is strongly urged to examine the minutes of the individual focus groups.

Chapter 2
PRIOR EXPERIENCES AND CURRENT ATTITUDES
TOWARD OBTAINING A GED

Introduction

The first set of questions asked of focus group participants involved their prior experiences with high school and adult education. Groups were asked to share high school experiences and reasons for not graduating, if they have participated in any kind of adult education in the last five years, and if they now feel they would like to complete a GED.

Prior High School Experiences

Focus group members related various reasons for not finishing high school. Gang and drug behaviors were cited as reasons by many, along with preferring partying and having fun to attending school. Several individuals stated that during that time they were running the streets and ‘gang-banging’, and that school was not a priority. One man noted that he mostly spent his time on drugs and gangs instead.

One of the African-Americans mentioned that he wanted attention, and thought that becoming a ‘street person or a ‘tough person’ would provide it, but that the lifestyle had, as he put it, “left me in a hole.” He had been involved with football and other activities that “could have put me in a different place, but I was too young and too dumb” to realize the opportunities I had. As one ex-offender said, “I was not smart to begin with, and partying was the easy way out.” A few of the individuals in the groups had been expelled from school.

A few of the women who participated in the focus groups indicated that they dropped out of school because they had a child, noting especially that no child care was available to them. As one woman reported, “I was a bad kid, then I had a baby, and I had no sitter,” so she quit school. Several of the women in the senior citizens group had dropped out of high school to get married and have a family.

Falling behind in their studies was another reason many of the focus group participants dropped out of school. An ex-offender said that he cared more what people thought about him than his grades; he didn’t get the help he needed in school, choosing instead to be the ‘class clown’ and hang out with the wrong people. A woman in the group of public housing residents related that she had difficulties in her school, but her mother and father wouldn’t transfer her to another school, so she quit. She once attempted to go back and finish, but had trouble comprehending the material.

One African-American indicated that her high school was not supportive in that she asked for help but did not receive any. Another African-American had moved from school to school, feeling that all the schools he attended were “ghetto,” as he put it, and that he was unable to focus on learning due to bad behaviors going on in the classroom. A few of the Hispanics believe that they did not receive enough attention from the teachers in their high school and dropped out due to falling behind.

Due to various circumstances, some of the persons in the focus groups dropped out of school to work. Some of the Hispanic participants indicated they had to help support their family and, therefore, needed to drop out of school to get a job. An unemployed man reported that he had been held back junior year. Being left behind his friends, he quit school and went to work, and “never got around to going back.”

Other reasons for dropping out of high school included being bored with the school work, and not liking teachers and authority figures. Several of the Hispanics reported that they had gone as far as they could go in school in Mexico, but some of the schools only went as high as middle school.

Previous Adult Education Experience

A few focus group members indicated that they had some adult education during the past five years. A few of the African-Americans mentioned taking computer classes through Rock Valley College.

Several of the ex-offenders stated that they had tried some adult education, but since their mindset hadn't really changed since high school, they encountered the same difficulties as they had in school. One man mentioned having tried some adult programs, but ending up being expelled from those as well due to showing up late to class. He stated that rather than attending class, he was 'outside smoking weed' and that he found himself repeating what he termed the 'same cycle – in my own world, doing my own thing'. Another member stated that he had started a GED program, but stopped because he got a job requiring him to work twelve hours per day. One ex-offender signed up with the Literacy Council, but the tutor assigned to him said he read too well to qualify for the program; they bumped heads, he was discouraged and never went back. Another ex-offender said he tried Roosevelt Adult Education a few years ago. He was accepted into the program, but said he did not receive any information as to how the program was supposed to work or when he was supposed to begin attending, so he never went.

One of the recent GED recipients mentioned that she had enrolled at Roosevelt after dropping out of school, but thought the program tried to make her “do the whole four years of high school just to get a GED” and was too fast-paced for her to handle.

Current Attitudes Toward Completing A GED

Overall, the majority of those taking part in the focus groups feel that they now would like to pursue a GED. However, a few individuals still have little interest in obtaining the GED. For example, most of the ex-offenders agreed that they would like to do so, expressing that when you are in jail, it makes you analyze your life, see the mistakes you have made and that you could have done certain things differently. They believe that a GED would increase their confidence level, and that one should “keep trying” in life, even having experienced difficulties. Others in this group feel that attempting to get a GED is pointless since most jobs will not look at a person with a criminal record, with or without a GED. One man noted that while he would like to do so, as he put it, “I don’t think I can.”

Among the RVC group, some of whom recently obtained their GED, several individuals indicated that they wanted to get their GED to improve their employment situation – one wanted to work toward a nursing degree, while another stated, “I’ve been a truck driver for 18 years; I want to get into law enforcement.” Another individual, speaking of their desire to get a job stated, “You can’t do anything without a GED.”

None of the senior citizens showed any interest in obtaining a GED today, saying that they really did not think it would benefit them at this stage in their life.

Chapter 3 BENEFITS OF AND INCENTIVES TO OBTAINING A GED

Introduction

All of the focus groups were questioned about their perceptions regarding the benefits of obtaining a GED. The groups were also given a list of possible incentives for pursuing a GED and asked if these incentives would encourage people to pursue a GED. The participants were also asked to name the one thing that would persuade them to complete a GED program. Individuals were also asked about family and employer support for those pursuing a GED.

Benefits of Obtaining a GED

The main benefit to obtaining a GED, according to all of the focus groups, is improved employment opportunities. A few of the ex-offenders believe that having a GED would earn them respect from prospective employers – that they “actually went out and did something,” as one stated. Most agreed that employers look for a GED, so having one would increase their chances for employment. A Hispanic woman stated that she wanted a better job so that she could earn enough money to get her hair stylist license. The young adults expressed a desire to help their families, believing that receiving a GED would enable them to do so by helping them get a good job.

Those taking part in the focus groups also cited a desire to go to college as a benefit of obtaining a GED. Some of the Rock Valley College group who have already received their GED or are about to receive the diploma saw a GED as the first step in doing so; in fact, some of the members of this group have recently enrolled at RVC.

Additionally, self-esteem, self confidence and a sense of pride in their accomplishment were also cited as benefits of obtaining a GED. As one of the ex-

offenders put it, “Just looking on the wall – I got that, now what’s next?” Another ex-offender noted “To be able to say I got it, my mom knows I did it.”

In the discussions, a few of the persons taking part related that a benefit would be to set an example for their children or other family members.

Incentives for Pursuing a GED

The focus groups were questioned about whether the following ideas would motivate them to pursue their GED.

- Classes include other people that you know
- Classes are some place where you are comfortable like your workplace, church, in your neighborhood.
- Child care is provided.
- Classes are on weekends.
- Transportation is provided.
- Classes are free or nearly without cost.
- The instructor is someone who dropped out, completed a GED.
- You receive some kind of reward for completion.
- The program moves at a slow pace.

Free or nearly free GED classes met with the most enthusiasm from all of the focus groups, with several participants adding that free or low-cost GED testing would also be a good idea. Many of the groups voiced concern that although classes are often free, substantial fees are charged to take the GED tests. The ex-offenders noted that many people without a GED do not have a job, so they have no money available to pay for classes or testing. The group who recently got or were about to get their GED indicated that they knew of people who had not attempted the GED because of the costs. Although, one person in this group noted that free classes could be a negative,

saying, “You don’t have to come if it’s free – you have nothing to lose.” She believes that if you have to pay for something, you will be more motivated to finish.

Almost all of the groups agreed that “classes are some place where you are comfortable like your workplace, church, in your neighborhood,” transportation, and moving at a slow pace are all good ideas and would motivate them to pursue a GED. Several of the women in the groups especially liked the idea of provided child care during classes and testing. Some of the elderly participants said that child care could possibly be a benefit for their age group, since some grandparents are raising their grandchildren.

Most of the groups believe that having “classes with other people you know” is actually a bad idea, saying that this could be a distraction. Several of the Hispanics felt that people might be tempted to socialize rather than doing the work in class if the class was made up of their friends.

Weekend classes was deemed a good idea by some of the groups. However, some group members, especially those who are working, said that they would not want to go to classes on the weekend and take time away from their family.

“The program moves at a slow pace” was seen as a good idea by some of the groups. However, most of the individuals noted that, instead of a slow pace, the program should be tailored to each person’s capabilities.

Receiving some type of reward for completing a GED was not seen as a motivator for most of the groups, with some individuals saying that the reward is completing the program. Having an instructor who dropped out and then obtained a

GED was mentioned as beneficial by a few of the groups, saying that he or she could better relate to the students.

When asked “What would be the one thing that would persuade you to pursue a GED?” the overwhelming response was increased employment opportunities or improvement of the person’s financial situation. A few people named a desire to go to college as the one thing that would motivate them to begin GED classes.

Support of Family, Friends, and Employer

Most of those who took part in the focus group discussions agreed that their family and friends would be very supportive if they wanted to pursue their GED. In the group of Hispanics, however, a few individuals disagreed, saying their family would question why they were going back at all. As one man stated, “They’d be like, why now? You had your chance, it’s too late now.” This attitude by their family might hold them back a bit, but could also provide motivation to prove their family wrong.

Among those participants who are employed, opinion varied as to whether their employer would be supportive of their efforts to get a GED. One of the recent GED recipients said that the classes had to “work around their schedule” for work. Several believe their employer would be supportive. A few participants indicated that they were instructed to get their GED by their employer – some indicated that they had a better job waiting for them when they completed their GED, while several others indicated they might be let go if they did not do so. One of the young adults reported that his employer based his work hours on what was reasonable for him, so he could attend classes and maintain his studies.

Chapter 4

BARRIERS TO OBTAINING A GED AND USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Introduction

Focus group discussants were read a list of possible barriers to obtaining a GED and asked if these barriers would pose a problem for them and other persons who might want to pursue a GED. Participants were also asked about the use of technology in GED classes.

Barriers to Obtaining a GED

Those participating in the focus groups were read a list of barriers that might prohibit a person from pursuing their GED and queried as to whether these barriers would stand in their way of obtaining their GED. The barriers were:

- Family responsibilities, child care or lack of free time.
- I don't feel confident in my ability.
- Don't know how or where to get a GED.
- Transportation
- Do not have the necessary knowledge, good language skills, will need a lot of help.
- Do not like learning situations, classes, being with others.
- Have a disability which needs to be accommodated.
- Cost associated with getting a GED.

The cost associated with obtaining a GED was mentioned as a possible barrier by at least one person in all eight of the focus groups. One African-American man believes cost is an issue, stating "It's not right that they make people pay for education – it should be free." A few people mentioned that although, in some cases, classes are free, testing usually includes a fee.

All of the groups feel that lack of confidence in their ability and not having the necessary knowledge/skills and would need a lot of help are also barriers to completing a GED program. A few individuals specifically mentioned needing extra help with math courses.

Transportation is seen as a barrier by a few groups, especially public housing residents and African-Americans. A few of the unemployed individuals noted that transportation could be a problem, depending on where classes are held.

Family responsibilities, child care, or lack of free time was named as a barrier by four of the groups, especially Hispanics. A few of the Hispanics commented that they worked many hours each week, sometimes holding down two jobs, and did not have time to take GED classes.

A few of the focus group members in several groups do not like learning situations or a classroom setting and voiced concern that this dislike could prohibit them from pursuing a GED.

Two individuals in the unemployed group commented that they would not know how or where to go to start the GED process. No one mentioned a disability as a potential barrier.

Use of Technology

During the focus group discussions, the following question was asked, "How do you feel about the use of technology like computers and learning software in a GED program? Would you be more or less likely to participate?"

The focus group participants revealed varying opinions on this question, even within their own groups. Some of the focus group members believe that the use of computers would enhance learning, while others, such as most of the senior citizen group, think that computers would be detrimental to learning since some people lack computer skills.

One ex-offender said, "I would rather do the work by hand – it makes it harder, so you learn better." However, another ex-offender noted "Life is about computers..." and feels that using a computer in GED classes could help develop computer skills so that a person would gain computer knowledge as well as getting a GED.

The Hispanics stressed that the use of technology depends on the individual. Some people are good with computers, but many still do not know how to use them. Several of the public housing residents and unemployed individuals believe using computers in classes is a good idea since many jobs now require at least some computer skills. However, the public housing residents recommended that a computer instructor be present to assist those who had no prior computer experience or knowledge.

Some of the young adults commented that paper, pencil, and books might be more conducive to learning the material.

Chapter 5

GED PROGRAM MARKETING STRATEGIES

Introduction

The focus group participants were asked a series of questions regarding marketing strategies for local GED programs. Specifically, groups were asked the following:

- Would you be willing to attend a short talk about the GED and local programs and meet some people like you who completed the GED?
- Would you be willing to take a practice test to see how you might do?
- How would you like to receive information about area GED programs?

Short Talk About the GED

When asked if having a short talk in the community about local GED programs is a good idea for promoting these programs, most of the groups agreed that having talks and meeting people who had completed their GED would be beneficial. As a public housing resident commented, people would be receptive to “anything that can help us.” The recent GED recipients said it might make the GED program less “scary.” Some of the elderly questioned whether enough people would attend this type of talk to make it worthwhile. A few of the groups suggested that these talks should be held at different locations around the city, such as community centers and sports events.

Practice Test

When questioned about the value of a practice test before placement in a GED program, all of the group members thought that these tests could prove beneficial. The

ex-offenders believe that this could help them analyze their strengths and weaknesses and know how far they had to go. Along with a practice test, this group also indicated a desire for GED prep classes in order to raise their skill level before starting a program.

Methods of Distributing GED Information

Those participating in the focus groups were asked for suggestions as to the best ways to distribute GED information in the community. Several valuable suggestions were received from the focus group members.

All but one of the focus groups suggested using social media outlets, especially Facebook, as an effective marketing technique. As one of the unemployed persons noted, social media is “the most popular thing going right now.” Ads could be placed on Facebook, along with setting up a Facebook page for local GED programs, which could then be shared by Facebook members.

The use of direct mailings, such as flyers, was also suggested, though not all of the groups thought this would be effective. The group of recent GED graduates suggested including a flyer with the coupon books that come in the mail. One of the public housing residents noted that posting flyers in elevators at public housing facilities and other places might be a good idea saying that people in elevators have nothing to do but “wait for their floor.” Other suggested locations for putting up flyers included community centers and churches. Mailings are generally seen as a waste of time by the Hispanic group, but said this often depends on who sends the mail. As one individual noted, “If it was from La Voz Latina, it would be opened.”

A few of the groups liked the idea of PSAs on television and radio. One of the unemployed persons even suggested a tagline for advertising - A Second Chance. Some of the participants, however, did not think that radio advertising would be useful, saying that not a lot of people listen to the radio anymore. Hispanics, especially, felt this way because of the lack of a Spanish radio station locally.

Other marketing strategies included having a GED booth at On The Waterfront and going door-to-door with information about local GED programs.

Key points to include in any marketing strategy were suggested, including the cost of classes and testing, if any, how to start the process of getting a GED, the location and hours of available local classes, and whether child care and transportation services are provided.

APPENDIX 1

FOCUS GROUP MINUTES

African-Americans Focus Group
Washington Park Community Center

Nine individuals attended the focus group, six female and three male African-Americans. All but one individual in the group were between 18 and 30 years old; the remaining individual was 52.

Participants were first asked about their experiences in high school and why they did not graduate. One person stated that “I was a bad kid, then I had a baby, and I had no sitter,” so she quit school. Several had issues with their schools. One indicated that their high school was not supportive – she asked for help and did not receive it. Another had moved from school to school, feeling that all the schools she attended were “ghetto,” as she put it, and that she was unable to focus on learning due to bad behaviors going on in the classrooms. Another individual stated that he “didn’t like teachers telling me what I could or couldn’t do” in the classroom – he had problems with authority. Finally, one group member started working a job and so dropped out of school.

Several members of the group indicated that they had undertaken some adult education. Computer classes through Rock Valley College, held at Northwest Community Center were mentioned; Blackhawk Center was also named as a source. Finally, one person stated that she had begun the CNA program at Rock Valley, but that she found it unhelpful because of the money issue – she could not afford to continue, and she felt Rock Valley was unwilling to help her.

When asked if they desired to get their GED today, all said yes, but some responses were less than enthusiastic. As to the benefits of receiving a GED, one individual mentioned it as motivation for her son – “if he sees me going back to school, he’ll keep going,” as she put it. Several others agreed that getting the GED was its own reward. A sense of accomplishment was also seen as a benefit. Better jobs or career opportunities were also mentioned; one individual does still desire to go to college for nursing. All agreed that family and friends would be very supportive if they chose to attempt the GED.

Next, the group discussed barriers to pursuing a GED or things that might prevent them from attempting it. Several indicated that family or child care responsibilities were a barrier. Some individuals lacked confidence in their ability to finish or believed they would need a lot of help to succeed – the math test was cited as a specific concern. All stated they knew how and where to go to get their GED. Transportation was an issue for many participants, while a few disliked the classroom setting because, as one person put it, “I don’t like those who want to play”; they expressed frustration with those

in the classroom setting who aren't serious about why they are there. None expressed any concern related to a disability. Finally, except for one person, this group did not feel that cost was a barrier, citing the existence of many free GED classes. However, one person said that cost was an issue, saying "It's not right that they make people pay for education – it should be free."

Participants were then asked what one thing might persuade them to attempt the GED right now. "Just to have it" was the first reason stated. Several mentioned the increased job opportunities that come with a GED; while a few expressed a desire to go to college and earn a degree. Finally, one individual stated that wanting her son to succeed in life would persuade her to get a GED, believing that seeing her attempt to better herself would motivate her son to do the same.

Next, participants were asked about factors that might motivate an individual to undertake the GED. The group strongly agreed that "classes including others that they knew" would not be a good idea, as they could prove distracting. Holding classes in a comfortable location was seen as a positive. The suggestion of having child care provided drew an enthusiastic positive response; weekend classes made no difference to this group. Transportation to and from class was another enthusiastic yes and classes that were free or almost free were seen as beneficial as well. The group did talk about the fact that although classes are often free, there are often substantial fees to take the GED tests. Opinions were mixed as to whether having an instructor who had dropped out of high school and subsequently received their GED would be of value. Although some felt that such an instructor would be able to connect better with the students, the group agreed that it was more important that the instructor "know how to teach," as one put it. As to tangible rewards for completion, the group agreed that while it might be nice, it's not necessary – getting the GED is its own reward. Having classes that are slow-paced was seen as beneficial, but the group thought it would be more useful if classes were tailored to the individual student, whether slow or fast-paced. They believed that some classes do that already.

When asked whether using technology in GED classes is a good idea, the group felt that it was generally a good idea, but it doesn't really matter whether they do so or not – it would not make individuals any more likely to undertake the GED if computers were used to deliver the material.

Participants were then asked if they would be willing to attend a program about the GED and what local programs were available, and meet individuals like themselves who had completed the GED. Most in the group liked the idea, and thought that there should be more than one such program held at different locations around the city. They also liked the idea of taking a practice test to see how they might do.

Finally, participants were asked how to distribute GED information. Flyers and posters were suggested, as was door-to-door advertising. "The more ways, the better," as one individual put it. When asked what key pieces of information should be included, responses included that classes are free, how to access available transportation, child care is provided, and possibly a listing of what degree programs are available locally once the GED is completed.

Participants were thanked for their input and a \$15 stipend was given to each participant.

Ex-Offenders Focus Group
Resource Intervention Center

A total of ten individuals participated in this focus group. All were men, with six being African-American and four Caucasian. Ages ranged from 18 to 51.

First, participants were asked to share their high school experiences and why they did not complete high school. Several participants mentioned drug and gang involvement, becoming involved with the wrong crowd, or being a “street person,” as one put it, as their reason for not completing high school. One noted that he had been involved with vocational schools, but mostly spent his time on drugs and gangs instead. One mentioned that he had been seeking attention, and thought that becoming a ‘street person or a ‘tough person’ would provide attention, but that the lifestyle had, as he put it, “left me in a hole.” He had been involved with football and other activities that, as he put it, “could have put me in a different place, but I was too young and too dumb” to realize the opportunities he may have had. He also mentioned having argued with his teachers in high school, stating that “When you argue with the teacher, at the end of the day you’re in trouble.” Another individual had been involved in sports at his high school, and had college scholarships lined up due to his ability in sports. He injured his knees, and the scholarships evaporated; he became frustrated and quit school as a result. Another stated that he cared more what people thought about him than his grades; he didn’t get the help he needed in school, choosing instead to be the ‘class clown’ and hang out with the wrong people. Several indicated that they had been expelled from school due to behavior or criminal activity. Several others noted having quit due to difficulties with work – as one put it, “I was not smart to begin with, and partying was the easy way out.” However, many participants in the group regretted not having completed high school. “I wish I knew then... I would have tried harder,” as one person stated.

Several members of the focus group reported having tried some adult education, but since their mindset hadn’t really changed since high school, they encountered the same difficulties as they had in school. One mentioned having tried some adult programs, but ending up being expelled from those as well due to showing up late to class. He stated that rather than attending class, he was ‘outside smoking weed’ and that he found himself repeating what he termed the ‘same cycle – in my own world, doing my own thing’. Another mentioned that while he had the opportunity to do so while in jail, he “didn’t want to be sitting in a classroom with a bunch of dudes,” preferring a co-ed setting for school. Another member stated that he had started a GED program, but stopped because he got a job requiring him to work for 12 hours per day. One had tried the Literacy Council, but the tutor assigned felt that he could read too well to qualify for the program. They bumped heads, he was discouraged and never went back. Finally, one had tried Roosevelt Adult Education a few years ago before they were incarcerated. He was accepted into the program, but did not receive any information as to how the

program was supposed to work or when he was supposed to begin attending, so he never went.

When asked if they wanted to complete a GED today, opinions were mixed. Several agreed that they would like to do so, expressing that when you are in jail, it makes you analyze your life, see the mistakes you have made and that you could have done certain things differently. One noted that while he would like to do so, he said, "I don't think I can." Others feel that it is pointless for them to attempt the GED, since most jobs will not look at a person with a criminal record, with or without a GED. Finally, some in the group feel that a GED would increase their confidence level, and that one should "keep trying" in life, even having experienced difficulties.

Group members were asked how they thought a GED might benefit them today. Several thought that a GED would earn them respect from prospective employers – that they "actually went out and did something," as one stated. Most agreed that employers look for a GED, so having one would increase their chances for employment. Pride in their achievements and self-satisfaction, as well as proud family members were also cited as benefits – as one said, "To be able to say I got it, my mom knows I did it, he's come far." Self confidence and a feeling of "moving forward" in life were also mentioned.

Most participants felt that friends and family would be supportive if they were to attempt a GED. One also stated that he had an aunt in Chicago who told him to call her once he had his GED, and she would help him further in life. This aunt had always been very supportive of his efforts even through school, so he was certain she would continue to do so. Also, one individual in the group was currently employed, and he felt that his employer would be supportive if he was pursue the GED as well.

As to barriers or things that might stop them from pursuing a GED, family responsibilities were only cited by one person as a potential barrier. Several lacked confidence in their ability to complete the GED. All members of the group said they know where to go to get a GED, although several expressed uncertainty as to "how to go about it." Transportation was a non-issue for the members of this group; no members of the group indicated that the classroom setting would be an issue, although one did express frustration due to his learning level and how much help he would need. Asked whether any had a disability that would need to be accommodated, the group reported none. As one member put it, "Those are excuses." Finally the group agreed that cost was an issue, though they were able to mention several options for free classes (including on-line options, Rock Valley College and classes available through the Resource Intervention Center).

Group members were then asked what one thing would persuade them to try the GED. The overwhelming response related to jobs, career seeking and improving their financial

status; several stated that knowing a job was already lined up for them when their GED is completed would make them do it immediately. Additionally, self-esteem, self confidence and a sense of pride in their accomplishment were also cited as things that would persuade them. As one individual put it, “Just looking on the wall – I got that, now what’s next?” Finally, one individual indicated that their fiancée had recently been diagnosed with epilepsy and was prone to seizures and he wanted to get his GED to better be able to take care of her.

The group was then asked about a number of factors related to GED programming, and whether these would motivate individuals to attempt the GED. They agreed that being in classes with others who they knew could actually prove detrimental to their success. A comfortable, familiar location for classes was seen as a benefit; they also saw benefit in providing childcare though none personally would need it. Classes available on weekends were not seen as helpful. The group felt that providing transportation to and from classes would be helpful, as many individuals don’t drive. The most enthusiastic, positive response for this group came when “free or nearly free” classes were suggested – this was seen as a huge benefit, particularly since many without a GED do not have a job, so they have no money available to pay for classes. The group also noted that often, the classes are free, but students must pay a substantial fee to take the GED tests. Having an instructor who had dropped out of high school and subsequently completed the GED was seen as beneficial, as such an instructor could better understand and motivate the students to complete the GED. As to rewards for completion, the group agreed that getting the GED is its own reward and that further, tangible rewards were unnecessary; the only ‘reward’ they thought would be appropriate would be to have a job lined up. Finally, when discussing whether a slower-paced program would be beneficial, the group agreed that it might. However, they thought it was more appropriate that individualized attention be provided so that the program moved at each student’s individual pace. They agreed that this is a problem with the traditional high school setting. Classes move along at one pace – some students struggle to keep up, while others are bored because they are capable of moving more quickly than classes will allow.

When asked if participants would be more or less likely to attempt the GED if technology such as computers were used to deliver the classes, most participants agreed that it would not be a benefit. Some feel it would not matter one way or the other, while others believe that working by pencil and paper would help the learning process. As one individual said, “I would rather do the work by hand – it makes it harder, so you learn better.” However, others noted that “Life is about computers...,” and that using the computer to deliver GED material would help develop computer skills – they would gain computer knowledge as well as getting the GED.

Participants were then asked if they would be willing to attend a short talk about the GED and meet individuals like themselves who had completed it. They agreed that they would be willing to do so. They also felt that they would like the opportunity to take a practice test just to see how they might do. They believed that this would help them to analyze their strengths and weaknesses and know how far they had to go. They also indicated a desire for GED prep classes, so that they could raise their skill level to where it needed to be to begin GED classes.

The group then discussed ways to disseminate information related to the GED. The group agreed that any way it could be distributed would be good – the more ways, the better. Suggestions included face-to-face, word of mouth opportunities – they felt that these would demonstrate an interest in the individual prospective students, and that it would be an opportunity for someone to show them hands-on what the GED is all about vs. just telling them by the written word. Social media would also be beneficial. Direct mail was not seen as useful, as most is considered junk mail and is simply thrown out. TV ads would be beneficial, as would hosting GED events to draw attention to the program. The group also felt that highlighting examples of individuals who have been successful after receiving a GED would be beneficial, particularly as it would show how getting a GED can translate into getting a job. However, the group noted that individuals have to want to better themselves before they would pay attention to any such efforts; as one put it, “If you don’t want it, it won’t matter.”

Finally, the participants expressed their appreciation for us coming and talking with them about these issues. Participants were thanked for attending and each received a \$15 stipend.

Hispanic Focus Group La Voz Latina

Ten Hispanic individuals attended the focus group – four men and six women. Ages of those participating ranged from 22 to 45. Lila, a staff member at La Voz, provided interpretation services as most of the participants spoke little or no English. None of the participants had completed the GED or high school, and none were currently taking GED classes.

Participants were first asked about their high school experiences and the reasons why they did not finish high school. Gang and drug behaviors were cited as reasons, as was preferring partying and having fun to school attendance. Several individuals cited peer pressure or friends as a reason they did not complete high school. Having been bullied while in school was also mentioned as a reason by one participant. Some individuals felt they did not receive enough attention from the teachers in their high school so they dropped out because they were falling behind. Others dropped out for financial reasons – they had to start working to support their families. Several individuals in the group stated that they had gone as far as they could go in school in Mexico, but the schools where they lived only went as far as middle school. Finally, one individual stated that he had dropped out at 15; while he returned several times, he had no motivation to complete school. He realized later that dropping out was a mistake when his friends would talk about such school events as prom. This person also indicated that he regretted not graduating because of job difficulties, saying “I thought I didn’t need school in order to work; now, everyone asks for a GED or diploma.”

Next, participants were asked if they had any adult education classes or attempted the GED within the past several years. One person had tried going for a GED several times, but work always got in the way and supporting their family is the priority – “I have bills to pay.” When asked if they would like to get their GED, all participants stated they would like to do so.

The group was asked how getting a GED would benefit them. Several felt that the GED would lead to an opportunity to go to college, even if only for a few courses. As one individual stated, “Something is better than nothing.” Others mentioned the improved job prospects and striving for ‘something better’, which would come from a GED. One specifically stated that she wanted a better job so that she could earn the necessary money in order to get her hair stylist license and she sees the GED as a first step in that process.

Participants were somewhat divided on the question of whether friends and family would support their efforts in getting a GED. Some felt that their family would question why they were going back at all. As one individual put it, “They’d be like, why now?”

You had your chance, it's too late now." They felt that these feelings do hold them back a bit, but they also provide motivation to prove their family wrong – to prove that they can do it even if their family thought they couldn't. On the other hand, most participants thought their families or friends would be very supportive of their efforts.

Participants were also divided as to whether their employers would be supportive. Several individuals in this focus group were currently employed. There was a mixture of responses – some thought that their employer would support their efforts; others did not. As one person commented, "All they care about is, is the work getting done?"

As to barriers that might stop them from getting a GED, lack of time available to do so was the biggest reason cited in this group. A few of the Hispanics commented that they worked many hours each week, sometimes holding down two jobs, and did not have time to take GED classes.

Lack of knowledge and confidence in their ability was also cited as an important reason. Other reasons cited included child care and the costs associated with giving a GED.

When asked, "What one thing would motivate you to get your GED?", overwhelmingly the most important reason cited was "getting a better job." Several individuals mentioned the desire to be the first one in their family to finish college. More self-confidence was also cited as a reason. One individual felt that a GED would enable him to help more in his church and community.

Individuals were asked about factors that might make someone more likely to attempt a GED. The group felt that having others that they knew in their class would actually be detrimental. They felt it could prove distracting, as individuals might be tempted to socialize rather than doing the work in class. Having classes held in a comfortable location was considered a positive by this group. The ideas of available child care and weekend classes received overwhelmingly positive reactions; this group did not consider transportation to and from classes as important. Everyone agreed that free or 'nearly free' classes would be a major positive. They liked the idea of the class instructor being someone who dropped out of high school and went back to complete the GED – they felt that such an instructor could serve as a role model or mentor to the students. However, rewards were not considered a motivator. The group agreed that receiving the GED was the reward. No further rewards were considered necessary, and would not motivate those in the group to pursue the GED. Finally, having classes that are slow-paced was seen as a major positive as well.

The group was then asked whether the use of technology in GED programming was a good idea. They agreed that it really depends on the individual. Some are good with computers, but many still do not know how to use them.

Participants were asked if they would be willing to attend a short talk about the GED and local programs, and meet some people like them who had completed the GED. The group agreed that this was a good idea. When asked if participants thought that the opportunity to take a practice test to see how they might do on the GED would be valuable, they agreed that it would.

Finally, the group was asked for suggestions as to how to promote GED programming, and how they would like to receive information. Commercials on the Hispanic TV channels were suggested, along with distributing flyers in local churches. Newspaper ads were seen as a good idea. Also, asking permission to speak on the GED during church was suggested, as was having GED sign-up events at churches. Radio was not seen as valuable as there are no Hispanic radio stations in Rockford. Mailings are generally seen as a waste of time, but it often depends on who sends the mail. As one individual noted, "If it was from La Voz Latina, it would be opened." Finally, social media outlets such as Facebook are seen as a prime way to get the word out concerning GED programs.

Public Housing Focus Group
Rockford Housing Authority

Ten people attended this focus group. Ages ranged from 28 to “nearly 60”. Three African-American women were present, with one Caucasian woman, as well as five African-American men and one Caucasian man. None had completed their GED, and none were currently involved in classes.

Participants were first asked about their high school experiences and why they did not finish high school. One stated that she got sick and missed a substantial amount of school. Another individual said that he left high school because he was “trying to be cool – thinking I could go out and be a man by myself, when I wasn’t really a man.” Difficulties in school were also cited as a reason for not finishing – one stated that she had difficulties in her school, but her mother and father wouldn’t transfer her to another school, so she quit. Finally, challenging life experiences was the reason for several individuals not finishing high school – one stated that he quit after his mother passed away, while another had experienced three deaths in her family in a very short period of time, which led to a number of bad life experiences and family splitting up.

Very few people had undertaken any adult education or vocational training within the last few years. One stated that he had been ‘in and out’ of programs for GED for several years, but found that he didn’t “fit” with most of the teachers. He said, “I’m a ‘see and say’ type learner; the teaching style doesn’t fit.” Another felt that he had difficulty sitting still in class long enough to be successful. All group members agreed that they would like to get their GED today.

Asked about the perceived benefits of getting a GED, jobs and improved financial condition were cited as the major benefit by many individuals in the group. The increased skills that come with studying for the GED were also seen as a benefit. Several individuals indicated a desire to attend college, and saw a GED as a first step in that process. The group all believed that their family and friends would be very supportive of their efforts in getting their GED.

The focus group then discussed barriers to getting a GED. None in the group felt that child care would be an issue for them; all feel that they knew where to go to get their GED. Transportation was cited as a barrier by many in the group. Most of the group members also believe that they lack the necessary knowledge or skills to get a GED, and would need a lot of help. Several participants saw “learning situations or being in a classroom” as a barrier to their completing the GED. For most, the cost of completing the GED is also seen as a major barrier.

When asked “what one thing would motivate you to attempt the GED,” the prospect of a higher income was the overriding factor.

Factors that might make individuals more or less likely to attempt the GED were discussed. One person thought that classes including others that they knew would be a good idea, although the rest of the group believed that this would be a bad idea. Most agreed that holding classes in a comfortable, familiar location would be a positive. Many thought that providing child care would be a good idea and helpful. Opinions were mixed as to the value of weekend classes – some thought it might be helpful, while others did not think it mattered. The idea of providing transportation to and from classes received a positive response. All group members strongly agreed that if classes were free or nearly free, it would help more people attempt the GED. They also believe that having an instructor who had dropped out of school and subsequently earned their GED would be helpful, in that such an instructor would relate better to the students.

The group agreed that using technology such as computers in classes would be a good idea, since most jobs now require at least some computer skills. However, they recommended that a computer instructor be present to assist those who had no prior computer experience or knowledge; they also suggested that if GED programs used computers to deliver the material, incorporating some basic computer training into these programs would be a good idea.

As to the suggestion of individuals attending short talks about the GED program and meeting others like them who had completed their GED, the group thought it was a good idea. They stated they were receptive to “anything that can help us,” as one individual put it. They also liked the idea of taking a practice test just to see where they were at.

Finally, the focus group discussed ways to get the word out in the community about GED programs. Their first suggestion was through TV ads or PSAs. Opinions were mixed on the value of radio ads – some thought they might be useful, while others questioned how many people listen to the radio today. Flyers were also suggested, including the suggestion to post flyers in elevators since people have nothing to do while in an elevator but wait for their floor. Billboards were also suggested. Finally, social media and text message ads were suggested. They group agreed that most people now participate in some form of social media – even those with limited computer skills know enough to get onto Facebook.

Participants were thanked for attending the focus group and received \$15 for participating.

Recent/Soon-To-Be GED Recipients Focus Group
Rock Valley College

Ten individuals participated in this focus group. Two Caucasian men and one African-American man was present, along with seven Caucasian women. Ages ranged from 18 to 45. A few people had recently completed their GED, and the remainder was in the final stages of completion.

Participants were first asked about their high school experiences and why they did not complete high school. Boredom with high school was cited by several individuals, while others indicated that they simply didn't care about school – they did not see the importance of completing high school. One indicated that she ran away from home; another had been kicked out of their home and had to get a job to support himself. One participant stated that the State of California had lost the record of his having completed the GED – he indicated that this is not an uncommon occurrence. “Too many fights” was also cited as a reason why high school was not completed. Finally, a participant had transferred to Jefferson High School prior to their senior year, then subsequently found that he was one PE credit short of graduation. Upon learning this, he dropped out and enrolled in the GED classes.

Several individuals had some experience with previous adult education. One had taken entry level college courses for Rock Valley. Another had enrolled at Roosevelt, but felt like the program was trying to make them “do the whole four years of high school just to get a GED” – the program was too fast-paced for them to handle. One person commented that she had gone to a community college to enroll in GED classes. When she took the pretest, the tester responded, “Why are you here? Just go take the test.” At that point, she knew they could pass the GED whenever she chose, but procrastinated in doing so for some time.

When asked why they decided to complete a GED, one individual indicated that her mother had passed away, and she was keeping a promise to her. Several individuals indicated that they desired to improve their employment situation – one wanted to work toward a nursing degree, while another stated “I've been a truck driver for 18 years; I want to get into law enforcement.” Another individual, speaking of their desire to get a job stated, “You can't do anything without a GED.”

Next, participants were asked how they thought a GED is or would benefit them. Job opportunities was the overwhelming response. One woman thought that a GED might cause her to have a “better class of friends.” She said, “People hang around those in the same situation as yourself. If you're educated, you hang around educated people.” Several others felt that completing their GED is setting a good example for their children. A sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction was also cited as a

reason by some in the group. One individual indicated that not many of his family members had completed high school, and he wanted to be “one of the ones who did.” Finally, several in the group stated that they were doing it “just because,” or for something to do – they saw it as engaging in a positive activity rather than running the streets. Finally, some indicated a desire to go to college, and saw a GED as the first step in doing so. In fact, two of the group members recently enrolled at Rock Valley College.

All participants strongly felt that their family and friends had been supportive. Of those who were working, opinions were mixed as to whether their employers had been supportive of their efforts. One stated that the classes had to “work around their schedule” for work. Another felt that their employer had been very supportive of their efforts. A few participants indicated that they were instructed to get their GED by their employer – some indicated that they had a better job waiting for them when they completed their GED, while several others indicated they might be let go if they did not do so.

As to barriers to getting a GED, family and child care responsibilities were cited by several individuals. Confidence in their ability or needing extra help was also cited as a barrier to some individuals attempting the GED. A couple of participants mentioned transportation as an issue, and one stated that he doesn’t like being in a classroom setting. Finally, the costs associated with getting a GED were noted by several individuals as a possible barrier.

When asked what one thing had motivated them to work on their GED, several stated that it was their children that had caused them to seek their GED. Others felt that “where you would end up when you’re done” was a motivating factor. Personal satisfaction was also mentioned as the one reason they chose to pursue the GED. Finally, one woman stated that her probation officer had strongly encouraged her to pursue her GED.

The group next discussed factors that might motivate individuals to pursue a GED. They agreed that although it depends on the individual, being in classes with others they know would generally be a bad idea, as they would be more a distraction than a help. Classes held in a familiar location such as within the neighborhood, in a community center or possibly a church was seen as a positive. Several in the group noted that the Rock Valley College program offered a substantial list of location options for those desiring the GED. The provision of child care would be a major benefit especially for single mothers. Opinions were mixed on weekend classes – some thought they might help, but as one individual commented, “Weekends are when I spend time with my kids.” All attendees thought that transportation to and from class would be a definite benefit. The group strongly felt that free classes (or nearly free)

would be a huge benefit, indicating that they knew of people who had not attempted the GED because of the costs. Although one person disagreed, saying “You don’t have to come if it’s free – you have nothing to lose,” feeling that if you have to pay for something, you will be more motivated to finish. Opinions were mixed on having the instructor be someone who dropped out of high school and went back to complete their GED. The group felt that this would depend on the individual – some thought that such an instructor would relate better to the student, while others believed it really wouldn’t matter. Asked whether a tangible reward for completion would be a benefit, the group agreed that completing the GED is its own reward. Finally, the group felt that individualized attention was important – some need to move at a slow pace, while others would be frustrated by this and would prefer classes to move along more quickly.

Members were asked about the use of technology such as computers in GED classes, and whether that would be a benefit. They felt that it didn’t matter, and in many cases could prove to be more of a distraction than a help. Also, many people are afraid of computers.

The group discussed the possibility of attending a short talk about the GED program, where they could meet individuals like themselves who had completed the GED. They thought it would be helpful, and might serve to make the GED less “scary.”

The group also strongly agreed that it would be helpful to do a practice test for a person’s own benefit, in addition to the placement testing that is normally done. The group also believes that additional placement testing should be done, particularly in the subject of math because many have problems in this subject. Although some group members said that additional testing might discourage some individuals from attempting the GED if their test scores came back too low.

Finally, the group discussed how to promote information about GED programs, saying that TV and newspaper ads would be beneficial. They also suggested flyers in the mail, particularly placed in coupon value packs which are regularly sent. The Internet and social media was also suggested, particularly Facebook. Although they noted that since Facebook ads are not accessible when using a cell phone, a local GED page on Facebook was suggested, which could be shared.

Participants were thanked for their contributions in the focus group, and received a \$15 stipend.

Senior Citizens Focus Group
Lifescape Community Services

Nine individuals attended the focus group, all more than 60 years of age. Two were Asian (one male, one female), and seven were African-American (one male, six females). None had finished high school or completed their GED; none were currently involved in classes.

Participants were first asked about their experiences in high school and why they had not completed high school. One individual mentioned that he had only completed third grade. Several women in the group indicated that they had gotten married at a young age, and so quit high school. Another stated that she was a child who was “running wild” and was more interested in partying and having a good time than going to school. One person said, “My friends were quitting, so I quit too.” Finally, one person quit high school because he needed to start working. No participants had participated in any adult education in the last few years.

Participants in this focus group had little to no interest in completing their GED today. Most saw little benefit to getting a GED at this stage in their life. Many expressed needing to learn a “whole lot” or having to “start over” with school. Also, several in the group indicated that they had suffered a variety of medical conditions such as strokes that would make it very difficult for them to complete the GED due to their memory issues.

When discussing barriers that might prevent individuals from completing the GED even if they had the desire to do so, several of the seniors cited family responsibilities, including having a spouse who had suffered a stroke and required constant care. Lack of confidence in their ability to complete the GED, or lacking necessary knowledge and skills was also cited by many in the focus group. Transportation was not seen as an issue for this group. Several indicated that they had a disability that would need to be accommodated, mostly related to stroke or other conditions affecting their memory or vision issues. Finally, the costs associated with completing the GED were seen as a barrier for some individuals.

Participants were then asked what one thing would persuade them to attempt the GED. One individual mentioned that they would like to get a job, as they dislike living on a fixed income. Several others mentioned that if they were younger and “had the brain I had back then,” as one woman put it, they might be more interested in attempting it.

Next, participants discussed a variety of items that might make people more likely to try the GED. Classes including people that they knew was not seen as a positive or a negative by this group. Classes held someplace comfortable or familiar was seen as a plus. Several individuals cited that childcare would be helpful, even for people their age, because some grandparents are raising their grandchildren. The group agreed that weekend classes would be a bad idea, as several spend time with their families on the

weekend. Transportation provided was seen as helpful, as were free classes. Having an instructor who had previously dropped out and subsequently completed the GED did not appear to matter to this group. Finally, having individualized programs to accommodate a variety of students was seen as a very good idea. Several in the group suggested a different testing methodology to accommodate the difficulty some seniors might have in completing the program.

Participants were then asked about the use of computers or other technology in GED classes. Most in this group reported that they lacked computer skills, so this was seen as a barrier rather than a help. When asked about the possibility of attending a short talk about the GED programs around town and the opportunity to meet other GED graduates like themselves, the group questioned whether there would be enough interest in such a program.

Next, participants were asked whether a practice test, aside from the normal GED placement testing, would be a good idea. While the group agreed that it could be helpful from a standpoint of seeing what you know and where you are at, they also thought that such testing might discourage some from attempting the GED if they were to score poorly.

Finally, the participants discussed ways to get information out into the community. Flyers posted around town or mailed were both seen as valuable options. Several in the group indicated that they do read the mail they receive. Also, the group suggested posting flyers on their church bulletin board. They also thought it would be worthwhile to have someone come to their church to talk about the GED program during services. TV ads were also seen as a valuable option by this group. Newspaper ads are also valuable – although many do not take the newspaper today, there are still many that do. Radio ads might also be helpful, but the group agreed that TV is better than radio. Finally, word of mouth, peer-to-peer marketing is very beneficial.

Participants were thanked for attending the focus group and each received \$15 for participating.

Unemployed Individuals Focus Group Workforce Connection

Ten individuals attended the focus group. Four were African-American women, three were Hispanic men, one was a Hispanic woman, three were Caucasian women and one was a Caucasian man. Ages of those participating ranged from 23 to 60+. None of the participants had completed a GED or high school, and none were currently taking GED classes.

First, participants were asked about their high school experiences and their reasons for not completing high school. Several individuals stated that during that time they were running the streets and 'gang-banging', and that school was not a priority. One individual stated that he had been in boarding schools for a good portion of his life; he had difficulty completing the work. Skipping school and hanging out with friends were also cited as reasons for not completing high school. One had been thrown out of school because he was not able to learn the material. Another had been held back in high school in his junior year – having been left behind his friends, he went to work rather than complete high school, and 'never got around to going back'. One individual from Mexico stated that her school only had 'certain grades, and that's it', while another stated that he had completed a GED in Mexico, but lost the paperwork and now has to start over. Finally, one woman from Poland, who has been U.S. for 16 years, knew little to no English when she moved here and immediately started working instead of going to school.

Several members of the group indicated they had done some adult education classes, through Roosevelt and Hononegah High School. One man related he had taken some adult education courses while in prison.

Participants were asked if they would like to complete the GED and the responses were all overwhelmingly yes. Several indicated they had been close in the past. When asked how getting a GED would benefit them, all participants cited jobs as a prime reason. Another reason cited was to "be as smart as the kids," as one person commented. Also, the group all believed that their family and friends would be very supportive of their efforts in getting a GED.

As to barriers or things that might prevent individuals from completing the GED, many in the group felt that lack of confidence in their ability, lack of knowledge or language skills, or needing a lot of help was a barrier to their attempting the GED. A couple of people in the group stated they did not know how or where to get a GED. The group agreed that transportation could be an issue for some, depending on where classes were held. Also, several individuals cited a dislike of classes or learning situations. Finally, costs were a huge issue for participants in this focus group.

The group was then asked, "What would be the one thing that would persuade you to pursue a GED?" Several indicated the satisfaction that would come with having completed the program - "Just to say I completed something," as one individual put it.

Also, some individuals indicated they would pursue a GED if they believed they would be able to complete it.

Next, participants were asked about a series of factors that might make an individual more likely to attempt a GED. Classes that included others that the participants know was actually seen as detrimental, as they could serve as a distraction. The group felt that having classes in a familiar, comfortable location might be a plus, but it wouldn't matter a whole lot. Child care was not an issue for this group, and weekend classes were not seen as valuable. Transportation to and from classes would be a big plus for this group, as would classes that are free or nearly free. When discussing the issue of costs for GED programs, the group noted that even though classes are sometimes free, there is still often a fee for the testing. It would be helpful if, in addition to classes being free, the testing could be done free of charge as well.

The participants were divided on the value of an instructor who was a previous high-school dropout who returned to complete the GED – some think it is a good idea, and that such an instructor might better relate to the class while others believe that “it doesn't matter, as long as they teach well.” When asked about a reward for completion, the group agreed that completing the GED was a reward in itself – “just the certificate,” as one individual commented.

Participants were also divided on the value of classes proceeding at a slow pace. Some felt that this could be frustrating for those students who were able to learn at a faster pace. Individualized classes were seen as a good idea. Some participants also saw a need for individual attention from the instructor, as opposed to “teach yourself from a book.”

When asked about the use of technology, the group agreed that computer skills are necessary for many jobs right now, so it might be valuable to gain experience on a computer while taking the GED. It is also seen as helpful to be able to take the tests on a computer (rather than paper-and-pencil).

Participants were asked if they would be willing to attend a short talk about the GED and local programs, and meet some people like them who had completed the GED. The group agreed that this was a good idea, and could be beneficial. They expressed a desire for several smaller groups rather than one large group. Also, asked if they were willing to take a practice just to see where they were at, all stated they would be very willing to do so.

Finally, group members were asked how information about GED programs should be distributed. Some in the group felt that the information is already out there, and that additional distribution efforts would not be valuable. Newspaper ads were suggested, as were TV ads. The group agreed that social media outlets would also be a worthwhile distribution point as social media is “the most popular thing going right now,” as one person stated. “A Second Chance” was suggested as a tagline for such advertising. Key points to include were suggested, including the fact that classes are free, where to

start with the process of getting a GED, the hours classes are available, and how to access available transportation options.

Participants were thanked for their efforts. They each received a \$15 stipend for attending.

Young Adults Focus Group Youthbuild

Eight young adults with ages ranging from 17 to 23 attended the focus group. Four were African-American men, with one Hispanic man and one Caucasian man. There was also one Caucasian woman and one African-American woman. Most of the group was just beginning their GED courses. Youthbuild programming includes taking classes and studying for the GED tests.

Participants were first asked about their experiences in high school and why they did not graduate. One individual cited what he called the “chaos” in high school. “There was a lot of stuff throwing you off focus,” as he put it. This individual had subsequently left high school and enrolled in a private school, but did not graduate there either. He had also attended a few GED classes at Rock Valley, but dropped out. Another stated that there was nothing “catchy” or fun about high school – he felt there was nothing to hold his interest. An individual’s living situation was also noted as a reason – this person had run away from home and was living ‘on the streets’, and so did not complete high school. Finally, one woman stated that she had two babies while in high school and was unable to complete high school due to caring for her children.

When asked about the benefits of obtaining a GED, increased job prospects was named as the major benefit. One of the young adults reported that he already had two job prospects. They believe that more doors will be open for them when they receive their GED. One noted a desire to go to college to study oceanography, while others looked forward to their life changing as a result of completing the GED. Finally, several individuals expressed a desire to help their family, believing that receiving a GED would enable them to do so.

Asked if their friends and family had been supportive of their efforts, most members of the group responded with an enthusiastic yes. Two focus group members were currently working; they felt that their employers are being very supportive. One reported that his employer based his work hours on what was reasonable for him, while still attending school and maintaining his studies.

The group then discussed barriers that they thought might have prevented them from attempting the GED. Child care was cited by several as a major barrier. Several noted a lack of confidence in their ability, knowledge or skills, feeling that they needed a lot of help to complete the GED. All indicated that they had known how to go about getting a GED and where to go to do so. A couple of individuals said that transportation was an issue. The group agreed that the costs and fees associated with completing the GED could be a barrier for some.

Asked what one thing had triggered their decision to work toward their GED, one individual stated that turning 21 years old was the trigger for him, saying “Being more of an adult, I needed to have my stuff together. Don’t want to be old and not have my stuff together.” Several individuals cited setting an example for their children or “the next

generation.” Working toward the GED represented a change of lifestyle for one individual, who stated that it “gave me something to do, to get off the streets.” Finally, several individuals stated that their working to get their GED was motivated by a desire to “show people that I can.”

In discussing factors that may make individuals more or less likely to pursue the GED, the group strongly agreed that classes including others they know is a bad idea, believing this could prove a distraction. A comfortable, familiar location for classes was seen as positive by the group, as they feel that when you are around an organization or people that are “for your good, positive,” it could help a lot. One individual stated, “When you are around negative energy, it causes people to become negative or think negative.” They also agreed that child care being provided for classes would be a positive. Opinions were mixed on the idea of weekend classes – a couple members of the group thought that would be beneficial, while others believe that many individuals “feel their weekend is so precious, they would not want to give it up.” They all agreed that free transportation to and from classes would be a major benefit, as many have transportation issues. Free or nearly free classes received an enthusiastic positive response. Opinions were mixed on the benefit of having an instructor who had dropped out of school and subsequently received a GED – the group thought it might be beneficial for some, but it would depend on the individual.

The group agreed that using computers and technology in GED instruction would make it more likely that individuals would sign up for GED classes, but questioned whether doing so would be helpful in the class. They think that hands-on learning – paper, pencil, and books – might be more conducive to learning the material.

Some thought that attending a short talk on GED programs is a good idea, with City Hall, community centers and sports activities were suggested as possible venues. The group believed that it would be helpful to take a practice test to see where they fell before jumping into GED programming.

Finally, ways to get the word out regarding GED programs were discussed. Flyers in the mail were suggested, as well as posting flyers in strategic locations around town – particularly those where it is believed that many individuals do not have GED’s. Washington Park Community Center was discussed as a good starting location. Having individuals speak on the GED program at various venues was also suggested. PSAs on TV and radio were also suggested, as was a booth at On the Waterfront. Door-to-door solicitations were also thought to be a good idea, such as having people simply walk around local neighborhoods distributing information. Finally, the group enthusiastically supported the idea of using social media to distribute information.

Participants were thanked for attending the focus group and each received \$15 for attending.