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As a Path to a Degree, the GED Is Rerouted With Students' Needs in Mind

By Lauren Sieben



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Sihame Bazi celebrates after graduating from LaGuardia Community College's GED Bridge to College and Careers Program, which helps aspirants see themselves as college students by offering its GED classes on the campus.

Shoma Mukherjee had worked in online retail for nearly eight years when she was laid off. Her replacement wasn't any more experienced in furniture sales than she was, but he had something that she didn't: a college degree.

"That hurt me a lot," she says.

At age 20, Ms. Mukherjee had immigrated to the United States from India with plans to attend college. But when her father got sick, she was too short on time and money to focus on her education. Instead she went to work, and later she had a son.

The sting of unemployment several years ago, however, gave her the incentive to return to the classroom after 18 years to study for the General Education Development test. It was the first step toward earning a degree of her own.

Ms. Mukherjee is one of about 300 students who have received diplomas from the GED Bridge to College and Careers Programs at LaGuardia Community College, in New York. The programs, which started in 2007, are designed so that students think about their education beyond the GED. Participants elect a career path—health or business—that's integrated into their studies.

The effort at LaGuardia, which is part of the City University of New York, is one way that community colleges, along with some public-school districts and family-literacy programs, are overhauling their GED curricula and support services.

"Our structures nationally for getting students a GED are flawed," says Gail O. Mellow, LaGuardia's president. "They're based on an older time, a simpler time—and students really have to have much stronger academic preparation in the GED than they now do. We have to align the GED with college."

Nearly 40 million American adults don't have high-school or GED diplomas, according to 2009 data from the American Council on Education, which developed the GED test. Another of the council's studies followed a cohort of GED graduates from 2003 and reported that while 77.8 percent of those who passed the test had enrolled in two-year colleges or certificate programs, only 11.8 percent of the test passers had earned degrees or certificates by the fall of 2009.

The council is in the process of reworking the test, both to modernize it and to better align it with what students will need to know before entering college. That work won't be complete until around 2014. In the meantime, the National Center for Family Literacy, a nonprofit group, has begun compiling guidelines for partnerships between community colleges and family-literacy programs, highlighting the most effective ways to prepare GED students for college.

The center has found that frequent communication between colleges and adult-education programs is key to getting GED graduates into college and keeping them there. So, too, are services such as career and college counseling and free remedial classes.

In order to reach President Obama's goal for the nation to have the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020, educators must focus their efforts not only on collegebound high-school students but also on adults without diplomas, says Sharon Darling, president and founder of the literacy center, in Louisville, Ky.

At LaGuardia, Ms. Mukherjee completed the GED's health track in 2009 and is now in her third semester of college there. After she finishes her associate degree, she plans to transfer to Hunter College or York College, which are also part of the CUNY system, for a combined bachelor's and master's program in occupational or physical therapy.

Before she completed the Bridge program, Ms. Mukherjee didn't see herself as a college student. Now she is on the dean's list, with a 4.0 grade-point average. She's even found new common ground with her 14-year-old son, Saad, who she says sees her as a "buddy" and a fellow student.

"We're talking about the same exact things, we're talking about school, we're talking about the stuff we'll be doing together, about homework," she says. "I think my son's very proud of me."

Welcome on the Campus

LaGuardia is rare among community colleges in offering its GED classes on site. That presence on the campus is inspiring to GED hopefuls and helps them to imagine themselves as college students, Ms. Mellow says.

The GED Bridge program's most defining trait is its "contextualized" coursework. Instructors teach each subject in the frame of health or business. A health student's reading assignments might address medical ethics, for example, rather than literature from a high-school English class.

"By asking students to pick a career focus, you're asking them to talk beyond the test and to begin to articulate their aspirations for career or additional education," says Amy Dalsimer, director of precollege academic programming at LaGuardia.

Bridge students work with a counselor to discuss their career and college plans. That resource is especially important for students unfamiliar with the application process for financial aid; most of them live below the poverty line, Ms. Dalsimer says.

Finances are a challenge for providers, too. LaGuardia paid for the Bridge program largely through grants from the MetLife Foundation, amounting to about \$400,000 since the pilot program began, in 2007. But it is a difficult model to reproduce at colleges and adult-learning centers with less access to cash.

The National Center for Family Literacy received a grant from MetLife worth \$700,000. That money will go toward developing informational tools for community colleges and family-literacy programs. Part of the money will also support family-literacy programs across the country.

The Jefferson County Public Schools, in Louisville, has arranged a low-cost collaboration with nearby Jefferson Community and Technical College without any grant money. The program is one of three partnerships featured in a case study from the family-literacy center's research.

"No money changed hands. We got together and said it was the right thing to do for the students that we're serving," says Julie Scoskie, director of community-support services for the school district.

The partnership led to the creation of the Educational Enrichment Services program, in 2003. It offers free remedial classes to students who are between the GED and college, helping them save roughly \$450,000 in tuition each year.

Students do, however, pay tuition for higher-level remedial courses at the college. Educational Enrichment Services provides free remediation only to students who score below a certain cutoff in math or reading.

In addition to cutting costs for students, Ms. Scoskie says, the arrangement is also advantageous for college instructors, who can "hit the ground running" in the advanced remedial classes. "Before the partnership," she explains, "people who couldn't add, subtract, multiply, or divide were mixed in with people who maybe didn't know how to add, subtract, multiply, or divide fractions."

The school district has also revamped its GED curriculum to align with the entrance exam at the community college. Students receive more-rigorous instruction in subjects such as math and writing in anticipation of college-level work. For example, although the GED doesn't test certain math or writing skills, Jefferson County's GED students learn to write a research paper while studying for the exam.

The partnership has even influenced the structure of the adult-learning center. GED education in Jefferson County used to operate like a revolving door, Ms. Scoskie says, working around students' schedules and allowing them to start and stop classes at will. Instructors received new students almost daily. Now the center requires students to sign up for a six- or eight-week block of instruction. The stricter schedule has helped increase retention and achievement among GED students, she says.

Enrollment in the program has dropped since the requirement was adopted, but the county has also decreased its enrollment goals to better match its available resources.

Transitions to College

Even the most robust programs can't bring all students up to speed for college. Students in LaGuardia's GED Bridge classes have outperformed others on the GED exam, with a 70-percent passing rate among Bridge students since 2007, compared with New York City's 49 percent in 2009, according to LaGuardia. But the programs haven't eliminated the students' need for some remedial work.

A student who enters a GED classroom at a seventh- or eighth-grade reading level most likely won't transition directly into college, says LaGuardia's Ms. Dalsimer. Writing and algebra are two of the most challenging subjects for Bridge graduates; the two subjects, she acknowledges, are not emphasized on the GED.

Both LaGuardia and Jefferson County have developed their own solutions to such absences in the GED, but the larger question remains: Does earning a GED diploma truly predict a student's ability to handle college work?

When the American Council on Education releases its revised GED exam, in three years or so, it will correspond with a modern high-school curriculum, says Nicole M. Chestang, executive director of the council's GED Testing Service. It will emphasize college readiness, unlike the current exam, which was modeled after a 1999 curriculum. The test will move from a paper-based to a computer-based format by 2013.

The MetLife Foundation has given a \$3-million grant to the council's GED 21st Century Initiative, as the revision is called, not only to restructure the test but also to develop stronger instructional programs. A. Richardson Love Jr., the foundation's contributions manager for education, says the "ambitious" initiative should help more GED recipients move straight into college classrooms. "It's very discouraging to get your GED and then find out you've got to do three more courses before you can get college credit," he says. Ms. Mukherjee took just one remedial class at LaGuardia, in English, and notes that English isn't her first language. She otherwise went straight into college.

Of the Bridge students at LaGuardia who passed the GED test, 65 percent enrolled in college or postsecondary training programs. LaGuardia doesn't yet have data on how many students graduated, dropped out, or are still enrolled in college. Graduation is Ms. Mukherjee's only plan, and she credits the Bridge program for helping her move beyond the GED.

"They're still calling me to find out how I'm doing, and this kind of thing encourages you," she says. "Believe me, for me it's not easy. Sometimes I go to sleep at 3 o'clock in the morning and then at 8 o'clock I'm out to class. I'm making up the time I lost. And once I make up that time, I think I will be in a good position to encourage and help other people."