



Access to Postsecondary Schooling and the GED: New Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Massachusetts

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Key Findings

- Previous research suggests that few GED recipients go on to enroll in college, and that those who do enroll earn few credits and drop out quickly. In contrast, we find that earning a GED credential significantly increases post-secondary enrollment and persistence among ABE students who just meet or exceed the GED passing threshold.
- Specifically, we find that just passing the GED increases the probability that ABE students ever enroll in college by 45.3 percentage points and the probability that they remain enrolled for at least one year by 35.6 percentage points, relative to those who just failed the GED.
- Enrollment and persistence outcomes are driven by attendance in 2-year colleges.
- ABE students are more likely than the general GED test-taking population to retest if they fail their first attempt, but the average ABE student also scores lower and is less likely to pass the GED than the average GED test-taker.
- We do not find any evidence that earning a GED increases ABE students' likelihood of enrolling in a four-year college or earning a post-secondary degree or certificate within two to six years of passing the GED.

Research Questions

- How does earning a GED impact postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment among participants in Massachusetts' Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes?
- Are ABE students who take the GED test more or less likely than the general GED test-taking population to earn a GED?
- Are ABE students who take the GED test more or less likely than the general GED test-taking population to re-test if they do not pass the GED on their first attempt?

Data

The data for this study merges 2008 to 2016 ABE and ESOL class enrollment data with 2002 to 2016 National Student Clearinghouse college outcome data and 2002 to 2013 GED test results.



Research Methods

We use a “fuzzy regression discontinuity” approach to estimate the impact of passing the GED on college outcomes for students near the passing threshold. This research design compares the outcomes of ABE students who score narrowly above the GED passing threshold to the outcomes of students with similar scores who fall just below the GED passing threshold to determine the effect of having a GED on postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and attainment. The intuition behind the design is that GED scores are “noisy,” so students just below and above the passing threshold are similar to one another except for an essentially arbitrary determination of whether they passed the test or not. We run the same analysis for each GED subtest to examine several regression discontinuities (one for each GED subtest score, plus one for total GED score) and aggregate all six passing thresholds into a single measure of distance from passing.

Detailed Results

- For ABE students, we find that just passing the GED increases the likelihood that individual ever enrolls in college by 45.3 percentage points.
- ABE students who just pass the GED enroll in college for an additional 2.9 quarters relative to their peers who fall just short of passing
- ABE students who just pass the GED are 35.6 percentage points more likely to remain enrolled in college for 4 quarters, 24.6 percentage points more likely to remain enrolled in college for 6 quarters, and 16.4 percentage points more likely to remain enrolled in college for 8 quarters.
- We do not find any evidence that earning a GED increases ABE students’ likelihood of earning a postsecondary degree or certificate within two to six years of passing the GED.
- Enrollment and persistence outcomes are driven by attendance in two-year colleges.
- Post-secondary results are strongest for students who are unemployed at the time of their ABE enrollment relative to their peers who are employed.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our results suggest that recent cohorts of GED testers, particularly those who enroll in ABE classes, are more often pursuing a GED credential with the goal of accessing postsecondary education than was previously understood. High rates of college enrollment but low rates of degree attainment among marginal GED passers suggests that while the GED is opening new pathways for ABE students, they may need additional support to reach their academic goals. Among GED-holding ABE students who enroll in college, the typical student enrolls for several quarters, but does not graduate with a degree or certificate. It is unclear whether the investment of time and money in completing some college, usually at a two-year college, without a degree has a positive return on investment for these students. Further research is required to understand the labor market returns to the GED among ABE students. As more ABE students use their GED credential to enroll in college, institutions of higher education may see growing demand for additional supports, such as college counseling, assistance completing financial aid forms, or access to ABE courses that help students avoid costly remedial coursework in college.