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## Intellectualizing Adult Basic Literacy Education: A Case Study

Kelly S. Bradbury  
CUNY, [kelly.bradbury@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:kelly.bradbury@csi.cuny.edu)

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## Intellectualizing Adult Basic Literacy Education: A Case Study

Kelly S. Bradbury

At a time when accusations of American ignorance and anti-intellectualism are ubiquitous, this article challenges problematic assumptions about intellectualism and proposes an expanded view of intellectualism. It is important to recognize and to challenge narrow views of intellectualism because they not only influence public perceptions of and engagement with education and intellectualism, but they also affect what and how we teach in U.S. schools and aid in institutionalizing social hierarchies that privilege the knowledge, learning sites, and educational experiences of the cultural elite. To demonstrate the benefits of revising our views of intellectualism, I draw upon my observations of and interviews with adult learners participating in GED-preparation writing workshops.

*Only those who have power can decide what constitutes intellectualism ... The intellectual activity of those without power is always characterized as nonintellectual (122).*

—Paulo Freire, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*

A few years ago, when I asked adult learners participating in GED-preparation writing workshops what the word *intellectual* means, their responses included the following: “I don’t know. What does it mean?” “No, I don’t know what that is. Is it intellecture?” “Okay, now, I know intelligent, but what’s intellectual? You have to tell me. I’m not familiar with that term,” and “I know what intelligent means, but we never talked about intellectual in high school so I wouldn’t know the definition.” Two students had a definition. Wendell<sup>1</sup>, a 60-year-old man who dropped out of school in the 7th grade, described an intellectual as “a bookworm” and someone with a high vocabulary. Carl, a young male in his twenties, distinguished a smart person from an intellectual: “an intellectual attains his confidence through academics, so he’s real aggressive toward his academics, but I think a smart person, he balances them out as far as his intelligence and his common sense. An intellectual person, they just grasp like education to be their way to freedom...An intellectual person is an aggressive learner, but with a

smaller picture.” When I asked him if he considers himself an intellectual, Carl said “No, no, no, not at all. Because just for the simple fact that an intellectual person is just a person that sees school from one perspective, and you gotta look at it from multiple perspectives, multiple angles. An intellectual has fewer perspectives.”

The fact that the adult learners I interviewed at The Lindberg Center are unfamiliar with the term *intellectual* or define it in a way that excludes themselves is not surprising. They are part of a national public repeatedly labeled anti-intellectual and ignorant, and they have never been part of a community considered intellectual. At a time when accusations of American ignorance and anti-intellectualism are ubiquitous, this article challenges problematic assumptions about intellectualism that overlook the work of adult basic literacy programs and proposes an expanded view of intellectualism.

Since the 1970s, composition and education scholars have worked to expose and challenge the social construction of remedial writers as cognitively deficient and remedial programs as “marginal to the intellectual community” (Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* 195). In *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy argued basic writing students are not cognitively deficient or incapable of academic excellence, but they are beginners who “learn by making mistakes” (5). Several years later, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky furthered the argument and, in response, developed a basic writing curriculum based on challenging reading and writing assignments, rather than on grammar exercises and drills (*Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*). In 1995, Deborah Mutnick wrote that the view of basic writing as a skills course “reinforced linguistic prejudices and masked the underlying problems of racism, class discrimination, and other forms of social inequality,” and she called for a writing pedagogy that would give agency and authority to basic writing students typically silenced by prejudice and inequality (9). Additionally, Ira Shor’s critical pedagogy has sought to empower underprivileged students and Mike Rose’s scholarship continues to challenge “systems of intellect” and definitions of intelligence that “drive broad cognitive wedges between those who do well in our schools and those who don’t” and between different classes of people (“Narrowing the Mind and Page” 297; *Lives on the Boundary; The Mind at Work*).

Despite these efforts, the work of adult basic literacy programs like the one Carl and Wendell attend at The Lindberg Center gets subsumed by the more ubiquitous *public* discourse highlighting educational and mental missteps. Following Richard Hofstadter’s 1963 Pulitzer Prize-winning historical examination of anti-intellectualism in American life, academics and cultural commentators have repeatedly used the term in their calls of crisis and decline in American culture and education. In addition, American popular culture reflects—and perpetuates—the widespread perception

that Americans are ignorant, anti-intellectual, or lack reason. Today, this flood of criticism is extensive in volume and location, reaching the public via television shows like *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?*, films like *Idiocracy*, entertainment bits like *The Tonight Show*’s “Jaywalking,” and best-selling books with mordant titles like *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, *The Age of American Unreason, Just How Stupid Are We?: Facing The Truth About the American Voter*, and *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free*. Even American politics has not escaped such criticism. The popularity of both former President George W. Bush and 2008 Republican candidate for Vice President Sarah Palin has been cited as evidence of a widespread anti-intellectualism in the U.S., and political science professor Elvin T. Lim has called Presidential rhetoric anti-intellectual in *The Anti-intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*.

While accusations of American anti-intellectualism, both popular and academic, sometimes offer useful commentary on American culture, most are based on or reinforce narrow views of intellectualism that equate the term with living a “life of the mind,” with a high level of intelligence, or with the study of old, abstract, or highbrow ideas. Consequently, Americans conflate intellectualism and academic markers of intelligence, and as a result, adult basic literacy programs are not recognized as valuable in cultivating an intellectual public. It is important to recognize and to challenge these narrow views because they not only influence what and how we teach in U.S. schools and the public’s beliefs about education, but they also perpetuate social and institutional hierarchies that privilege the knowledge, learning sites, and educational experiences of the cultural elite.

In this article, I examine some of the most influential historical and contemporary sources of the problematic, narrow views of intellectualism that overlook the work of adult basic literacy programs: the rhetoric of anti-intellectualism and ignorance, hierarchies of knowledge, and hierarchies of educational institutions. I also propose a view of intellectualism focused on an educational program’s work to interest and engage participants in learning and critical thinking and on participants’ own desire to learn. To demonstrate the benefits of revising our views of intellectualism, I draw upon my work with GED adult learners at The Lindberg Center. It is my hope that if we understand and reconsider our exclusionary popular views of intellectualism, we can challenge the rhetoric of American anti-intellectualism and acknowledge the intellectual import of adult basic literacy programs like the GED writing workshops at The Lindberg Center. It is time, as Carl would say, to see intellectualism from “multiple perspectives.”

## The Rhetoric of Anti-Intellectualism and Ignorance

Americans' narrow views of intellectualism are inextricably linked to the widespread and longstanding rhetoric of American anti-intellectualism and ignorance. Published in 1963, historian Richard Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* remains the foundational statement on anti-intellectualism in the United States from which contemporary accusations of American anti-intellectualism, ignorance, and unreason have continued to flow. Hofstadter defines anti-intellectualism as "a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life" (7). He defines an intellectual as someone who lives *for* ideas, not *off* them and someone who lives for *ideas*, not *an* idea. He qualifies this further, saying an intellectual has "a sense of dedication to the life of the mind" and a desire to keep asking questions. Hofstadter also claims practicality is not the basis of the intellectual's interest in ideas, even if the ideas have practical applications or consequences (27-31).

Associating intellectualism with a "life of the mind" implies that to be intellectual, a person must dedicate his or her life to the pursuit of ideas. Consequently, even though Hofstadter insists intellectualism is not directly tied to a profession, he recognizes that people often do associate particular professions—such as law, medicine, engineering, and teaching—with intellectualism because the work they do is considered "vitaly dependent upon ideas" (26). Wendell made this association when he commented that "Attorneys have to be an intellectual to do their job. Supervisors, bosses, CEOs, all those would be intellectuals because they have to be." In addition to associations with careers and the "life of the mind," Hofstadter's insistence that intellectuals do not pursue ideas for practical outcomes has contributed to widespread beliefs that "useful knowledge" or knowledge pursued for a practical purpose cannot be intellectual.

One of Hofstadter's most influential arguments about anti-intellectualism has been his charge that it has been part of American culture since its birth. He argues that anti-intellectualism is rooted in American religion, business, politics, and education because intellectualism is seen as hostile to much of what Americans value in those areas, including the wisdom of the heart, character, practical knowledge, and an egalitarian educational system (46). The image of anti-intellectualism so deeply ingrained in the United States' cultural ethos has propelled the search for more examples of its existence and persistence. In fact, since Hofstadter's highly publicized book, numerous other critiques of American intelligence and intellectualism have reiterated or extended his argument by pointing out more contemporary manifestations of or contributors to American anti-intellectualism.

One of the most prominent declarations about intellectualism after Hofstadter's was historian Russell Jacoby's 1987 *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. Jacoby argues that beginning in the 1960s, young intellectuals who wrote for the public retreated to the security of university campuses for economic reasons, and, as academics, stopped writing for the public. While the sentiment that intellectual deliberation should take place in the public—outside the walls of academe—is a productive one, Jacoby's criticism of academics portrays them as the primary arbiters of intellectualism, contributing to the conflation of intellectualism and academia that narrows Americans' views of intellectualism.

Published the same year as Jacoby's book, Allan Bloom's well-known censure of American higher education, *The Closing of the American Mind*, also ties intellectualism to higher education. Bloom declares the problem in education is that students' minds are being "closed" by modernist sentiments of egalitarianism, fueled by 1960s counter cultures, that demand "openness" to everyone's ideas. The solution for Bloom is to ensure that students at top-tier universities read "The Great Books" because, to him, they grapple with the "important questions of life" that "open" students' minds. Here, intellectualism gets tied to a particular kind of knowledge ("The Great Books") and to particular educational institutions: top-tier universities.

Some of the more widely read critiques of American culture published in just the last few years continue to tie intellectualism to the acquisition of a particular kind of knowledge and to "living for ideas" and fail to mention or consider the work of non-traditional educational institutions. In her 2008 best-seller *The Age of American Unreason*, cultural critic Susan Jacoby calls America "ill with a powerful mutant strain of intertwined ignorance, anti-rationalism, and anti-intellectualism" (xx). Jacoby re-inscribes Hofstadter's view of intellectualism as "living for ideas" and anti-intellectualism as the belief that "intense devotion to ideas, reason, logic, evidence, and precise language" is sinister (10); however, she links it to—and conflates it with—ignorance and anti-rationalism. This conflation results in the belief that to be intellectual, a person must possess certain knowledge. What knowledge a person must possess is dictated by the person—such as Jacoby—labeling American society ignorant or anti-intellectual.

One of the most recent critics of the American mind is history professor Rick Shenkman. In *Just How Stupid Are We?: Facing the Truth About the American Voter* (2009), Shenkman calls the American voter ignorant, uninformed, inattentive, shortsighted, and a passive absorber of information. That same year, in *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free*, Charles P. Pierce blames the rise of idiocy in America on skepticism about expertise and says it reflects "the breakdown of the consensus that the pursuit of knowledge is a good" (8). In 2008, English professor Mark Bauerlein, in *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age*

*Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, blames technology for producing unprepared, apathetic college students, and he declares, “the intellectual future of the United States looks dim” (233). Nicholas Carr shares Bauerlein’s sentiments, adding his concern for the “rewiring” of brains to skim texts rather than read with concentration in *The Shallows: What The Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010).

While these critiques document some important and valid issues influencing education and learning in the U.S., the rhetoric of anti-intellectualism and ignorance they employ reinforces the popular perception that Americans are collectively anti-intellectual. Because these accusations associate intellectualism with academia, a “life of the mind,” and highbrow knowledge, adult basic literacy education cannot fall under the rubric of intellectualism and adult learners like Carl and Wendell cannot recognize themselves as participants in an intellectual community. This rhetoric counters—and overpowers—efforts to value much of the education and learning taking place in the U.S.

## Hierarchies of Knowledge

As is evident in the prominent uses of the term anti-intellectualism, intellectualism is linked to a hierarchy of knowledge—a hierarchy that devalues the study of useful knowledge like basic literacy skills and writing a 5-paragraph essay. This hierarchy of knowledge, intellectual vs. useful/practical, is grounded in the historical development of distinct information and cultural markets separated by social class. Historian Richard D. Brown has noted that the information abundance in the mid-nineteenth century amplified by printing presses led to the formation of two distinct information markets. The first, the traditional information market that focused on information for the sake of knowledge, remained under the control of the social elite. The elite maintained control by writing the texts that dominated American education and by dictating the standards of “respectable knowledge.” The second, a new information market that formed mid-century, focused on information for entertainment. It was controlled by “popular” audiences and included publications like the penny press (270-77).

Related to this hierarchy of information is what historian Lawrence Levine has called a hierarchy of culture. According to Levine, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, public life was becoming more fragmented and the concept of culture became hierarchical: “highbrow” was used to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority, while “lowbrow” was used to indicate someone or something not “highly intellectual” or “aesthetically refined” (222). The outcome of this developing hierarchy of culture was that while classical music, art, and literature enjoyed both “high cultural status and mass popularity” throughout most of the nineteenth

century, by the end of the century they were considered “highbrow” and were intended for socially elite audiences only (233).

As the definitions of lowbrow and highbrow indicate, highbrow culture and knowledge are typically considered intellectual, while lowbrow culture and knowledge are often equated with anti-intellectual or non-intellectual.<sup>2</sup> These associations have led to the privileging of knowledge and culture deemed highbrow, creating boundaries that limit what and who fall under the rubric of intellectualism. However, as Levine points out, the categories of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” are not fixed and have changed over time. For example, while Shakespeare’s work was considered popular entertainment for many diverse audiences in nineteenth-century America, in the twentieth century, Shakespeare’s work was seen as “highbrow” entertainment for “polite” culture (4, 31). The oscillation of what gets defined as highbrow, or intellectual, and lowbrow, or non-intellectual, reveals the importance of who gets to define the terms. Consequently, hierarchies of knowledge—and views of intellectualism—are significantly tied to a social hierarchy in which the dominant class controls what gets valued and rewarded.

A contemporary example of how hierarchies of knowledge influence public views of intellectualism can be found in recent reports of a “reading crisis” in the United States. The reports make claims about the intellectual consequences of reading practices and impose a “hierarchy of literature.” In the past several years, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has released a number of reports on reading. In the same vein as earlier reports that “Johnny Can’t” read or write, these reports send the message “Johnny Won’t” read or doesn’t read well. The NEA’s 2004 report entitled *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* claims their survey of over 17,000 Americans age eighteen or over revealed that “For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature” (vii). They assert, more specifically, that the rate of decline in literary reading is accelerating, that it parallels a decline in book reading at large, and that it is declining across gender, race, ethnicity, age, education level, and income divisions (ix-xi). In 2007, the NEA released another report, titled *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*. Based on statistics from more than forty studies on the reading habits and skills of children, teenagers, and adults, the NEA again claims that Americans are reading less; Americans are reading less well, evidenced by test scores; and the declines in reading have civic, social, and economic implications (5-6).

The NEA’s concentration on literary reading, defined as novels, short stories, plays, or poetry, to the exclusion of non-literary reading—all other types of reading<sup>3</sup>—implies that literary reading is more valuable than non-literary reading. In addition, because the NEA argues a decline in literary reading has intellectual consequences, these reports influence

contemporary understandings of intellectualism. For example, the NEA concludes in the Executive Summary of the 2004 *Reading at Risk* report that “If one believes that active and engaged readers lead richer intellectual lives than non-readers and that a well-read citizenry is essential to a vibrant democracy, the decline of literary reading calls for serious action” (ix). The authors of the report imply that reading necessarily produces well-informed and intellectual citizens and not reading produces ill-informed citizens who are not intellectual. The relationship between literary reading and intellectualism is expressed more explicitly in the Preface of the same report, when the NEA claims “print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capability... would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment” and our nation would become “less informed, active, and independent-minded” (vii).

By linking their report of a decline in literary reading with a nation of ill-informed, passive thinkers, the NEA implies there is one path to active, independent thinking and consequently to intellectualism, and it goes through reading novels, short stories, plays, or poetry. Because a GED-preparation program like the one at The Lindberg Center is associated with teaching students basic reading and writing skills and not with “highbrow” literature, the learning there would not be considered intellectual in these terms.

## Hierarchies of Educational Institutions

Attached to the hierarchical beliefs about knowledge and intellectualism expressed in these debates is an assumed hierarchy of educational institutions. This is most evident when Allan Bloom argues the “lower and professional schools” should prepare the general population to be good citizens while elite universities should produce intellectuals. In “Intelligence, Knowledge, and the Hand/Brain Divide,” Mike Rose helps us understand this institutional divide when he traces the history of the academic/vocational education split. According to Rose, the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act gave “national legitimacy” to the vocational education movement by establishing different governing organizations, funding sources, and educational plans for vocational schools. The result was the institutionalizing of cultural and educational biases about intelligence (634). Because those who work with their hands are assumed to be less intelligent than those who work with their minds, the institutions that prepare students for those respective jobs are judged similarly. In other words, academic programs cultivate intelligence, while vocational programs prepare students for work (636).

In his history of non-formal adult education in the U.S., historian Joseph Kett examines the connection between adult education and “useful knowledge”—a connection that places adult education under the rubric of non-intellectual. According to Kett, the connection originated in the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth century with the development of education institutions like literary clubs, mutual improvement societies, and the lyceum. Under the influence of progressive education and the rise of what Kett calls “efficiency educators,” adult education became increasingly associated with preparation for work and “job improvement.” During the period from 1870-1930, technical institutes experienced growth and higher education distanced itself from job training. According to Kett, in the twentieth century adult education became more formal and tied to institutions of higher learning. Despite its connection to universities through extension and correspondence programs, adult education maintained its focus on practical knowledge aimed at increasing academic and job credentials rather than intellectual development (228-31). Adult education’s connection to useful and practical knowledge and job improvement has contributed to it being overlooked in discussions of intellectualism.

## A Broader Perspective

Running through this history of the development of views of intellectualism is a series of problematic dichotomies about learning, education, and knowledge, including intellectual/anti-intellectual, practical/intellectual, open mind/closed mind, hand/mind, highbrow/lowbrow, intelligent/ignorant, academic/vocational. Imposing and reifying these dichotomies severely limits what knowledge, activities, educational institutions, and people are deemed intellectual. For example, if only knowledge considered highbrow is considered intellectual, then knowledge considered practical, useful, or experiential is devalued or classified non-intellectual, contributing to the marginalization of those who acquire and possess such knowledge (often including non-white, non-highly educated Americans of the lower, middle, and working classes). Or, if only higher-ranking academic institutions are thought to foster intellectualism, then all the learning that takes place at vocational, technical, or non-traditional sites of learning is dismissed as non-intellectual. The result of this dichotomous view of learning and intellectualism is the promotion of hierarchies that place higher value on the ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of the gatekeepers of intellectualism—academics and cultural critics.

We need to challenge the problematic assumptions about intellectualism that impose these privileges and make intellectualism exclusive. One way to do that is to review and revise popular views of

intellectualism so they place more value on a person's desire to learn and think critically and on a program's efforts to foster learning and critical thinking than on the particular texts, ideas, and institutions with which a person engages. If we define intellectualism as the desire to learn and the practice of critically engaging with ideas, then our views of intellectualism can include education for a practical purpose; the study of useful, practical, and experiential knowledge; and non-traditional and vocational sites of learning. Because this definition does not privilege particular texts or educational institutions, it can encompass both those who fall under the traditional definition of intellectualism and also those whose socioeconomic positions have impeded their following a more traditional educational path—students like those at The Lindberg Center.

### The Lindberg Center: A Case Study

The Lindberg Center is a neighborhood non-profit institution in the Midwest that has been providing programs designed to promote economic advancement, self-sufficiency, and leadership among youth and adults for over a century. Among the programs The Lindberg Center offers is a series of writing workshops designed to prepare adults for the GED written exam.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to study the intellectual import of adult basic literacy education, I observed two sections of a six-week sequence of the writing workshops, a day class and a night class, and interviewed thirteen students,<sup>5</sup> the instructors, and the program supervisor. Based on my classroom observations and interviews with participants, I argue that the students in the writing workshops at The Lindberg Center come to the workshops interested, motivated learners who value education. In addition, the reading and writing activities used in these workshops encourage and support students' intellectualism by furthering their interest in education and fostering their critical engagement with ideas. With a broader definition of intellectualism, we can recognize The Lindberg Center as a community that cultivates intellectualism.

### The Students

According to the program supervisor, Lindberg Center students are typically 25-40 years old, unemployed or making low wages, and on some form of public assistance. A majority of the students are African American, many are single parents, and most have tried to get their GED through other programs or at other times in their lives. Most dropped out of school somewhere between 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade and start the program at the Center testing at a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>-grade level. The students I interviewed reflect a similar profile. They range in age from 20 to 60. Six were men and seven were women, and all identified their race as Black. While most dropped out of school between

10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, a few left between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The primary reasons cited for dropping out of school were having a baby, lack of support (family, economic, school), low self-esteem, or the need to work. See Table 1 for a brief look at the demographics and experiences of the thirteen students I interviewed.

Table 1: Writing Workshop Student Interviewees

#### Women

Name	Age	When Dropped Out of School	Why Dropped Out of School	Why Working on GED
Anna	54	10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Had a couple children; couldn't read	For pride
Carin	50s	9 <sup>th</sup> grade	Dysfunctional family; racism in school; had to start working at age 15	To handle things better; because she believes knowledge is power
Dina	45	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Low self-esteem; had a baby	To gain self-esteem; to demonstrate to children and grandchildren she can do it
Jackie	30s	at age 17	Had daughter at 14; pregnant again at 17	For a better life
Kim	20s	at age 17	Became pregnant	To better self; to get a better job; to be a role model to her children

LaShonda	28	9 <sup>th</sup> /10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Didn't get much help from teachers so lost interest	Wants a better life; employment; to help nieces and nephews with school
Teresa	29/ 30	10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Hanging out with a bad crowd	To better herself and her kids

**Men**

Name	Age	When Dropped Out of School	Why Dropped Out of School	Why Working on GED
Carl	early 20s	10 <sup>th</sup> or 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Behavior issues	For better job opportunities; to improve living situation; to be a role model
Jerome	20s	11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Skipping school; lack of interest	For a better life via a better job
Joseph	25	10 <sup>th</sup> grade	Needed to work to take care of himself	To go to college
Malcom	27	after completed 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Always struggled with school; a lot of depression and insecurity	Self-confidence; because education is a tool; because not having completed high school is a burden on his back

Wendell	60	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	Racism; no motivational help from home; back and forth to jail at age 13; doctor labeled him retarded	To prove something to self and others
William	26	2 weeks before H.S. graduation	Got in trouble; economic problems	To go to college and self-respect

Students' motivation to learn was evident not only in their performance during the workshops, but is also demonstrated by their willingness to voluntarily devote nine hours a week to their GED training—they met two more times a week for training in other subjects—often balancing this with a full-time labor-intensive job and/or raising a family. The three main forces motivating students to get their GED that surfaced in my interviews with students were the belief that education increases access to things they want, the need to prove to themselves they can get their GED, and an awareness of the effect their lack of education has on others.

All of the students I interviewed value education because they assume it leads to a better life. Cate, the program supervisor, says students make this connection because of their “real-world” experiences in which their lack of education has limited their access to things they have wanted. What students mean by “a better life” varies, of course. For some, a better life means a better job, more money, a nice home, or the opportunity for more education for themselves or their children. For others, a better life means a nice life for their children, having the respect of others, or believing in themselves. For Kim, a career as a surgical tech and owning a house are among the things she wants but believes she can't get without a GED. Her statement about why she values education is indicative of many of the students' responses: “Like you need [education] to do anything that you wanna do...it's like I have all these goals I wanna do but I have to get my GED first before I do that.”

In addition to associating education with access, all thirteen students indicated their interests in and motivations for furthering their education are tied to self-respect. For instance, when I asked Dina, a 45-year-old woman who currently works part-time at McDonald's, why she's working on her GED now, she said, “I hope to gain self-esteem, definitely, number one.” Likewise, Wendell, the oldest person in the program at the time, said, “I just wanna say to myself, and I got brothers and sisters I can say to, I did get this.” And Anna, a 54-year-old mother of ten, said, “The hat and gown



is basically what I'm here for. I wanna walk around with the little tassels at the store, butt naked with the hat on...ya know, just be proud of it." Cate confirmed that, in her experience, many of the students' self-esteem is attached to proving to themselves they can *earn* the diploma, rather than have it handed to them.

Based on students' comments, many of them are also motivated by their understanding of the relationship between their education and the lives of others. This is seen, for example, in Kim's concern about not being smarter than her 5<sup>th</sup>-grade daughter, LaShonda's desire to help her nieces and nephews with their school work, Carl's desire to be a role model for his brother and his race, and Dina's aspiration to be a role model for her grandkids. Teresa, a single mother in her late twenties with a full-time clerical job at a doctor's office, said, "Ya know, I have two young sons and I don't want them coming to me asking me questions I can't answer cause I don't know.... I wanna be this good parent and good role model for my sons."

Students' belief that education will necessarily improve their lives is based on a conviction similar to the literacy myth—the belief that literacy by itself is necessary for economic, social, and cognitive advancement (Graff xxxvi-xxxviii). In this case, students assume their lack of education has been a barrier holding them back from a good life or from being the person they want to be. Students' interest in and commitment to furthering their education, then, is significantly tied to their belief—fostered by culture and educational institutions—that education can open access to the things in life they desire. In one student's words, "knowledge is power" (Carin).

My interviews with students and teachers also revealed that for most students, their interest in education increased with age. When I asked Dina what's different now, she said, "I'm older. I'm a little wiser. I know I need that education to go further. And, I'd say my self-esteem is much better." Even though Carl is only 20, he's an example of a student whose devotion and focus changed recently. He said "as you mature and get older you start to think and look at the finer things in life and not the faster things in life." The instructor of the evening workshops said that most of the older students are extremely focused—they write and write and write and repeatedly ask for feedback. It's the younger ones, he said, who sometimes struggle to stay focused and who write a paragraph and then stop. What these comments reveal is that students' interest in education and their willingness to engage in intellectual activities came with the awareness that they needed it to get some of the things they desire, and this awareness came with experience and maturity.

Just as important as the assumptions students make about education are the assumptions they don't make. Based on their comments in the interviews, the workshop participants do not associate education with a

"life of the mind" or with the study of highbrow or sophisticated ideas. In fact, none of them ever mentioned what specific content or skills they want to learn or thought they should learn. Their assumption is that their lack of education has been a barrier to a good life or to becoming the person they want to be, and the solution is education.

Combined, students' comments about education, their motivations for working on a GED, and their views of intellectualism demonstrate students enter the writing workshops valuing education, believing in multiple forms of education, and motivated to learn—characteristics of a broader, more democratic view of intellectualism.

### The Workshops

Each workshop begins with an engaging and exploratory creative activity followed by more formal writing exercises and assignments aimed at preparing students for the GED written exam. The creative activities introduce students to the writing and experiences of others and give them the freedom to explore and communicate—both in their writing and in class discussions—their own ideas about a variety of issues. Blanche, the teacher of the afternoon workshops, used the following creative activities in her class: reading and discussing short writings by Malcolm X, Terry Tempest Williams, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Alice Walker; reading and discussing poems by George Ella Lyon and Nikki Giovanni; writing individual poems or group poems; and a "picture prompt" exercise for which students looked at a painting and wrote a poem to accompany it.

The more formal writing exercises and assignments are designed and sequenced to teach skills like brainstorming, organizing, comparing, analyzing, describing, summarizing, revising, and storytelling. In the first workshop of the six-week series, Matt, the teacher of the evening workshops, asked students to write an essay about themselves and their interest in reading and writing. He introduced the assignment, saying, "For now, don't worry about writing a formal essay. Just tell a story about yourself and use lots of details." The following week he had students write letters to President Obama, voicing two or three concerns they have and what they'd like Obama to do to address them. He used this assignment to discuss with students the function of audience, style, and purpose along with the parts of a letter, giving them a bit more structure with this assignment. The next week he reviewed the structure of the letter and then tied it to the structure of the 5-paragraph essay they must master for the GED test. The assignment that night was to write a 5-paragraph essay about an opinion they've changed and how and why the change occurred. In the fifth workshop, Matt had students write seven paragraphs in which they practiced the skills of summarizing, describing, analyzing, and comparing two famous paintings. During the final workshop, students worked again on writing the formal 5-paragraph

essay, this time about specific ways they are affected by the economy—a topic students communally created.

Matt said he attempts to connect the creative “warm-up” activity and the more formal test-preparation writing activities by helping students recognize these writing activities as different rhetorical situations. In one situation, students are being asked to respond to and critically analyze a poem; in another they’re taking a test. Matt says he talks to students about the “machinery” surrounding them in the different situations and how to respond appropriately in each. What he’s trying to do, he says, is develop in the students “a sort of switch [they] can flip” when they go into the test-taking situation. “If you get them to that sort of intellectual place where they’re able to critically analyze the writing situation they’re being put in for the purpose of this exam, then you’re not just putting them through a kind of GED writing boot camp; you’re actually stressing critical analysis even if you’re having them produce writing [for the test] that is not very critical or analytical.”

In addition to teaching students to be critically aware of different writing situations and preparing them to write well in those different situations, both workshop teachers bring in content that is culturally relevant and thought-provoking. Because a majority of the students in the workshops are minorities from low-income or working-class backgrounds, both teachers often use the writings of authors addressing issues relevant to race and class. For example, Henry Louis Gates’ “In the Kitchen” is an essay about the spot of kinky hair at the base of a black person’s neck, “the kitchen,” that was the one part of the body that undeniably “resisted assimilation” into white culture. Alice Walker’s “The Place Where I Was Born” is about having to leave her home because of racist oppression and economic impoverishment. Malcolm X’s “Prison Studies” explores his struggle to learn to read and the power he felt when he did. In her poem “Where I’m From,” George Ella Lyon paints a picture of the type of life and family she came from through details like “the dirt under the back porch” and “fried corn and strong coffee.” And, Paul Dunbar’s “Sympathy” explores the feeling of being caged in. Having students read and write about others’ experiences that resonate with their own gives students the opportunity to explore and critically consider issues relevant to them.

While the instructors designed some of the more formal writing prompts to be particularly relevant to students’ lives, many of the prompts they used are actual GED essay exam prompts. These topics include the following: “Explain why you do or do not vote,” “What are the essential characteristics of a good parent?,” and “Name someone you consider to be a modern hero or heroine. Explain why.” Though students weren’t always excited to write about these topics, the teachers encouraged them to see the

prompts as the opportunity to write about their own personal opinions and experiences related to the topic.

What my analysis of the activities and content used in the GED-preparation workshops shows is that despite the necessary focus on basic reading and writing skills and formulaic nature of the 5-paragraph essay students must learn, the workshops challenge students with content and a series of reading, thinking, and writing activities that exercise students’ “mental muscles” and support their exploration of ideas. Even though the primary goal of the workshops is to prepare students for the GED written exam, the combination of creative and formal writing activities helps students see writing as more than a rote exercise for the exam. In this context, writing becomes a tool both for communicating to an audience—in the test situation—and a tool for exploring and sharing ideas. In these ways, the workshops not only satisfy students’ general interest in learning and help them work toward their goal of getting their GED, but they also foster students’ critical thinking and engagement with ideas—characteristics of a broader definition of intellectualism.

## Conclusion

Because traditional views of intellectualism are based on problematic dichotomies that assume basic or remedial education is in opposition with intellectual education, non-traditional sites of learning like The Lindberg Center’s GED writing workshops are overlooked in considerations of American intellectualism. Building on the work of scholars like Mina Shaughnessy and Mike Rose that challenges the social construction of remedial writers and blue-collar workers as cognitively deficient, this research challenges the assumption that adults participating in a GED program—and the program itself—cannot be intellectual. As my examination of these workshops reveals, students participating in the workshops are motivated, interested learners whose life experiences have made them critical thinkers about their environment. The workshops foster students’ interest in learning and critical engagement through culturally-relevant content and purposefully designed and sequenced assignments and activities.

It is important to recognize the intellectual import of sites of learning like The Lindberg Center workshops because such programs provide valuable education to learners whose socioeconomic positions have impeded their access to more traditional educational pursuits. The consequence, of course, is not just that some educational institutions are considered intellectual and others are not, but the institutionalization of social hierarchies that promote and perpetuate inequality in American education. In other words, because educational institutions reinforce social

hierarchies, certain ideas, beliefs, and motivations are considered more valuable. And because social hierarchies often cross race, class, and gender lines, educational institutions perpetuate inequality. My revised definition of intellectualism recognizes there are multiple paths to and multiple forms of intellectualism. The Lindberg Center writing workshops demonstrate well the benefits of expanding our views of intellectualism to include non-traditional sites of learning.

Surrounded by accusations of American ignorance, unreason, and anti-intellectualism that dominate beliefs about American education and culture, we need to challenge the narrow views of intellectualism that overlook the educational experiences of interested learners participating in adult basic literacy programs like the writing workshops at The Lindberg Center. We need to look at intellectualism from a new, broader perspective—one that values an individual's motivation and engagement with learning and an educational program's work to encourage and support students' critical engagement with ideas and their interest in learning. This new perspective can challenge the damning assumed notion that a majority of Americans are ignorant and anti-intellectual and that the United States is void of intellectuals and intellectualism outside its elite institutions.

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## Endnotes

1. Wendell is a pseudonym. I have changed the name of the students, teachers, program supervisor, and the educational institution to respect the confidentiality of their identities and their stories.

2. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines highbrow as “a person of superior intellectual attainments or interests” and “intellectually superior.” Lowbrow is defined as “one who is not, or does not claim to be, highly intellectual or aesthetically refined.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Second Edition. 1989. <http://dictionary.oed.com>. Accessed July 5, 2009. The *Wikipedia* entry for highbrow begins by equating highbrow with intellectual: “Used colloquially as a noun or adjective, highbrow is synonymous with intellectual” ([en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)). Accessed 23 January 2012.

3. Faulted for its focus on literary texts in the 2004 report, the NEA did include in its 2007 survey (reported in *To Read or Not To Read*) the reading of fiction and nonfiction in various forms, including books,

magazines, newspapers, and online materials. The NEA returned to its concentration on literary texts, though, in their 2009 report titled *Reading on the Rise: A New Chapter in American Literacy*. Though the organization had a more positive diagnosis this time—“literary reading is on the rise” among adult Americans (3)—it once again assumed some reading is better than other reading.

4. In 2003, the Lindberg Center formed a partnership with an outreach program at a nearby university. Since then, the university's Outreach Consultants (graduate students from different departments on campus) have worked with the Center's instructors to design and teach a sequence of six writing workshops four times a year to help students prepare for the writing portion of the GED exam.

5. Though attendance varied each week in both classes, there were approximately 30-40 students total (between the two classes) participating in the workshops during the six weeks I observed and interviewed them. I interviewed students, with IRB approval, on a volunteer basis.

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Kelly S. Bradbury is Assistant Professor of English and Assistant Director of the Writing Program at the College of Staten Island, CUNY. Bradbury has published pieces in *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion*, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, *Journal of Teaching Writing*, and Cambridge Scholars Press’ edited collection *American Popular Culture: Historical and Pedagogical Perspectives*. She is currently working on a book titled *Reimagining Intellectualism in the Twenty-First Century: Literacy, Education, and Class*.