

I This chapter provides a research-based overview of accelerated learning as a program and educational format in higher education today.

Accelerated Learning in Colleges and Universities

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Accelerated learning programs are one of the fastest-growing transformations in higher education. They are one of the most controversial changes as well, challenging such fundamental academic structures as faculty tenure and the standard forty-five clock hours of instruction. At the Center for the Study of Accelerated Learning, we have identified 250 colleges and universities with specifically identified accelerated programs, the vast majority of these designed to serve adult students. Any postsecondary program targeted for working adults has either started or considered the initiation of an accelerated learning format. Estimates are that 25 percent or more of all adult students will be enrolled in accelerated programs within the next ten years. Currently, 13 percent of adult students studying for degrees are enrolled in programs that offer degrees in less than the traditional length of time (Aslanian, 2001).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) reports that 41 percent of students enrolled in degree-granting higher education institutions in fall 1998 were adults. These 6 million students (age twenty-five and older) need a college education to develop their careers and acquire new skills and knowledge in a global society where they are likely to have longer life spans than did workers in the past. In the past twenty years, nontraditional universities such as the University of Phoenix (with more than 130,000 students) have emerged with accelerated learning formats to attract adult learners. Most accelerated programs, however, are found in traditional institutions (at least 200 of them around the country) that have developed these formats specifically to serve working adults.

In general, adult education is a fast-growing enterprise, especially among faith-based colleges. A national study of church-related schools (mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic) found that two-thirds of them had instituted one or more bachelor's degree programs for adult students. Sixty percent of these programs had begun in the past thirteen years (Mission, Formation and Diversity Project, 1999), and many of them are now accelerated programs. These schools realized, as Scott and Conrad found in 1992 in their research literature review, that adults appreciate the efficiency of accelerated learning formats. In other words, students valued completing courses and attaining degrees in less time than usual.

Internationally, accelerated learning programs are also rapidly growing. Universities, from the United States or with assistance from organizations within the United States, are featuring this approach in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Ireland, Germany, and Australia.

Defining an Accelerated Learning Program

By definition, accelerated learning programs are structured for students to take less time than conventional (often referred to as traditional) programs to attain university credits, certificates, or degrees. The core element in accelerated learning programs is the accelerated course. Ground-based (as opposed to on-line) accelerated courses are presented in less time than the conventional number of instructional contact hours (for example, twenty hours of class time versus forty-five hours) and for a shorter duration (for example, five weeks rather than sixteen weeks). Accelerated courses, often referred to as intensive courses (Scott and Conrad, 1992), are usually structured in condensed formats that include weekend and evening classes and workplace programs.

In the case of on-line accelerated courses, the duration of the course may be shorter than conventional standards (eight weeks rather than sixteen weeks), but contact hours are very difficult to calibrate. With instructional configurations such as video streaming, listservs, chatrooms, Internet searches, e-mail, and bulletin boards, the concept of contact hours begins to blur.

With less time formally necessary to achieve credits or degrees, do adult learners in accelerated programs graduate sooner than their peers in conventional programs? One study found that 26 percent of adult students had graduated after three years from an accelerated program in a private college as compared to 18 percent who had graduated in the same time period from a conventional academic program at a public college (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001). After six years, the difference in graduation figures between the two schools had decreased and was no longer significant: 37 percent from the accelerated program and 32 percent from the conventional program. From the perspective of this study, neither accelerated

programs nor conventional programs favored degree completion for adult students. Yet a significant percentage of adults did earn their degrees more quickly in the accelerated program.

Why Accelerated Learning Programs Are Controversial

Conventional academics have criticized schools with accelerated programs for stressing convenience over substance and rigor (Wolfe, 1998). They argue that increased contact time is necessary for reflection and analysis of what is being learned. There is also the question of how well instructors can cover the appropriate amount of content in a shortened period of time. Critics regard accelerated courses as being too compressed to produce consistent educational value. They perceive these courses as sacrificing breadth and depth, resulting in learning that is crammed and poorly developed (Shafer, 1995). These critics have referred to universities that use accelerated formats as “McEducation” and “Drive-Thru U.” to emphasize their relationship to fast food restaurants and their inferiority to more conventional schools (Traub, 1997).

As Brookfield points out in Chapter Seven in this volume, accelerated programs may represent a commodification of learning in which businesses sell a product (a degree) in a way that undercuts the competition, with students spending less time studying and less time at school. “After all,” he writes, “the concern is often to move as many people (paying customers) through a program as quickly as possible, so that more may be recruited into the next cycle.”

In addition, accelerated learning programs often do away with such conventional academic accoutrements as tenure, nonprofit status, the semester system, and full-time faculty (Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999). The programs rely on affiliate or adjunct faculty who have full-time jobs apart from the university and usually apply a standardized and predesigned curriculum. In fact, some programs offer a marketing strategy that emphasizes that students will learn from “working professionals.” The implication is that these instructors will be more attuned to the realities of today’s workplace. Such transparent advertising implicates the irrelevance of the more established “ivory tower” university. In general, these policy differences and marketing campaigns threaten the status quo of conventional academics and probably stimulate their criticism of accelerated learning programs.

Quality of Accelerated Learning Courses and Programs

As in the case of conventional academic programs, we cannot make a general assessment that accurately fits all the accelerated learning programs in higher education. We know immediately that the variety of possibilities is

immense and that all programs are not excellent. We also know that the issue of quality in education is a conundrum, a perplexing question rife with the conflicting values, standards, and criteria of scholars and public alike. Following are some of the barometers of quality in higher education that have been applied to accelerated learning programs.

Accreditation. As part of an accredited college, regional accrediting bodies such as the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools assess accelerated learning programs. Although the process of regional accreditation review is not without its critics, it generally affords the public an understanding that an institution that receives accreditation has met acceptable academic standards and has the resources to provide a satisfactory college education. In addition, individual departments within accelerated programs such as management and accounting are eligible for review by national, professional, and specialized accrediting bodies. There is yet no published review of how well accelerated learning programs fare when they submit a particular department or discipline for evaluation by these specific accrediting agencies.

Learning. There remains the strong intuitive notion in higher education that learning is less effective when less than the traditional amount of time is devoted to it. Researchers have studied the relationship between time and learning, but their findings are not clear (Karweit, 1984). Walberg's synthesis (1988) of the time and learning research concluded that time is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning and that time in and of itself is only a modest predictor of achievement. Depending on the task at hand, other factors that influence learning, as much as or more so than the time spent on learning, are student capability, quality of instruction, and personal motivation (Wlodkowski, 1999). In general, the findings from these studies suggest not allocating fixed amounts of time to learning without consideration of the previously mentioned factors. This generalization is also supported by recent brain research indicating that the neural connections and networks that make up long-term memory (the part of learning that lasts) will fade unless the memory unit is reused or reinforced through application or relationships relevant to one's life (Ratey, 2001).

Recent studies in which researchers compared the learning of younger (traditional) students enrolled in sixteen-week courses with the learning of adult students enrolled in five-week versions of the same courses suggest that accelerated courses provide levels of learning indistinguishable from or greater than those demonstrated by the younger students in conventional courses (Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999; Wlodkowski, Iturralde-Albert, and Mauldin, 2000).

Using summative assessments that required students' demonstration of critical thinking and application of a learned knowledge base, Wlodkowski and Westover (1999) investigated three courses: Accounting II, Business Law, and Introduction to Philosophy. They found that regardless of format, conventional or accelerated, four of five student assessments met a standard

of satisfactory to excellent for course work at the college level as judged by three faculty experts in their respective fields of study. In a similar study conducted in Spanish in Puerto Rico, Wlodkowski, Iturralde-Albert, and Mauldin (2000) investigated four courses: Introduction to Economics, History of Puerto Rico, Human Relations in Business, and Labor Relations. They found that the average performance of the older students in the accelerated courses was significantly higher than the average performance of the younger students in conventional courses as rated by three faculty experts in their respective fields of study. Findings from these two modest studies exemplify the possibility that factors such as motivation, concentration, work experience, self-direction, and, paradoxically, an abbreviated amount of time for learning may catalyze learning.

In a more qualitative comparative study, Conrad (1996) found that intensive courses became rewarding and powerful learning experiences when certain attributes were present (see Chapter Three, this volume). These attributes included instructor enthusiasm and expertise (usually gained through experience), active learning, classroom interaction, good course organization, student input, a collegial classroom atmosphere, and a relaxed learning environment. When these attributes were present, the intensive courses allowed for more concentrated, focused learning; more collegial, comfortable classroom relationships; more memorable experiences; more in-depth discussion; less procrastination; and stronger academic performances. When these attributes were missing, writes Scott (Chapter Three, this volume), students reported “intensive courses to be tedious, painful experiences.”

Student Attitudes. Historically, college student evaluations of conventional courses generally are positive and indicative of student satisfaction (Astin, 1993). This trend is true for adult student perceptions of accelerated courses and programs as well. The findings of more recent studies (Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999) reflect the findings of the first comprehensive review (Scott and Conrad, 1992) of research assessing accelerated formats. In both, students, especially adults, appreciate their effectiveness and the strong interest they cultivate.

When the perceptions of adult students in accelerated courses are compared with the perceptions of younger students in conventional versions of the same types of courses with the same instructors, both groups generally have positive and similar attitudes toward their courses. These findings noted that both reported valuable learning experiences with positive social climates for peer interaction (Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999). In a qualitative study, Kasworm (2001) found that adults perceived their accelerated degree program to be “a supportive world defined for adult learners” as compared to their previous impersonal and bureaucratic young adult collegiate experiences (see Chapter Two, this volume).

Alumni Attitudes. Another possible indicator of quality is alumni attitude toward accelerated courses. Since alumni have hindsight and experience

in the workforce after they have completed their accelerated degree programs, their perceptions are tested by time and their actual work experiences. When alumni attitudes toward the accelerated courses of Management, Human Resource Management, and Corporate Finance were assessed, their perceptions were nearly as positive as those of the current students measured with the same self-report survey as cited above (Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999). These courses were part of their major, and their satisfaction may be related to this fact (Astin, 1993). Nonetheless, these alumni were randomly selected from among eight hundred graduates from the three colleges and represent a broad range of course sections and instructors in accelerated courses.

The Initial Evidence. When the four barometers of quality—accreditation, learning, student attitudes, and alumni attitudes—are considered, the initial evidence is that adults in accelerated programs do learn satisfactorily and in a manner that meets the challenge of conventional college course work. These adults also consistently report a positive outlook toward their accelerated learning experience.

On average, the adult students in the studies cited were fifteen years older and with fifteen years more work experience than the younger students in the conventional courses. These differences may be part of a constellation of characteristics that enable adult students who self-select into accelerated programs to do well in a more abbreviated learning experience. For example, professional work experience probably enhances the writing skills of many adult learners. Report writing in business requires one to organize facts and data into clear and direct narratives. Persistence studies offer insight into some of these characteristics.

Persistence and Success in Accelerated Programs

There is a great deal of research about the persistence and success of traditional-age college students, but few studies focus on adult students, and even fewer attend to adult students in accelerated learning programs. Based on studies at several colleges (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001; Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999), the typical adult student in an accelerated program is a thirty-six-year-old white woman who is married, working full time outside the home, and with more than fifteen years of work experience. Although the range varies widely among individual colleges with accelerated programs, the undergraduate degree completion rate for adult students in the studies cited averages close to 40 percent within six years. Nationally, the six-year graduation rate is 38 percent for undergraduate students, regardless of age, in large urban state colleges and universities (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1997).

Researchers (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Campbell, 2002) have recently completed a two-year study to identify factors that influence adult students' continuing involvement in course work or graduation (persistence) and grade point average (success).

The study examined two schools: a large faith-based university with an extensive cadre of accelerated programs (enrollment 11,500 adult students) and a public university with an enrollment of 11,000 students with a large adult population primarily in traditional programs.

The researchers used four methods to collect data: (1) a historical analysis to track the records of a cohort of 370 or more adult students at each institution from 1993 to 1999; (2) the Adult Learning Survey (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001) to assess a set of variables among current students that included demographic characteristics, transfer credits, financial aid, and motivation factors; (3) an exit survey to understand the reasons that adults left their respective college; and (4) telephone interviews to more qualitatively understand their experiences prior to withdrawing from college. This study provided the following important findings:

- Adult students benefit from having significant prior college experience before enrolling in four-year colleges, whether in accelerated or conventional programs. Having more transfer credits was associated with degree completion at both schools. Prior college experience may provide some degree of confidence, coping skill, and familiarity with college learning, contributing to successful persistence and degree attainment.

- Adult students with higher grades were more likely to persist and succeed at both institutions. This finding is consistent with conventional wisdom and prior research based on traditional-age students (Astin, 1993).

- Financial aid strengthened adult student persistence at both institutions. At the school with the accelerated program, adults who received financial aid were three times more likely to persist than adults who received no financial aid. For adults in the school with the accelerated program, 50 percent of the students indicated “not enough money to go to school” as a significant reason for leaving, and 46 percent recommended additional financial aid as something their college could do to influence them to continue their enrollment. In this regard, clearly more women than men called for “lower tuition costs” (81 percent versus 41 percent) and “additional financial aid” (60 percent versus 27 percent).

- Lack of time was the dominant theme for leaving both colleges. The adult students repeatedly and emphatically mentioned competing priorities and not having enough time to meet the demands of family, work, and school. Among adults in the school with the accelerated program, the top two reasons for leaving college indicated in the survey were “conflict between job and studies” (60 percent) and “home responsibilities too great” (59 percent).

- At least one-fourth of the students at both schools saw improved guidance and better advising as a positive influence for remaining in school. Misinformation, confusion, and lack of follow-up were major complaints from the students in the accelerated program.

- Women were twice as likely as men to graduate within six years from the school with the accelerated program. The assessments did not shed light on this intriguing finding.

- Better social integration with peers correlates with persistence at both schools. Research findings from other studies confirm that positive involvement with peers and faculty encourages adult students to persist (New England Adult Research Network, 1999; Tinto, 1998).

- A higher percentage of students graduated sooner from the school with the accelerated format. After three years, 26 percent of adult students had graduated from the school with accelerated programs, while 18 percent had graduated from the school with the conventional programs. This finding, although expected, is seldom documented.

As is often the case when studying alternative educational formats, findings from such studies offer implications for both conventional and more radically different educational institutions. It is obvious from this research that there is a need for increased financial aid for adult students, particularly women. Other studies have found that most adult undergraduates rely on personal funds to cover college costs (Aslanian, 2001). Only 20 percent use loans, 19 percent receive grants or scholarships, and 18 percent receive tuition reimbursement. When tuition reimbursement is available, 70 percent of adults use this benefit. Financial sources including federal aid, foundation support, and tuition discounts are areas for new policy development to assist adult students, whether they are in schools with accelerated learning programs or with conventional learning formats.

These findings also support the creation or expansion of weekend course schedules for adults. Weekend courses or programs offer adults, especially women conflicted with job and family responsibilities, more flexibility in finding resources to remain in school. Although less than 10 percent of adults attend weekend courses, nearly half have reported a strong interest in this alternative (Aslanian, 2001). An accelerated program with its intense schedule is likely to make weekend courses a more adaptable choice for adults with family and work priorities.

In general, advising needs to be a more understandable and dependable process for adult students. This is especially so in accelerated programs where the process of course taking and learning moves quickly. During the first year of enrollment, effective advising is crucial. Course selection and sequencing can be critical in making or breaking the confidence of a novice adult student with little college experience.

Finally, deepening positive involvement with peers and faculty continues to encourage adult students to persist. This well-known finding appears to be true for adult students in accelerated programs as well (see Chapters Two and Three, this volume). Peer cohorts and support programs have been instrumental in significantly improving retention in schools with accelerated programs (P. Coffman, personal communication, 2001).

Issues for Further Research

Accelerated learning programs in higher education began about twenty-five years ago. As new and fledgling enterprises, they did not have the resources or time to engage in organized research. Today, most studies in the field of accelerated learning tend to be modest at best. Often, these studies are doctoral dissertations. Only within the past five years has there been an effort to conduct research and share findings in professional associations. The expansion of accelerated learning programs in higher education has far exceeded a rigorous assessment of their context, process, or outcomes.

Most of the studies reported in this chapter are directed toward undergraduate business management programs, probably the most heavily enrolled and attractive accelerated programs nationally. Some of the reasons that business management programs are so popular are that the adult market for them is large and their professional experience transfers to business course work. Also, adjunct faculty can be readily secured from the business sector, with their expertise obvious and relevant to adult students. In addition, business curriculum is relatively uncomplicated and easy to generate into standardized modules. Deepening the appeal of business programs has been a national economy that until recently makes adults hopeful of new and better jobs on graduation. However, research that can more adequately inform the development of accelerated formats throughout other important disciplines in higher education is lacking. In this respect, we need studies directed toward accelerated programs in areas such as the physical and natural sciences and medicine and engineering.

With the exception of the qualitative study by Scott (1996), we have not compared the learning and attitudes of young adult students below the age of twenty-five in accelerated formats with young adult students in conventional formats of the same courses. Researchers have had difficulty finding large enough samples of adults below the age of twenty-five in accelerated courses to make these comparisons. There may be an extensive number of younger adult students who could effectively learn in an accelerated format. This is an important direction for educational policy research.

We also lack research that compares the characteristics and performance of working adults in accelerated formats with working adults in conventional formats of the same courses. Finding large enough samples is again the major hindrance to such studies. Research of this nature could better inform us about the quality of accelerated courses and whether there are significant differences between students who are effective and students who are not effective in accelerated programs. In terms of persistence, the initial evidence is that there are few differences of any significance between adults who attend schools with accelerated programs and those who attend schools with conventional programs.

Studies of adult student persistence and success have just begun. We need to extend studies of this nature to a wider sample of colleges and adult

students. With this research, we may identify the structures and processes within colleges that increase adult access and opportunity for degree completion. These studies need to include the tracking of students and a specific understanding of advising procedures, financial aid policies, course sequencing, cohort structures, teaching methods, and motivational influences. Such research will help us to define practices that realistically foster success for adults in accelerated programs as well as in traditional programs.

In higher education, we are in a new world of learning, no longer bound by the conventions of the past. On-line learning, technologically mediated learning, accelerated learning, for-profit as well as nonprofit providers, and a burgeoning adult learner market have transformed higher education. Almost 75 percent of undergraduate students today are considered nontraditional (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). These students are typically a few years older than most high school graduates, attend college part time, are financially independent, and delay their enrollment into college beyond high school graduation. Given the demands of their jobs and families, they prefer programs that are time efficient and responsive to their needs and lifestyles (Aslanian, 2001).

Colleges with accelerated programs accommodate nontraditional students. Yet these institutions remain challenged by many of the same issues that face traditional universities: how to provide a quality education for all students who attend their schools, how to remain true to their mission, and how to be an agent of equitable social and economic improvement in a global world. Rigorous procedures of self-assessment and research within and between schools with accelerated programs are critical to these purposes. This chapter has described such a beginning in the shadow of a much larger future.

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