This chapter provides a research-based overview of accelerated learning as a program and educational format in higher education today. *Source: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 97, Spring 2003, pp. 5-15.*

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 also one of the most controversial changes as well, challenging such fundamental academic structures as faculty tenure and the standard 45 clock hours of instruction. At the Center for the Study of Accelerated Learning we have identified 225 colleges and universities with specifically identified accelerated programs. The vast majority of these are 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 (200l) reports that 41 percent of students enrolled in degree-granting higher education institutions in Fall 1998 were adults (Digest of Education Statistics 2000, Table 175). These 6 million students (age 25 and older) need a college education to develop their careers and to acquire new skills and knowledge in a global society where they are likely to have longer life spans. In the past twenty years, nontraditional universities such as the University of Phoenix (with more than 100,000 students) have emerged with accelerated learning formats to attract adult learners. However, most accelerated programs are found in traditional institutions (at least 200) 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 B.A. degree programs for adult students. Sixty percent of these programs had begun in the last 13 years (Mission, Formation and Diversity Project, 1999). Many of these programs 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 phenomena. Universities, from the United States or with assistance from organizations within the U. S., are featuring this approach in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Ireland, Germany, and Australia.

What is 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 20 hours of class time versus 45 hours of class time; and for a shorter duration --- for example 5 weeks rather than 16 weeks. Accelerated courses, often referred to as intensive courses (Scott and Conrad, 1992), are usually structured in condensed formats including 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, 8 weeks rather than 16 weeks, but contact hours are very difficult to calibrate. With instructional configurations such as video streaming, list serves, chat rooms, 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 (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001) 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 graduated in the same time period from a conventional academic program at a public college. 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. Overall, 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 are Accelerated Learning Programs 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 this sourcebook (Chapter 7), accelerated programs may represent a commodification of learning in which businesses sell a product (a degree) in a way that undercuts the competition--- students spend less time studying and less time at school. "... After all, 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." (page).

In addition, accelerated learning programs often do away with such conventional academic accouterments 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 who 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. Below 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, the process 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. At the present time, there is no published review of how well accelerated learning programs fair 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 (1988) synthesis 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 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 which indicates 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 16-week courses with the learning of adult students enrolled in 5-week versions of the same courses suggest that accelerated courses provide levels of learning indistinguishable or greater than those demonstrated by the younger students in conventional courses (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999; Wlodkowski, Iturralde-Albert, & 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 out 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, & 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). These "high quality 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. However, when these attributes were missing, students reported "intensive courses to be tedious, painful experiences (Chapter 3, this volume)."

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 & Westover, 1999) reflect the findings of the first comprehensive review (Scott & 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 & 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 2).

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 more tested by time and the "real life" of their jobs. 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 & 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 800 graduates from the three colleges and represent a broad range of course sections and instructors in accelerated courses.

When the four barometers of quality discussed in this research overview: accreditation, learning, student attitudes, and alumni attitudes, are considered, there is initial evidence that adults in accelerated programs do learn satisfactorily and in a manner that meets the challenge of conventional college coursework. These adults also consistently report a positive outlook toward their accelerated learning experience.

On the average, in the studies cited, the adult students were 15 years older and with 15 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

In general, 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 an even rarer number attend to adult students in accelerated learning programs. Based on studies (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001; Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999) at several colleges, the typical adult student in an accelerated program is a 36-year-old white woman who is married, working full-time outside the home, and has better than 15 years 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, & Gahn, 2001; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Campbell, 2002) have recently completed a two-year study to identify factors that influence adult students' continuing involvement in coursework or graduation (persistence) and grade point average (success). The study involved 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) an 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, motivation factors, and so forth; 3) an exit survey to understand the reasons why adults left their respective college; and 4) phone interviews to more qualitatively understand their experiences prior to withdrawing from college. Important findings from this study were:

- Adult students benefit from having significant prior college experience before enrolling in four-year colleges, whether in accelerated or in 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 enhanced 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 those adults who were non-financial aid recipients. 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 vs. 41 percent) and *additional financial aid* (60 percent vs. 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 (Aslanian, 2001) have found that most adult undergraduates rely on personal funds to cover college costs. Only 20 percent use loans, 19 percent receive grants or scholarships, and 18 percent receive tuition reimbursement. However, 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 in schools 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 move 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 2 & 3). Peer cohorts and support programs have been instrumental in significantly improving retention in schools with accelerated programs (Coffman, 2001).

Issues for Further Research

Accelerated learning programs in higher education began about 25 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 last five years has there begun to be 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 article are directed toward undergraduate business management programs, probably the most enrolled and attractive accelerated programs nationally. Some of the reasons why business management programs are so popular are that the adult market for them is large and their professional experience transfers to business coursework. Also, adjunct faculty can be readily secured from the business sector with their

current expertise obvious and relevant to adult students. In addition, business curriculum is relatively uncomplicated and easy to generate into standardized modules. Further enhancing the appeal of business programs, has been a national economy that makes adults hopeful of new and better jobs upon 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 25 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 25 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 those who are effective and those 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 adults who attend schools with conventional programs.

As this chapter points out, recent 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 non-profit providers, and a burgeoning adult learner market have transformed higher education. Almost 75 percent of undergraduate students today are considered "non-traditional" (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; 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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