

## **The Benefits of an Accelerated Learning Format in Teacher Education Programs**

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## *Abstract*

Because our student population is increasing, 50,000 additional teachers will be needed in the U.S. within the next ten years. Overcrowded teacher education programs in traditional universities cannot guarantee the availability of necessary classes, however, and students desiring a teaching credential anticipate an extended time frame for credential completion.

There is growing interest in the benefits of accelerated programs to meet this critical need. Researchers have found that outcomes from such compressed courses equal (or surpass) outcomes from traditional course formats. National University employs such an accelerated format and has been highly successful in training future teachers for California classrooms.

Key Words: teacher education, accelerated learning, compressed learning, program format

## *Introduction*

Teacher retention is a critical issue in education world wide. As baby boomers retire, our U.S. school enrollment is projected to increase by one million children in the next ten years, and 50,000 additional teachers will be needed to fill the gap (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Because

teacher education programs in traditional universities cannot guarantee the availability of necessary classes, students desiring a teaching credential experience frustration, anticipating a longer time frame for credential completion and entrance into the classroom. As a consequence, there has been growing interest in the benefits of accelerated programs to meet this need, and nontraditional students (adult learners) are entering them in large numbers (Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003).

These non-traditional learners are very practical. They have limited time for study and need more flexibility and convenience than do traditional students. Over 250 U.S. colleges and universities currently offer such accelerated programs, and it is projected that 25 percent or more of all adult students will be enrolled in accelerated programs within the next ten years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Accelerated learning is being looked at worldwide as a possible vehicle for educating more of the population in less time.

### *What Are Accelerated Courses and Programs?*

These programs are structured to take less time than conventional programs to attain a degree or credential. Accelerated courses are often taught sequentially (one at a time) rather than in the traditional parallel fashion in which several classes are taken at once. Rather than splitting

one's focus between several subjects for one semester, the student focuses on one subject at a time with deeper concentration

Most traditional universities use a parallel style format, while universities that have accelerated programs such as National University use a sequential model for all programs. Greiner, Serdyukov, Tatum, Subbotin, and Serdyukova (2005) would contend that such a sequential model meets the needs of adult learners better than the traditional parallel model since it seems to reduce the number of distractions in students' lives so that they can give more focused attention to one subject. Students have shared that this "one class at a time" format allows them to focus all their attention and energy on one subject and that the learning tends to be deeper.

Accelerated learning formats require the same number of class hours as a conventional format, but these hours are compressed into fewer weeks. Accelerated courses have five common characteristics: "short duration, more frequent and lengthier lessons, compressed learning information, efficient activities, and intense learning processes" (Serdyukov & Serdyukova, 2004). Evidence suggests that such accelerated learning programs are very effective with nontraditional learners, operate at lower costs, and have outcomes that are comparable (and often superior) to traditional university formats (Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003).

### *Who Are These Students?*

"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" (Wlodkowski, Mauldin, and Gahn, 2001; Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999). They have limited time for study and need more flexibility and convenience than do traditional students (Wlodkowski, 2003). Most nontraditional students work more than 20 hours a week and have families. They cannot do college living in a dorm! Adult learners "tend to prefer single-concept, single-theory courses that focus heavily on the application of the concept to relevant problems" (Zemke & Zemke, 1981, p. 609). They are very efficiency-minded asking "What is the cheapest, easiest, fastest way to learn to do that?"

### *Why Do Students Choose Accelerated Classes/Programs?*

#### *What Are the Benefits?*

Time is the first important reason students choose an accelerated format. Convenience of learning is another. These are working adults who value a program that can be finished in a shorter time. They are older than traditional college students and are trying to balance their work life, home life, and school. Time is precious for these adult learners and a shorter, compressed schedule of courses is appealing. In addition, classes are scheduled far ahead so that students see each month's course completion as

a step toward their goal. According to Serdyukov, et al. (2005), the benefits of accelerated learning are as follows: they

- Enhance students' learning and development by keeping them focuses on the given subject matter and learning
- Allow students to achieve their goals faster through condenses short-duration courses
- Allow compression of the overall time of instructional time while increasing productivity of learning providing comparable or superior outcomes
- Offer a flexible accommodation to the needs and conditions of working adults making learning more convenient
- Increase accessibility, flexibility, and convenience of learning raise the quality of education, and generally boost students' satisfaction.

*What Are the Criticisms of Accelerated Learning Formats?  
Why is Compressed Learning Controversial?*

Such compression of classes is thought by some to lead to weaker learning outcomes and that the crammed curriculum does not allow adequate time for reflection and deep learning. Critics propose that the *quality* of learning is a function of *hours* in the classroom. The longer the class, the more content will be covered. In a comprehensive review of 100 articles, however, Scott & Conrad (1991) concluded that outcomes from compressed courses equal (and sometimes surpass) outcomes from

traditional course formats. In comparative courses such as law, computer science, and business administration, the outcomes showed either no significant difference between traditional formats and compressed formats or that outcomes of compressed learning were stronger. The researchers added that “students were often motivated, excited, and inspired by intensive course experiences and that concentrated learning generated a level of satisfaction unlike that experienced in traditional-length courses” (p. 444).

In the Seamon study (2004), for example, psychology classes were compared—one a semester long class and one an intensive format. “Students in the intensive version of the course performed significantly better than students in the semester length course on posttests of content and questions tapping higher-order learning. The two groups did not differ significantly in their affinity for learning..., age or GPA, suggesting the superior performance was the result of the intensive course format and not any pre-existing student characteristics” (p.1, abstract). When psychology teachers were surveyed on student preference between intensive formats or semester-length courses, they overwhelmingly rated the accelerated classes as more satisfying.

## *Quality of Accelerated Learning Courses and Accelerated Programs*

Wlodkowski (2003) addresses some of the measures of quality in higher education that have been applied to accelerated learning programs: (1) accreditation, (2) learning, (3) student attitudes, and (4) alumni attitudes.

### *Accreditation*

Regional accrediting bodies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) are a public indication that a college or university has met acceptable academic standards and has the resources to provide a satisfactory higher education experience. Departments within a school (such as the School of Education) have their own accrediting bodies as well. In California, for example, teacher education programs are evaluated by the California Credentialing of Teacher Education (CCTC). National University is approved by WASC and the credential program is in good standing with CCTC.

### *Learning*

Although there remains the strong notion that learning is less effective when presented in less than the traditional amount of time, results of research do not bear that out. Conversely, researchers found that time studying did not necessarily bring more learning. When recent researchers compared the performance of younger (traditional) students with that of older students taking the same course in an accelerated format, the results

indicated no difference in the levels of learning (Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999; Wlodkowski, Iturralde-Albert, and Mauldin, 2000). Consistently, the outcomes showed either no statistically significant difference or that compressed classes were stronger.

In assessing the quality of learning, Swenson (2003) asks two important questions: "At the end of an independent lesson...courses, or program, 'do learners know they should know? Can they do what they should be able to do?'. . . There should be no differences in expectation regarding quality practices or outcomes." Learning should become the purpose of education and "formats are judged by how much learning takes place." (p. 86).

### *Student Attitudes*

Like students in traditional programs, adults in accelerated classes evaluate their learning experience as positive (Scott and Conrad, 1992). Kasworm (2001) found that in accelerated programs, students perceived their experience to be "a supportive world defined for adult learners" (p. 2) compared with their previous experience in traditional colleges during their younger days. The students perceived that the program offered them a world of structure: the program was predictable, the courses were taken one at a time, and there was a foreseeable timeline to completion. "The accelerated degree program was seen as locking them into a learning

process that held them in place and that pushed them to completion” (Kasworm, 2001, p. 8). “Learning one subject at a time was an important asset of an accelerated learning experience so there was no focus overload of learned information. . . .These students valued their fellow adult learners as key personal supporters to help them learn and cope with the complexities of their lives. They became a quasi-family of caring and supportive adults faced with adult life demands” (Kasworm, p. 7).

### *Alumni Attitudes*

Because alumni have acquired experience in the workplace after completing their program in accelerated classes, their perceptions of the value of their education are valuable. Similar to the Wlodkowski and Westover (1999) study, the results of a 2005 alumni survey of satisfaction at National University (NU) indicated that graduates were very satisfied with the quality of their education. An overwhelming majority of alumni indicated that their career success is greater as a result of their National University degree and that they would recommend this program (Alumni Feature Assessment, 2005). When asked what convinced them to enroll at National University, the top three responses were (1) accelerated one month format; (2) Evening course schedules and (3) convenient/numerous learning centers.

In a university where all courses are taken in a one course/one month format, these alumni results indicate that students in all schools and departments, in undergraduate and graduate levels (1) were very satisfied with the format and accessibility of classes, (2) believed their education was relevant to their chosen work, and (3) viewed the academic rigor as strong.

### *Teacher Education Program*

National University “recommends more teachers for credentialing than any other single institution in California.” (Factbook, 2006). The School of Education is by far the largest at National University, and the credential program is a thriving part of it. Graduates of the National University Credential program are asked to participate in an exit survey at the completion of the program that measures the quality of instruction and the relevance of classes to their experience in the classroom. Like other programs, these classes are presented in an accelerated format: one class/one month both online and on ground. Classes meet two evenings a week for 4 ½ hours as well as the final Saturday of the month for a total of nine classes or 45 contact hours. This “situated learning” has a practical focus that is tied to real classroom activities, observations, videos of classroom performance, etc. The Methodology courses use practical, hands-on learning experiences and demonstrations, the study of teaching strategies, and lesson plan development.

In the Teacher Education Exit Survey (2004), participants were asked to (1) rate the quality of instruction and faculty in their program; (2) rate the degree the credential program enhanced their ability to manage behavior of students and to teach students from diverse ethnic backgrounds; and (3) rate the value of each class to the development of their teaching ability. Similar to the results of the Alumni survey, 83.4% of students completing the Credential Program Exit Survey rated the quality of teaching as "very good-exceptional," 76% of the participants rated the credential program as enhancing their ability to manage student behavior as good to exceptional (this question connects with the real daily life experience of a teacher), 90% rated the preparation to teach students from diverse ethnic backgrounds very good-exceptional, and 80% rated the entire program as good to exceptional. Student satisfaction and academic performance reported in the Teacher Education Exit Survey mirror the results and conclusions put forth in all studies of accelerated learning programs and courses described in this paper.

### *Conclusion*

The critical need to train more teachers for the classrooms of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is without dispute. Student populations are increasing worldwide, Baby Boomer teachers are approaching retirement, and teacher retention rates remain unsatisfactory. The benefits of an accelerated learning program in which students with Bachelor's Degrees can complete all class

work and required state tests of competence and be ready to enter the fieldwork segment of their program in *one year* need serious consideration. If we can prepare our future teachers well in a shorter period of time and can demonstrate that these students are getting a strong education, one that readies them for today's classroom challenges, more universities world wide would do well to consider adding this compressed format to their traditional offerings. Both students and instructors appreciate the convenience, the shorter time frame, and the real world emphasis accelerated programs afford. Perhaps it is time that more universities take a second look at their options in order to serve their students more fully.

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