

**Evaluating the Quality of Accelerated Courses**  
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**Abstract**

Many working adults enroll in accelerated courses to acquire a college education. This study measured adult student learning and attitudes in three accelerated courses at seven private colleges. Adult students responded to an end-of-course survey and indicated high levels of satisfaction with both the content and instruction of their accelerated courses. Second, a random sample of alumni from these accelerated programs reported general satisfaction 1 to 2 years after completing their degrees. Third, adult students completed summative performance assessments. These measures indicate that near 70 percent of these students demonstrated learning rated as satisfactory or above by faculty experts. These results suggest that accelerated courses can provide levels of learning that meet the standard of rigorous college coursework.

**Introduction**

Demands for and interest in non-traditional, post-secondary programs has increased steadily in recent decades (Aslanian, 2001). In response to these evolving social expectations and market forces, there has been the widespread growth of accelerated courses and programs. These include weekend and evening classes, condensed course formats, workplace programs, and distance learning. Initial research indicates that these innovative approaches appear to be effective in meeting students' expressed goals and facilitating content mastery (Scott & Conrad, 1992). However, most of these studies are limited in scope, duration, and use grades as indicators of learning. In order to deepen an understanding of the effectiveness accelerated courses (3 credit courses of 5 weeks duration and twenty contact hours rather than 16 weeks duration and 40 contact hours), a 5-year evaluation research study was conducted involving seven private colleges with undergraduate enrollments ranging from 500 to 13,000 students. Researchers assessed current student performance and attitudes as well as alumni attitudes for three undergraduate courses: Management, Management of Human Resources, and Corporate Finance in the Business Management departments at each of the colleges.

## **Purposes**

1. To assess the academic quality of a variety of accelerated courses.
2. To assess the value of accelerated courses to students and alumni.
3. To investigate the effects relationship of time in class and duration of course on student learning.

## **Perspectives and Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically, intrinsic theories of motivation (Lambert and McCombs, 1998) and research findings about the characteristics of adult learners (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) may offer explanations about the achievement and attitudes of the students who take accelerated courses. Nearly 95 percent of the students in the accelerated courses in this study are adult learners. Their mean age is 36.3 years and 65.8 percent are women. In addition they average 19 years of work experience.

## **Modes of Inquiry and Data Sources**

Quality of accelerated courses was assessed with three forms of assessment and their associated indicators:

1. Self-report student survey scores. For the three accelerated courses a total of 320 undergraduates responded at the end of their respective courses to a 22-item survey measuring aspects of intrinsic motivation and instructional quality.
2. Self-report alumni survey scores. Three hundred and sixteen of 449 alumni randomly selected from a sample of 1695 graduates of the Business Management Programs of the represented colleges responded to a 22-item survey measuring aspects of intrinsic motivation and instructional quality in the accelerated courses they had taken. (70% return rate)
3. Academic performance on comprehensive problems and case studies as judged by three faculty experts in the domain of study. In the last two hours of each of the six courses, students were given a case study or comprehensive problem to respond to based on the general objectives of the course. A total of 257 students individually responded to these problems. Using rubrics for critical thinking, application of knowledge base, writing skills, etc., the three faculty experts rated each student's paper according to criteria which included excellent, very good, satisfactory, and not acceptable.

## **Results and Point of View**

1. The self-report survey consistently indicates current student perceptions of accelerated courses are positive, e. g., "Overall this course is a valuable learning experience." (97.5% strongly agree or agree)



2. The self-report survey consistently indicates alumni perceptions of accelerated courses are positive, e. g., "Overall this course was a valuable learning experience." (91.8% strongly agree or agree)
3. In academic performance, nearly seven out of ten current students (69.3%) met a standard of satisfactory to excellent, with one out of four (25.7%) achieving a performance of very good to excellent, as judged by faculty experts in their field of study. Using a paired comparison method, interrater reliability for each course was 90% or higher.
4. Seventy-seven percent of the current students and 84% of the alumni indicated they would return to their respective colleges if they could start college again.

The findings of this evaluation research reflect the evidence of earlier studies assessing accelerated learning, that students, especially adult learners, appreciate their effectiveness and the strong interest they cultivate (Scott and Conrad, 1992). In this study both current students and alumni indicate that conditions of intrinsic motivation and quality instruction permeate these courses.

At this time it is difficult to document what accounts for the positive performance of adult learners in this study. The literature offers a rationale from related theories and research but little quantitative evidence based on direct measures. The research on adult learners in higher education indicates that they are generally more self-directed and self-motivated than younger students in higher education are (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1999). Their extensive work experience may help them to focus and self-regulate their learning in way that allow them to read and study at rates which compensate for the shorter duration of accelerated courses. In addition, proximal goals are far more achievable than distal goals (Locke and Latham, 1990). ). Learners in accelerated courses have only to concentrate on one course at a time for five weeks at a time, unlike traditional students who face four or five courses and must allocate their time over 16 weeks. Finally, the research of Jacqueline Eccles (1998) indicates women to be highly motivated by the identity and attainment value of academic tasks. It is likely that many of the women in the accelerated courses are in the process of using this learning to acquire better jobs and advance their careers. It may be that the greater work experience, self-direction, proximal goals, and personal motivation of the adult learners in the accelerated courses positively interact to allow them to achieve rigorous learning even though the *duration* of time for learning is significantly less.

The level of performance for the majority of students in these accelerated courses provides evidence of learning that meets the challenge of college coursework in the Business Management Departments of private colleges across a wide spectrum of student populations and regions. If we consider student attitude, alumni attitude, projected rate of return to the same college, and student performance as indicators of quality, for most students in this study their accelerated courses and programs are a means to an effective college education.

## Educational Importance

In terms of availability, flexibility, effectiveness, and meeting the needs of wider spectrum of adult learners in an increasingly complex and demanding world, accelerated courses and programs offer an educational alternative to traditional college formats. When learning and student perspectives are considered, the evidence from this research indicates that particular accelerated courses and programs (Business Management) can have quality outcomes. Post-secondary education and society benefit from having delivery systems for important and effective learning other than the model of traditional college education. Accelerated courses and programs, now available in more than 250 colleges and universities (Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003), provide an educational option for working adults whose access to a college education is often limited by income, time, and location.

## References

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