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Alternate Degree Program Delivery Formats for Adult Students: What is Lost and What is Gained?

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Abstract: A growing number of adult learners are turning to accelerated degree programs to complete an initial or more advanced college degree. While various aspects of these types of degree programs have been discussed in the literature, relatively little is known about how the epistemological beliefs as well as the self-directed learning readiness of adults who are enrolled in accelerated degree programs change over time. A discussion of the findings of recent research about the relationship and the development of these phenomena by adult learners along with implications for improved adult education form the basis for this research roundtable.

More and more of the nation's over 3,300 institutions of higher education are turning to alternative models to develop and deliver degree-related learning experiences for adults. Accelerated degree programs, cohort-based learning experiences, online courses, and weekend degree sequences have become an increasingly important element of adult higher education today. An examination of the related literature including the works of Imel (2002); Kasworm (2001); Walvoord (2003); and Wlodkowski (2003) among others reveals that a certain amount of information exists about many aspects of these. Despite this, and while the growth of accelerated degree programs has certainly provided adults with a never before seen level of access a college education, many questions still remain unanswered about the nature of the learning outcomes that result from an adult student's participation in these types of learning experiences. In an attempt to achieve a greater sense of understanding about the nature of alternative degree-related program delivery formats for adult learners, recent research has produced an interesting set of conflicting findings (Boden, 2005). These include information about the programs' overall success, the type and character of the learning outcomes that were achieved by students, and the cognitive development and epistemological beliefs of students who were enrolled in these programs. Accordingly, to begin the discussion, the conveners of this roundtable will share data from their research concerning the epistemological development levels of cohort and non-cohort based adult students. In one instance, adult learners in the cohort-based programs that were examined in this research were found to be more likely than were their non-cohort program counterparts to possess the self-directed traits of creativity and the ability to use basic problem solving skills. At the same time, they were also found to be less likely to have a positive self-concept as an effective, independent learner, and they possessed less sophistication in their cognitive development than did their non-cohort counterparts. They were also more likely to hold naive epistemological beliefs such as learning does not require effort and intelligence is static. Seemingly then, it may be possible to conclude from these somewhat counterintuitive findings that cohort groups may simultaneously both impede and enhance an adult learner's cognitive development.

Subsequent to discussing and examining the meaning of these and other data from the conveners' research, participants at this roundtable will also have an opportunity to reflect upon the many philosophical, ethical, and academic issues that this information presents to educators of adults who are planning and implementing accelerated and cohort-based degree programs. To do

so, the remainder of this roundtable conversation will be organized around the following broadly based questions: 1) To what extent should alternative degree programs seek to foster the cognitive development of adult learners versus providing content based learning experiences of an expedient and convenient nature? Is it possible to simultaneously meet both outcomes? And if it is, what best practices exist to do so?; 2) Who wins and who loses as more and more degree granting programs for adult learners are being moved to alternative, accelerated and cohort-based delivery formats? Whose needs are really being met? Can a balance between such institutionally driven agendas as maintaining financial viability and achieving enrollment stability and meeting the individual developmental needs of adult learners be equally well achieved? If so, how? and 3) What additional knowledge is needed to assist educators of adults to make better decisions about how to develop accelerated degree programs which will meet both the institutional and individual student's needs? What contributions can research in the field of adult education make in answering this question and improving practice? How so?

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