

ACCELERATED COLLEGE LEARNING FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT: MARKETABILITY-VS-QUALITY?

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This paper examines the question of educational quality with respect to the accelerated or "speeded up" learning format at the college level, for law enforcement personnel. Accordingly, the largest law enforcement college program ever created in the Northeast is carefully evaluated.

The methodology employed incorporates the use of an intensive survey of faculty, asking them to compare their experiences under the conventional and accelerated formats.

The outcome of the survey revealed that the majority of faculty felt that the accelerated format was largely unsuccessful in the program as a result of three major factors: (1) the lack of adequate selection and placement devices for students; (2) the lack of proper training of faculty, and; (3) the lack of learning resources specifically geared to a law enforcement educational program of this nature.

INTRODUCTION

In these days of speeded-up living, the constant sense of time urgency most of us frequently feel has spread to the college setting with the advent of accelerated learning, or the "accelerated format". This format differs from the conventional college format in three important ways. First, it reduces the number of classroom or contact hours for a three-credit course to substantially less than 40-48 hours. Secondly, it enables a student to complete a full or part-time semester in less than 15-16 weeks. Finally, it stresses independent study to a much greater extent than is the case under the conventional format.

Proponents of accelerated or speeded up learning argue, that given highly motivated students, such a format is possible without a decrease in the overall quality of the educational experience.¹ The same degree or level of learning is assumed to be achieved as under the conventional format because of the addition of a greatly expanded independent study component which serves to compensate for the drastic reduction in class time.

The conventional college format is based on the so-called "Carnegie formula", which requires from 40-48 contact or classroom hours for a three-credit course. Most state departments of education have adopted this standard, as have various regional accreditation associations. Consequently, very few colleges have dared to deviate from this guideline.

At present it would appear that fewer than five percent of all criminal justice related programs are utilizing some type of accelerated format in their undergraduate programs and there seems to be no forecast of an expanded trend in this direction in the foreseeable future.² Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is to explore the feasibility of accelerated learning by reconstructing and evaluating the experience of a northeastern private college which adopted and accelerated format for law enforcement personnel. Under this format, contact hours were reduced from 48 to 18 for a three-credit course. With this reduction in classroom time and shortened semesters, it was possible for a student to earn a baccalaureate degree in two and a half years while working full-time.*

Administration of the Program

Students were recruited directly from various law enforcement academies and from the field. To make

*So as not to unduly ruffle administrative feathers (and because it is not of critical import), the identity of the school will not be revealed.

attending as convenient (and appealing) as possible, in addition to campus sections, classes were also held in police precincts, courts and correctional institutions throughout one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country. Once the program was in operation, these so-called "extension centers" were located as much as 50 miles away from the main campus.

It should be mentioned that there was no special testing requirement and only two screening requirements in the selection of students. These were:

- (1) that the student have a high school diploma (of any kind), and;
- (2) that the student be employed by a law enforcement agency.

With regard to this latter requirement, clerks working for law enforcement agencies as civilians were also admitted.

With respect to teaching, resident faculty were originally used exclusively, teaching in the program on an overload basis for an increment above their regular salaries. As the program grew, however, the administration decided to wrest control away from the resident chairpersons and hired a completely separate group of people from the outside to select faculty and generally oversee the program. Consequently, two separate faculties existed with different guidelines for selection, different pay scales, and very different career paths. More to the point, however, those faculty teaching in the law enforcement program received no special training and had no background with respect to teaching in a highly accelerated format. In effect, they were told to cover the same amount of material with the same level of sophistication in 18 hours - that they normally covered in 40 - 48 hours. They were not, however, told how to accomplish this other than being instructed to assign a great deal of extra homework for the independent study component.

Teaching in an accelerated format does require some very different and purposeful strategies than is usually the case when an instructor has a full 40 - 48 hours at his or her disposal. It is important, for example, to decide how much class time should be devoted to a review of material previously assigned, as opposed to material about to be assigned. Since the overwhelming portion of the course material is undertaken outside of the classroom, some examination of the more difficult concepts and other learning obstacles must be undertaken in class if the student is not to fall way behind by the next class meeting. This presupposes, however, that the instructor can anticipate what these obstacles are and cover them adequately during the shortened contact hours. In short, teaching in an accelerated format involves a great deal more than merely talking faster. Classroom time must be highly structured. It must be used as part of a carefully designed plan which enables the instructor to cover all of the regular course material.

Since every course in the law enforcement program required substantial independent research, the issue of library resources became of utmost importance. The campus library, while deemed adequate by outside accrediting agencies, was not easily accessible to the majority of students who were attending classes in off-campus locations. In effect, classes were mostly decentralized in a 50 mile radius around the campus, while library resources were originally centralized in one location. Although some later attempt was made to bring limited numbers of library books to most of the teaching locations, these were never utilized to any degree by the students.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

A survey was conducted of former faculty who taught in the program, for at least one academic year. Furthermore, only those instructors who also had at least one year of experience teaching in a conventional setting were asked to respond to the questionnaire. All other faculty were screened out since most of the questions, and indeed, the

major thrust of the survey related to contrasting these individuals' experiences under both formats.

Of the total of 63 faculty who received the questionnaire, 56 responded. Consequently, the response rate was a surprisingly high 84%. In all, there were about 300 instructors throughout the life of the program which lasted about six years and contained approximately 10,000 students at its peak.*

In response to the question of whether or not, from their own experience, as much course material was covered in the accelerated format as under the conventional 40 - 48 hour format, 45 or approximately 80 percent of the respondents answered "no". The distribution of answers appears in Table 1.

*The program was short lived mainly because of the termination of the G.I. Bill which paid students substantial benefits for attending. When benefits were no longer available, most of the students dropped out of the college.

TABLE 1
 COMPARISON OF THE AMOUNT OF COURSE MATERIAL COVERED UNDER THE ACCELERATED-
 VS-THE CONVENTIONAL FORMATS

Course material covered under the accelerated format (as a % of that covered under the conventional format)	# of respondents n=56 (N=63)	% of respondents
0 - 2%	9	16
26-50%	15	27
51-7%	13	23
76-9%	8	14
100% (no difference between the two formats)	11	20
Totals	56	100%

SOURCE: Survey of former faculty teaching in the law enforcement program. Conducted July/August, 1980.

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As can be seen from Table 1, the overwhelming majority of faculty felt that they covered **substantially less** course material while teaching in the accelerated program.

With regard to special faculty training, fully 91% (or 51 of the 56 respondents) answered that they felt they could have benefited from receiving such-**prior** to teaching in the program.

Another interesting result of the survey was in response to the question: "Should prospective students be required to take a special entrance examination, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, before being admitted into a highly accelerated program such as this?" To this question, 46 or 82% of the instructors stated that they felt there should have been such a requirement, with special emphasis on reading ability. There was, however, no such requirement in this program.

Table Two is a bivariate percentage representation of the views of instructors who taught on campus, as opposed to those who taught in the various off-campus locations (precincts, courts and prisons) concerning their perceptions of whether or not the independent study component was successful. It should be remembered that the independent study component is the critical core of the accelerated format and, if it fails, then so does the very premise of the program.

TABLE 2

BIVARIATE PERCENTAGE TABLE RELATING TEACHING LOCATION WITH PERCEIVED SUCCESS OF INDEPENDENT STUDY COMPONENT

n=56

	Taught on campus	Taught off campus
Indep. Study Component Largely Successful	39%	12%
Indep. Study Component Largely Unsuccessful	61%	88%

An examination of Table 2 indicates that the majority of faculty, regardless of where they taught, felt that the independent study component was unsuccessful. In other words, it was perceived that the students were not completing their out of class assignments adequately. However, it can be seen that the views of those instructors who taught off campus was far more negative than those who taught on campus. Consequently, a follow up question revealed that the most frequent reason given for lack of success with respect to independent study for those faculty teaching off campus was the lack of availability of library and other research materials.

CONCLUSIONS

The issue of whether or not drastically reduced class time results, by itself, in an overall decrease in the total amount of learning that takes place can not be answered here. It has been determined, however, that in the case of one of the largest public employee programs ever established, the faculty perceived the overall experience as a dismal failure. In large part, this can be attributed to the three factors listed below:

- (1) the lack of adequate screening devices in the selection of students
- (2) the lack of proper orientation and training for faculty with respect to strategies and methods of accelerated teaching
- (3) the lack of accessibility of learning resources because of the highly decentralized nature of the program.

As concerns marketability, an accelerated program is appealing to many perspective students because of the reduction in contact hours and the possibility of earning a baccalaureate degree in under four years. In the case of the law enforcement program under discussion, prior to its implementation the college in question had a total

student body of about 4,000. All of these students were attending under the conventional format. One year after the accelerated program began, it rivaled the on-campus day session with an equal number of students. It should be kept in mind that the resident school had been in operation for many years and, in all that time, had only been able to attract 4,000 students. Within three years from its inception, the law enforcement program had more than **twice** as many students as those attending in the resident school. While educational institutions are rarely able to deal with such rapid expansion in terms of selecting large numbers of qualified faculty, providing adequate counseling services, greatly expanding library holdings and the like, the real point to be made here is that, whatever other lessons are learned, the accelerated program attracted students in hoards.

With respect to the question of using more stringent pre-screening methods for student admission, this was not politically feasible since both the police unions as well as the mayor's office had indicated from the program's inception that all law enforcement personnel must have equal access into the program. Although faculty completing the survey did not specifically relate their responses to program accreditation, major problems did arise when the accreditation review took place (focusing on the same three factors previously listed). The accreditation issue became moot, however, since the program virtually self-destructed soon after government funding (G.I. Bill and LEEP subsidies) were discontinued.

This brings us to the major and final question - is there truly a dilemma in that an accelerated program pits marketability against educational quality? In the program examined herein, this does indeed seem to have been the case. However, this should not be seen as an indictment of the concept of accelerated learning per se. Rather, it should serve as a learning experience for other educational institutions by illustration the most dangerous pitfalls which must be avoided if accelerated learning is to have any chance of success.

ENDNOTES

1. **Interview with Dr. John Theobald**, former President of Queens College, City University of New York, May, 1975.
2. Of a total of 39 schools that responded to the survey, only 2 or 5.1% indicated that they have accelerated courses. In both cases, however, these were limited to certain of the electives and advanced courses, rather than the basic or core courses.

REFERENCE

Prizzia, Ross. **The Justice Administration Curriculum Development Report**. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Educational Improvement Fund Project, 1987.