

# Accelerated Degree Programs: Assessing Student Attitudes and Intentions

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**A**ccelerated degree programs, using intensive, shortened “semesters” and longer class sessions, are becoming popular across campuses in the United States and elsewhere (Daniel, 2000; Scott, 1994). In fact, Nixon (1996) found that out of 424 colleges and universities sampled, 217 offered accelerated degree courses and programs. There are many versions of the accelerated format. Some schools have shrunk the traditional 14- to 15-week course to anywhere from 5 to 12 weeks by increasing meeting times from 1 hour or so to as much as 8 hours per session. The end result is that the accelerated class has the same academic contact time—about 45 hours per semester—as a traditional course. Other schools reduce the academic contact hours and substitute team projects, field work, or intern-type assignments with frequently overlapping time periods.

Many educators are predicting that intensive courses and programs will flourish in the future, largely as a result of the changing demographic trends on campuses (Daniel, 2000; Lee, 1996; Scott, 1996). An increasing number of adult, nontraditional, and continuing education students with busy work schedules are returning to continue their education, and it is generally assumed that they prefer shorter, intensive programs (Scott & Conrad, 1991).

**ABSTRACT.** Accelerated degree classes and programs are becoming increasingly popular across college campuses, mainly because of changing demographic trends of students seeking tertiary education. However, there is a lack of research on student attitudes and intentions from an administrative perspective. Investigating a large sample of graduate business students, the authors of this study found that part-time students and those working full time were the most supportive of a proposal to accelerate an MBA program. However, there were significant differences by programs, student status, and source of tuition payments. Important segments of students stated that the intensification would affect their class participation negatively. The authors discuss implications of their results and suggest areas for future research.

Although there is some research supporting this assumption, there is a need for further study in this area (Daniel, 2000; Scott, 1995). Furthermore, with many educational institutions struggling to maintain financial stability, schools often view growing enrollment in part-time or new accelerated programs as a ready source of increased revenue. Whether nontraditional students remain satisfied with accelerated formats will determine their long-term effectiveness and viability.

Even though many administrators, instructors, and some students have misgivings about the effectiveness of accel-

erated formats on learning outcomes, a review of the literature reveals an overwhelming number of studies that report a positive impact—or statistically non-significant results from comparisons of traditional courses with such accelerated ones (Caskey, 1994; Daniel, 2000; Henebry, 1997; O’Mara, 1996; Scott, 1996; Van Scyoc & Gleason, 1993). However, there is a paucity of research dealing with the issue from an administrative perspective. There are some studies that compare student attitudes toward intensive and traditional length courses *after* the students have taken them. In general, these studies have reported positive attitudes toward the intensive courses, with some reservations (Kirby-Smith, 1987; Scott & Conrad, 1991). We were interested in students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward intensive courses *before* the students enroll in them, as these predispositions would affect enrollment. Thus, we sought to investigate what attitudes students had regarding accelerated courses and programs and whether they would opt for an accelerated format if given a choice.

We had two main objectives in this study. First, we attempted to address the scarcity of research regarding student attitudes and intentions by surveying a relatively large sample of students on their views on an accelerated graduate

business program proposal. Second, we compared the demographic and other characteristics of those who preferred an accelerated format and those who chose otherwise.

## Method

### *Procedures and Sample*

We designed a 15-item questionnaire focusing on students' attitudes, intentions, and perceptions about accelerating the graduate business programs and randomly distributed it to 230 graduate students taking classes in the school of business at a private university in the northeastern United States. We gave the following, brief introductory statement:

The School of Business is exploring the possibility of changing the schedule for MBA and graduate business courses to accelerate further our degree programs. Courses would be structured in 10-week modules and meet one time per week for 4 hour. Different courses would be offered over 5 modules during the year.

Essentially, this change would make it possible to run one extra module per year, because the School of Business already had three 13-week semesters and a 6-week summer session. Although some of the particular questions referred to the MBA program, it was understood that the respondents should answer according to the program in which they were matriculated.

The first 10 statements related to student attitudes and intentions. In Table 1, we present the questions/statements, which were coded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Four items were demographic: gender (0 = female, 1 = male), employment status (0 = part-time, 1 = full-time), student status (0 = part-time, 1 = full-time), and program of study. Another question asked the source of tuition payments.

Responses were received from 205 students (an 89% response rate). Of these, 122 (59.5%) were from men and 83 (40.5%) were from women. There were 79 (38.5%) full-time students and 110 (53.7%) part-timers; 16 students (7.8%) did not respond to this question. (The graduate programs were designed as part-time evening programs. However,

many students register as full-time students by enrolling in more than 24 credits per calendar year.) In terms of work status, 132 respondents (64.4%) worked full time, 30 (14.6%) part time, and 41 (20%) were unemployed. Employers paid the tuition for 66 (32.2%) respondents, 42 (20.5%) students paid part of the cost, 78 (38%) paid the full costs, and 17 (8.3%) were in receipt of government assistance (grants and loans). In terms of programs of study, students were classified into one of four groups based on commonality within the programs. The largest number of respondents were MBA students (129, or 62.9%); the second largest group consisted of students registered for the master's in public administration (MPA) and the master of science in health care (31, 15.2%); students studying in specialized business programs in finance and accounting were the third largest group (26, 12.7%); and the fourth largest group contained students enrolled in other related fields such as taxation (19, 9.3%).

### *Analysis*

We applied three types of analysis to the data. We employed descriptive statistics to summarize student attitude, intention, and perceptions. We used the analysis of variance *F* statistic to test the differences between the responses by subsamples, including gender, program of study, tuition payment method, and student status. Finally, we performed Pearson correlation analysis to assess the bivariate relationships between student attitude, intent, and student characteristics.

## Results

As the data in Table 1 show, 63% of the respondents liked the idea of four 10-week sessions per year (thus, there would be an overall 5 modules, counting the summer session), and 64% reported that if there were four sessions, they would take more courses. Only 8% claimed that they would take fewer. However, 44% felt that a class extension of 45 minutes would affect their class participation negatively, and another 22% were neutral. Also, 56% reported that it was important for them

to complete the MBA as quickly as possible (28% were neutral). Overall, about 50% of the students preferred the accelerated proposal to the current traditional 3-hour, once-per-week format, and 13% were neutral. Furthermore, 58% reported that the accelerated program would have or may have attracted them to the university in the first place, and 82% stated that they would or may encourage a person that they knew to attend if the proposal was implemented.

In general, there were only a few statistically significant differences across the various groups for key variables. As the data in Table 2 show, gender did not influence the results regarding attitude and intent; that is, men and women had largely similar views of the accelerated MBA proposal. However, students who worked full time were generally more open to the proposal (see Table 3); essentially, they preferred it to the 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes and stated that they would take more classes if it was implemented. Similarly, students studying part time (who are inclined to be working full time) liked the idea more than their full-time counterparts (see Table 4). But, interestingly, students employed part time were more likely to claim that extending the class time would affect their class participation negatively (see Table 3). In terms of source of tuition payments, students who were paying all the costs themselves were less enthusiastic about the accelerated proposal (see Table 5). Students receiving loans and other government assistance wanted to move more quickly through the program. Very important, we found significant differences in student attitudes when considering programs of study. The MBA and finance and accounting students were less likely to prefer the accelerated proposal as compared with the public administration/health-care and other student groups (see Table 6). The MBA and finance and accounting students also had a greater degree of belief that extending the classes by 45 minutes would affect class participation negatively.

As the data in Table 7 show, students who liked the idea of four sessions per year stated that they most likely would take more classes per year. These students appeared to be less affected by the

**TABLE 1. Frequency Distributions for Key Attitudinal Variables, by Percentage of Respondents**

Statement (no. of respondents in parentheses)	Agreement level (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year. (205)	9.8	19.0	8.3	22.4	40.5
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses. (205)	6.3	12.2	16.6	29.8	35.1
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year. (201)	24.9	38.8	28.4	5.0	3.0
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year. (203)	20.7	26.6	21.7	20.7	10.3
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively. (202)	12.9	20.8	22.3	24.8	19.3
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible. (202)	3.0	13.4	27.7	28.2	27.7
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes. (205)	15.5	22.0	13.2	23.4	25.9

  

Question	Somewhat (no. 1)/ maybe (nos. 2 & 3)			N/A
	Yes	No		
1. In comparison to other programs you explored before enrolling in graduate school, would this accelerated program have attracted you to UNH? (203)	36.9	24.1	22.7	16.3
2. Would you encourage a person you know to attend UNH if the accelerated program is implemented? (203)	45.3	17.7	36.9	—
3. Would your employer prefer this proposed accelerated program over the current system? (200)	17	9.5	27	46.5

Note. Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session.

negative impact on class participation and more concerned about degree completion in a timely manner. Students who claimed that they would take fewer courses per year on the accelerated schedule were more worried about class participation but less concerned with timely degree completion. Also, employment and student status were significantly related to student attitudes and intentions. Students *working* full time were more apt to prefer the accelerated format. However, the opposite held for students *studying* full time.

Part-time students were more likely to support the accelerated proposal.

### Discussion and Conclusions

From an administrative perspective, many aspects of these results were encouraging. Most students liked the idea of four sessions and 10-week modules, with classes running for an extra 45 minutes. A majority of students also stated that they intended to take more courses if four sessions were offered. The results also suggested that many

students would encourage a person that they knew to attend the university if the accelerated program was implemented.

However, a careful examination of the results revealed that, apart from gender, there were statistically significant differences on some of the survey items by employment status, student status, tuition payment source, and—very important—program. Students who were employed full time, like those who attended classes on a part-time basis, were more open to the proposal. It is possible that these two groups comprised largely the same students. Working students generally prefer programs that move them along as quickly as possible, so this result is not surprising. Students who had to pay the tuition themselves were also the least enthusiastic about the proposal. Again this result does not seem to be difficult to explain because an intensification of the schedules would affect their financial situation, as tuition payments would have to be paid more rapidly.

However, the result that was of the most concern was the fact that a fairly high percentage of students, mainly from the MBA and finance and accounting programs, reported that an extension of 45 minutes per class would affect their class participation negatively. Furthermore, many faculty members vehemently opposed the proposal during faculty and other meetings. Kirby-Smith (1987) reported similar results in her study of 15 intensive and 12 matched semester-length courses. Although an overwhelming majority of respondents preferred the intensive over the traditional format, after analyzing the total student response, she concluded that “the negative attitudes expressed by faculty and students toward intensive courses being offered concurrently with 15-week courses are cause for alarm and signal a need for future research . . . it may be advisable for colleges and universities to limit enrollment in intensive courses to a select group of students who are enrolled in special programs in which all courses are being offered in the intensive mode” (pp.130–131). This study shows that the perception of accelerated programming depends on the type of student enrolled in the program. Clearly, students working full



**TABLE 2. Mean Differences on Attitude Variables, by Gender**

Statement	Means		Stat. difference (F ratios)
	Men (N = 122)	Women (N = 83)	
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year.	3.59	3.73	.51
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses.	3.77	3.72	.07
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year.	2.20	2.25	.12
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year.	2.67	2.83	.81
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively.	3.15	3.19	.07
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible.	3.69	3.57	.63
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes.	3.27	3.14	.38

Note. Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

time whose tuition payments are covered by their employer prefer acceleration. Therefore, knowledge of the composition of current and potential students is vital to the decision to implement an accelerated program.

Although there may be many pedagogical techniques to mitigate the potential lessening of student participation, given the size of the MBA program, the potential risk to revenues, and the strenuous opposition by some faculty members, the

university decided not to accelerate the graduate business programs. Nevertheless, the school initiated a separate MBA program that accelerated degree completion by offering Saturday classes in a cohort style to students working full time. Enrollment has grown steadily since the program's introduction.

One limitation of this study was the fact that we used already enrolled students to assess attitudes of prospective candidates. Ideally, we should have obtained prospective students in the sample of students as well, but we could not because of logistical problems. However, current students in a nonaccelerated program also would have been affected by the plan to change the MBA program to an accelerated format, so their attitudes to the change were relevant.

In this study, we were able to discern some of the student characteristics that make an accelerated format desirable. On the other hand, we were also able to recognize the type of student who is likely to prefer the more traditional approach. Of course, the results pertain to the university surveyed, and more research is needed to confirm the results at different universities with various programming options. Finally, it would be important to determine whether students claiming to prefer acceleration upon registering for a course continue to hold that belief throughout a program.

**TABLE 3. Mean Differences on Attitude Variables, by Employment Status**

Statement	Means			Stat. difference (F ratios)
	Full time (n = 132)	Part time (n = 30)	Not employed (n = 41)	
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year.	3.86	3.53	3.05	5.52***
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses.	3.80	3.93	3.46	1.53
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year.	2.10	2.33	2.55	3.53**
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year.	2.63	2.87	3.00	1.50
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively.	3.02	3.60	3.29	2.61*
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible.	3.72	3.52	3.48	.94
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes.	3.38	3.03	2.85	2.44*

Note. Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 4. Mean Differences on Attitude Variables, by Study Status**

Statement	Means		Stat. difference (F ratios)
	Full time (n = 79)	Part time (n = 110)	
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year.	3.20	3.93	12.90***
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses.	3.66	3.78	.46
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year.	2.36	2.14	2.33
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year.	2.79	2.60	1.13
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively.	3.29	3.11	.86
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible.	3.63	3.63	.01
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes.	2.99	3.30	2.05

Note. N = 189 (16 persons did not respond to study status item). Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session.  
\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

**TABLE 5. Mean Differences on Attitude Variables, by Tuition Payment Source**

Statement	Means				Stat. difference (F ratios)
	Employer pays (n = 66)	Student pays part (n = 42)	Student pays all (n = 78)	Government assistance (n = 17)	
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year.	3.98	3.74	3.18	4.18	3.91***
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses.	3.82	3.76	3.54	4.35	1.69
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year.	2.11	2.13	2.43	1.94	1.61
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year.	2.33	3.17	2.95	2.19	4.31***
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively.	3.02	3.19	3.32	2.88	.68
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible.	3.59	3.68	3.50	4.38	2.16*
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes.	3.53	3.16	2.92	3.59	2.01*

Note. N = 203 (two persons did not respond to tuition payment source item). Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session.  
\**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

Other questions remain unanswered, for example: What is the impact on student enrollment if an accelerated proposal is imposed and if class participation is

reduced significantly? Regardless of these unanswered questions, administrators' desires to increase revenues may result in the creation of accelerated pro-

grams. We caution, however, that the quality of education and achievement levels of students should be monitored continuously in these programs.

**TABLE 6. Mean Differences on Attitude Variables, by Program**

Statement	Means				Stat. difference ( <i>F</i> ratios)
	MBA ( <i>n</i> = 129)	Finance/ accounting ( <i>n</i> = 26)	MPA/MS health care ( <i>n</i> = 31)	Other (mainly taxation) ( <i>n</i> = 19)	
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year.	3.50	3.50	4.23	3.89	2.50*
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses.	3.67	3.73	3.97	3.95	.64
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year.	2.26	2.32	2.03	2.16	.54
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year.	2.78	2.62	2.93	2.26	1.23
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively.	3.34	3.50	2.48	2.68	5.27***
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible.	3.52	3.88	3.97	3.65	1.81
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes.	3.17	2.81	3.71	3.32	2.01

Note. Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session. \**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

**TABLE 7. Pearson Correlations Among Key Variables (Decimal Places Omitted)**

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. I like the idea of four sessions per year.	—									
2. If there are four sessions, I would take more courses.	.70***	—								
3. If there are four sessions, I would take fewer courses per year.	-.40***	-.57***	—							
4. Moving to four sessions would have no impact on the number of courses I take per year.	-.34***	-.46***	.38***	—						
5. Extending the class by 45 minutes would affect my class participation negatively.	-.46***	-.32***	.21***	.21***	—					
6. For my career purposes, it is important that I complete the MBA program as quickly as possible.	.56***	.49***	-.31***	-.19***	-.36***	—				
7. Overall, I prefer a 10-week semester with class periods of 3 hours and 45 minutes to the current format of a 13-week trimester with 3-hour classes.	.68***	.53***	-.28***	-.29***	-.58***	.44***	—			
8. Gender	.05	-.02	.02	.06	.02	-.06	-.04	—		
9. Student status	-.23***	-.09	.19***	.12	.11	-.09	-.15**	.03	—	
10. Employment status	.25***	-.05	-.11	-.08	.07	.00	.10	.08	-.68***	—

Note. *N* ranged from 198 to 205. Statements 1 through 7 were rated on a scale with the following anchors: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*). Gender: 0 = female, 1 = male. Study status: 0 = part time, 1 = full time. Employment status: 0 = not working, 1 = part time, 2 = full time. On statements 1 through 4, four sessions meant moving from 3 full sessions and a summer session to 4 full sessions and a summer session. \**p* < .10. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

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