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Measuring the Satisfaction of Students at the Completion of an Adult Learning and Development Graduate Program

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The purpose of this empirical paper is to discuss the level in which the students nearing graduation from an adult learning and development graduate program were satisfied with their learning experience. Historically, colleges and universities have been regulated by accreditation agencies, such as the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, for the purpose of assuring that the adult learners will receive the level of education necessary to perform effectively in professional practice. Colleges of education are further regulated by agencies, such as NCATE. However, state departments of education are now requiring state institutions of higher learning to justify the need for academic programs and the level of training that is being administered in the classroom (Brand, 1997). Colleges and universities are being micromanaged from the state-level similar to the market driven model described by Kotler and Fox (1995). Faculty are now finding they are responsible for assuring the success of their educational program through numerous factors such as program enrollment, recruitment, student retention, student learning gains, and student satisfaction (Brand, 2000). Donaldson and Graham (1999) developed a model suggesting that college outcomes are dependent upon the five elements of (1) prior experience, (2) orienting frameworks (e.g., motivation, self-confidence, and values), (3) the adult's cognition (e.g., declarative, procedural, and self-regulation of knowledge structures and processes), (4) the "connecting classroom" (e.g., avenue for social engagement and negotiating meaning for learning), and (5) the life-world environment (e.g., family, work, and community). Edwards and Usher (1997) examined the understanding of knowledge and education, the place of the university, and the responsibilities for adult educators with respect to economic, social, and cultural dimensions. A study of graduate students found that the academic programs' level of program integration, responsiveness to change, and leadership explained 26% of the predicted value in the change of student enrollment (Milton, Watkins, Spears-Studdard, & Burch, 2003). The literature does illustrate studies that address many contextual factors between the adult learner and higher education. However, the studies do not address the degree to which the academic program is meeting the needs of the adult learners and the demands from governing accreditation agencies, state departments of education, and the administrators of higher education. The purpose of this study was to understand the level to which our graduate students were satisfied with their learning experience while pursuing a master's degree in adult learning and development.

Methods

The researchers developed the Adult Learning and Development Student Satisfaction Scale (ALDSS Scale) to measure the level of student satisfaction. The ALDSS is a 36-item scale designed to measure the level of student satisfaction among the following six factors: (1) curriculum, (2) learning format, (3) course materials, (4) program access, (5) faculty and instruction, and (6) faculty advising. The ALDSS scale asked the students to rate on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) how well they agreed with each of the items on the survey. The students were also asked to rate on a scale of 0 (no need) to 10 (very strong need) the seven subject areas that they would like to see additional elective courses added to the master's degree program. The seven subject areas include: (1) adult learning theory, (2) adult literacy, (3) correctional education, (4) educational technology, (5) higher education

administration, (6) human resource management, and (7) multiculturalism. The ALDSS scale asked students to list the various modes of learning (e.g., traditional, weekend, and/or distance) that they participated in for their master's degree. Finally, the ALDSS scale asked the students to describe themselves with respect to numerous personal characteristics, such as age, race/ethnicity, gender, marital status, number of dependent children, professional title, years of professional experience, and annual income. The primary focus of this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What extent are the graduate students satisfied with their learning experience as it pertains to the six-factor groups?
2. What are the areas of study that the graduate students would like to see additional elective courses added to the curriculum?
3. How do the personal characteristics of the graduate students influence the rating of the six-factor groups?
4. How do the personal characteristics of the graduate students influence the rating of the need for additional elective courses?

The sample for this study was generated from those students in the adult learning and development graduate program who were nearing graduation. The ALDSS scale was administered to 76 graduate students enrolled in the internship course. The internship course is one of the final two courses that the students enroll in for their master's degree. This group of students was chosen because they would have been in the program long enough to be able to effectively rate each of the items on the ALDSS scale. The personal characteristics for the sample are shown in Table 1. The sample consists of graduate students who had a mean age of 38.7 years and 11.5 years of professional development. The overwhelming majority of this sample (88.2%) were female graduate students. The sample consists of an even-split between the White graduate students and the graduate Students-of-Color. The majority of the sample was non-married (56.6%) and/or had no dependent children (55.3%). The majority of the graduate students (55.3%) in this sample had an annual salary range between \$20,000 and \$49,999. However, it is important to note that a large number of our graduate students (25%) earned less than \$20,000 annually, with 10% earning less than \$10,000 annually.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N=76).

Age:	X=38.7 years		Min.=23 years	Max.=59 years	
Professional Experience:	X=11.5 years		Min.=0 years	Max.=36 years	
Gender:	n	%	Dependent Children:	n	%
Male	9	11.8	No Children	42	55.3
Female	67	88.2	1-Child	14	18.4
Race:	n	%	2-Children	17	22.4
White	38	50.0	3-Children	2	2.6
African-American	37	48.7	4-Children	1	1.3
Hispanic/Latino	1	1.3	Annual Salary:	n	%
Marital Status:	n	%	\$0-\$19,999	19	25.0
Single	35	46.1	\$20,000-\$49,999	42	55.3
Married	33	43.4	\$50,000 or more	15	19.7
Divorced	7	9.2	ALD Program Format:	n	%
Widowed	1	1.3	Traditional (evening weekday)	46	60.5
			Accelerated (weekend)	30	39.5

The findings of this study suggest that each of the six-factor groups measured a strong rate of reliability, with alpha values ranging between .71 and .91. The rank-order among the six-factor groups with respect to the rates of reliability, include: learning format ($\alpha=.91$), curriculum ($\alpha=.85$), course materials ($\alpha=.85$), program access ($\alpha=.84$), faculty and instruction ($\alpha=.79$), and faculty advising ($\alpha=.77$). The data for this study was stored in an SPSS 14.0 dataset. In analyzing the results for this study, the authors used a t-test for determining the level of statistical significance between the mean scores.

Results

First, the findings suggest that each of the six-factor groups had positive mean values that ranged between 4.87 and 5.39 (see Table 2). All of the factor groups had mean values of 5.01 or greater, except for the learning format factor which had a mean value of 4.87. The two highest rated factors represented the faculty and instruction factor ($X=5.39$) and the faculty advising factor ($X=5.29$). The two highest rated items among the curriculum factor suggested that the core ALD courses (e.g., required courses) increased the graduate students' knowledge of the adult learning and development theories ($X=5.51$) and the internship course increased the graduate students' skills for professional development ($X=5.24$). The lowest rated item among the curriculum factor suggested that the elective courses somewhat represented the graduate students' interest in professional practice. The two highest rated items among the learning format factor suggested that the course papers ($X=4.99$) and the in-class group discussions ($X=4.95$) were applicable to the graduate students' professional practice. The lowest rated item among the learning format factor suggested that the course lectures were somewhat applicable to the graduate students' professional practice. The highest rated item among the course materials factor suggested that the course syllabi were clear with respect to the course objectives ($X=5.38$). Additional highly rated course material items suggested that the additional course readings ($X=5.17$) and the textbooks ($X=5.03$) increased the graduate students' knowledge of adult learning and development theory. In contrast, the graduate students suggested that the textbooks ($X=4.79$), the additional course readings ($X=4.82$), and the course handouts ($X=4.91$) were somewhat applicable to their professional practice. The highest rated item among the program access factor suggest that the web-based ALD courses allowed the graduate students to participate in coursework that did not conflict with their work schedule ($X=5.51$). However, five of the six items among the program access factor had mean scores greater than 5.10, therefore suggesting that the in-class and/or web-based courses offered to the graduate students did not conflict with their work and family needs. However, the lowest rated program access item suggest that the ALD elective courses could have been offered more frequently in order to meet their academic needs ($X=4.64$). The highest rated item among the faculty and instruction factor suggested that the ALD faculty had a strong understanding of the course topics ($X=5.68$). However, four additional faculty and instruction items pertaining to faculty clearly stating the course requirements, offering multiple modes of learning, providing a quality critique of student course work, and stimulating student interest in the field of adult learning and development had mean scores greater than 5.30. The lowest rated faculty and instruction item suggested that the graduate students would have liked to have seen the ALD faculty participate a little more frequently in the web-based discussions for on-line courses ($X=4.71$). The two highest rated items among the faculty advising factor suggests that faculty effectively explained the ALD exit strategy requirement ($X=5.57$) and the overall requirements for the ALD master's degree program ($X=5.53$). Three additional faculty advising items pertaining to the faculty responding to advisee telephone/email messages, the scheduling of appointments, and effectively explaining the

requirements for the ALD internship course requirement, had mean scores that ranged between 5.09 and 5.38. The lowest faculty advising mean score suggested that the graduate students would have liked for their advisor to have recommended more frequently specific elective courses that would have prepared the student for professional practice ($X=4.83$).

Table 2: Ranked Mean Scores for the Six Factor Groups (6-point scale)

Factors	N	Mean	SD	Variance
V. Faculty and Instruction	76	5.39	.66	.43
VI. Faculty Advising	76	5.29	.69	.48
IV. Program Access	76	5.19	.92	.85
I. Curriculum	76	5.16	.87	.76
III. Course Materials	76	5.01	.75	.57
II. Learning Format	76	4.87	.89	.80

Note: All mean scores greater than 3.50 represent a positive response.

Secondly, the findings suggest that the graduate students would like to see additional courses developed in each of the subject areas, except for the subject area of adult learning theory (see Table 3). The graduate students rated the subject area of adult learning theory with a mean score of 4.86, which is below the 5.00 threshold necessary for warranting a positive rating. The two highest rated subject areas by which the graduate students would like to see more elective courses developed for the master's degree program was in the areas of higher education administration and multiculturalism. However, the findings suggest that the graduate students would also like to see additional elective courses developed in the areas of educational technology, human resource development, adult literacy, and correctional education.

Table 3: Ranked Mean Scores for the Seven Subject Areas that the Students Recommend Developing Additional ALD Graduate Courses (10-point scale)

Factors	N	Mean	SD	Variance
Higher Education Administration	76	7.75	2.82	7.92
Multiculturalism	76	7.24	2.76	7.62
Educational Technology	76	6.92	3.23	10.45
Human Resource Development	76	6.59	3.04	9.23
Adult Literacy	76	6.55	3.12	9.74
Correctional Education	76	6.47	2.96	8.79
Adult Learning Theory	76	4.86	3.76	14.13

Note: All mean scores greater than 5.00 represents a positive response.

Thirdly, there were a number of graduate student characteristics that influenced the ratings among the six-factor groups. The findings suggest that the male students ($X=5.65$) had statistically significant higher ($p<.01$) curriculum mean scores than did the female students ($X=5.10$). The study suggest that the Students-of-Color ($X=5.57$) had statistically significant higher ($p < .05$) faculty instruction mean scores than did the White Students ($X=5.15$). The findings suggest that the students participating in the accelerated weekend program had statistically significant higher ($p < .05$) mean scores for both the learning format ($X=5.23$) and faculty and instruction ($X=5.66$) factor groups than did the students participating in the traditional master's program, with mean scores of 4.44 and 5.17 respectively. There was no significant difference between the mean scores for the six-factor groups and the students' marital status.

Fourthly, as stated earlier, the graduate students strongly desired more elective courses added to the ALD master' degree program in the areas of higher education administration and multiculturalism. However, there was no significant difference in the mean scores for higher

education administration courses with respect to the student characteristics. In contrast, Students-of-Color ($X=8.50$) had a statistically significant ($p < .01$) higher mean scores regarding the need for additional multicultural courses than the mean scores for the White Students ($X=6.00$). In addition, Students-of-Color ($X=7.50$) had statistically significant higher ($p < .01$) mean scores regarding the need for correctional education courses than the mean scores for the White Students ($X=5.45$). In contrast, the White Students ($X=7.68$) had statistically significant higher ($p < .05$) mean scores regarding the need for additional educational technology courses than for the Students-of-Color ($X=6.16$). The male students ($X=8.56$) had statistically significant higher ($p < .05$) mean scores than the female student mean scores ($X=7.06$) suggesting the need for more courses in the area of multiculturalism. Likewise, the male students ($X=9.22$) had statistically significant higher ($p < .01$) mean scores than the female student mean scores ($X=6.61$) suggesting the need for additional coursework in the area of educational technology. The non-married students ($X=7.12$) had statistically significant higher mean scores ($p < .05$) for courses on correctional education, than the married students ($X=5.64$). Finally, the information identifying the typology of graduate students with respect to the six-factor groups will be discussed in the final paper. There were no statistically significant differences between the graduate students participating in the traditional and accelerated weekend format for learning and the areas of study by which students would like to see additional courses developed for the ALD program.

Discussion

The findings from this study provided the faculty a clear understanding that the graduate students completing the ALD master's degree program was by and large satisfied with their overall academic experience. Each of the six factor groups were rated very positively by the graduate students. The findings did suggest that some graduate students believed that a slight adjustment to the learning format might need to be looked at by the faculty, as this was the lowest rated factor. However, the learning format mean scores were much higher for the graduate students participating in the accelerated weekend program than in the traditional middle of the week evening program. In order to better understand this statistic, the faculty would need to more thoroughly investigate whether the process for learning was different between the two programs sites or if the result was due to a difference in the graduate student population. The findings from this study suggested that that the graduate Students-of-Color were more satisfied with the faculty and instruction factor, which is good since the equal number of the ALD students were Persons-of-Color. This result suggest that the faculty in the ALD program are making a strong effort to meet the needs of the adult learning community when it comes to providing instructional plans with respect to race.

The findings did suggest that the graduate students would like to see more elective courses developed for the ALD program that related to the areas of higher education administration and multiculturalism. This result could suggest that many of the graduate students in the ALD program had aspirations for working professionally in higher education. With regard to the multiculturalism result, this finding could be in part due to the nature of the graduate student population in the ALD program, which consisted of 50% Persons-of-Color. However, it was interesting to find that the male graduate students in this sample saw a greater need for more multicultural courses than the female graduate students who represented more than 88% of the sample. In order to better understand this finding between the need for more multicultural coursework and graduate student gender, this would require a more extensive investigation with the graduate students in this study. The study also found that graduate Students-of-Color were more likely to see the need for courses to be developed in the area of correctional education than

the White graduate students. The answer to this result could be that the graduate Students-of-Color could have a greater likelihood of knowing a friend or family member who has or is currently in prison, because of the vast racial disparity among inmates in prison (Messemer, 2006). When more than 65% of inmates in U.S. prisons are Persons-of-Color (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005), then for the graduate Students-of-Color, they may view the need for correctional education courses in order to develop their knowledge and skills for the purpose of teaching inmates in prison and/or to develop programs for the purpose of reducing the rate of recidivism among adult learners in prison. In addition, this study found that the non-married graduate students saw more of a need for correctional education courses to be added to the ALD program which could suggest that married graduate students may be more worried about the safety of working in a prison and what this could mean for their family.

Finally, the findings from this study provide adult education faculty an additional framework by which to evaluate their own graduate programs. This study goes beyond the typical measurements of enrollment numbers, retention, and graduation rates, in which faculty members often have little control. This study provides adult education faculty six factor groups to measure that pertain to their own practice of course delivery and advising, which are factors that faculty often have a direct-line of control. The ALDSS Scale will serve as an additional evaluation tool for faculty to use for accountability studies required by higher education administration, state departments of education, and accreditation agencies. The goal is to provide faculty another avenue for protecting themselves and their programs during this era of market-driven adult and higher education.

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