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Learning from master of education students' experiences in an accelerated online program at a Hispanic-serving institution

Pierre Lu[1]
Taghreed Masri[2]
Tania Garcia[3]


(✉ Corresponding Author)

[1,2,3]*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA, and Canadian University Dubai, UAE.*
[1]*Email: mingtsan.lu@utrgv.edu*
[2]*Email: taghreed.masri@cud.ac.ae*
[3]*Email: tania.garcia05@utrgv.edu*

Abstract

The study aimed to explore Master of Education students' experiences in an accelerated online program, addressing whether course design and instructional practices met student expectations. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study collected data from 204 students through an online survey conducted from 2019 to 2023. The participants were predominantly female (80%) and Hispanic (77%), with the majority enrolled in elementary math and science education (42.6%), followed by content English (26.5%), mathematics education (20.6%), and content mathematics (4.4%). Data analysis included exploratory data analysis (EDA), correlation analysis, ANOVA, and t-tests to identify trends in student feedback. Key findings emphasized the importance of comprehensive program evaluation frameworks and the benefits of condensed course structures and assignment breakdowns. Additionally, effective faculty preparation was linked to positive student experiences, particularly when instructors were both subject-matter experts and skilled in teaching adult learners. Experiential learning was shown to improve engagement and skill development. This study contributes to understanding how accelerated Master of Education programs can be optimized by balancing content delivery, instructional quality, and student workload to foster both professional growth and academic success.

Keywords: HSI, Online accelerated program, Online learning, Program evaluation, Student experience, Survey.

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Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature
Online learning, online program evaluation, and particularly online accelerated master's programs at Hispanic-Serving Institutions are the primary focus of this study. This research is original, as this area has not been extensively explored. The paper shares and discusses insights derived from data collected over four years.

1. Introduction

Students are at the heart of the educational process. Their experience is integral to the continuity of educational institutions. The rapid evolution of higher education has led to significant changes in how educational programs are designed and delivered. One of the most notable trends is the shift towards online accelerated programs, which have recently gained momentum in higher education. These programs are designed to offer flexibility and efficiency through asynchronous coursework and shorter schedules for students who need to balance their studies with other commitments (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). They typically condense the traditional academic schedule, allowing students to complete courses in a shorter timeframe. Lo (2026) defined these programs as "a form of college education that enables students to achieve a desired set of outcomes in a shorter period of time in comparison with the conventional learning formats" (p. 2).

However, the accelerated pace and online format present unique challenges and opportunities for students and educators alike. Some concerns were voiced by learners and instructors about experiencing mental stress, anxiety, and physical pressure, as well as the likelihood of sacrificing the rigor, breadth, and depth of the courses for convenience in online accelerated programs (Yen et al., 2021). Completing difficult coursework in a short period of time in relative isolation within tight deadlines while balancing other responsibilities might pose real challenges for learners (Chicca & Matthias, 2023). Another criticism of such programs comes from viewing them as a neoliberal practice that treats education as a commodity, encouraging marketing to those who are 'time-poor,' such as individuals involved in childrearing and full-time working parents. They are more likely to suffer from different aspects of deprivation in terms of time poverty (Rose, 2017). Rose (2017) argues that the industry-based time construction within the current era of neoliberal capitalism that adopts the 24/7 model, can be manipulative. Within this model, sleep is rarely acknowledged as a necessary element of human functioning, resulting in sleep deprivation for many online students (Ibid). Critics also contend that the compressed nature of accelerated courses might result in poorly developed and crammed learning, which they describe as 'McEducation' and 'Drive-Thru U' (Wlodkowski, 2003). Paulo Freire's liberating perspective on education recognizes students as agents capable of improving the teaching experience by breaking the hierarchical logic between teachers and students, prioritizing horizontality in their relationships (Ferreira, Oliveira, & Cavalcante, 2022). This perspective has led to a greater acceptance of postgraduate students as agents of evaluation of their programs, which has become the basis of postgraduate teaching in different countries around the world (Ferreira et al., 2022).

1.1. Background of the Study

Online programs, including accelerated online programs (AOP), have gained popularity due to their potential to provide quality education in a more accessible and time-efficient manner. These programs are particularly appealing to working professionals and those with family responsibilities, as they can pursue their degrees without sacrificing other obligations (Allen & Seaman, 2017). As pointed out by Shea and Bidjerano (2019), the effectiveness of accelerated programs depends on how their design can meet students' diverse needs and their unique experiences. The authors found out that Students' satisfaction is affected by the quality of interaction they have with their instructors and the support they receive from them. Another research by Kuo, Walker, Belland, and Schroder (2013) also emphasized the role of self-discipline and commitment in the success of students studying online, which indicates that intrinsic and self-motivation and effective time management are critical elements in the online settings.

In addition, the context of the institution shapes students' experiences. Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), where Hispanic students constitute at least 25% of the overall student body, can provide unique insights into studying the dynamics of accelerated online programs because these colleges and universities are instrumental in improving access to higher education for underrepresented populations. It also offers a valuable opportunity to understand, as Garcia (2019) pointed out, how educational innovations can support students from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds. These online programs, as Salama and Hinton (2023) suggested, are specifically designed to attract students who cannot enroll in mainstream, traditional on-campus courses for a full-time degree, due to reasons related to acceptance of online degrees and recent changes in the global economy, which motivate these students to develop their skills and knowledge through online, hybrid, and accelerated courses.

1.2. Importance of the Study

The study emphasizes the importance of understanding the perceptions and thoughts of master's students in an accelerated online Master of Education program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Although many studies have been conducted on online education, few focus on student perceptions in accelerated online programs, which are distinctive due to their accelerated nature and the characteristics of their students. As Lo et al. (as cited in Miller (2017) noted, "Studies on student retention in higher education in AL programs have only a short research history" (p. 104). So, this indicates that despite the recent popularity of accelerated programs, "studies evaluating their impact are still scarce" (Chen et al., 2024).

Also, there are other factors that make this research study stand out. The study aims to investigate an accelerated online program with courses that are only seven weeks long, while the entire program is completed in ten months. Therefore, understanding how master's students perceive and experience this intensive format is crucial. Their perceptions of the challenges they face, as well as the benefits and effectiveness of the program they study, can provide valuable insights into how the program's structure impacts their learning experiences and outcomes (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2019).

By focusing on graduate-level students, whose critical thinking, evaluations, and experience make them an excellent source of information that might be sharper than that of younger counterparts. Based on their input, the

study addresses their specific needs and expectations of these adult students who seek advanced knowledge and skills, which are directly related to their professional lives, as Gardner (2009) suggested. The insight into their evaluation of the program can deepen our understanding of how well the accelerated format aligns with the students' professional development and educational needs (Gardner, 2009). Postgraduate students can identify existing flaws in their programs, guide curriculum innovations, and suggest changes and modifications that can align the program with their needs and interests.

As Ferreira et al. (2022) emphasize, postgraduate students possess "the know-how to evaluate their postgraduate programs and the right to seriousness and respectful listening especially regarding the following demands: the faculty, management and the dynamics of operationalization of the program" (p. 3) which is what this study aims to do. The demographics of online students, in terms of age range, work experience, IT skills, work and family commitments, and other factors, make online education more attractive among similar professionals and graduate students who aim to advance their careers and income while requiring greater flexibility around their work and family commitments (Salama & Hinton, 2023).

Conducting this study at an HSI adds a unique dimension to the research. HSIs play a significant role in providing access to higher education for Hispanic students and other underrepresented groups. Exploring the experiences of students at an HSI allows us to assess how the program supports diverse learners and promotes educational equity (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2021).

1.3. Purpose of the Study

Based on graduate students' feedback, the study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by providing insider insights and evidence-based recommendations that can improve program design and instructional strategies. These improvements are essential for various stakeholders, including educators, administrators, and policymakers, to enhance the quality of diverse graduate education experiences. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to report the findings from exit survey results obtained from graduating students in an online accelerated Master of Education program at HSI.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Evaluating Accelerated Online Programs

Program evaluation in education is a systematic method used to assess the design, implementation, and outcomes of programs that can provide critical feedback for continuous improvement. Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2004) emphasize the need for comprehensive program evaluation frameworks that integrate both qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the complexity of learning and educational environments. Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004) support this by illustrating how mixed-method evaluations can enhance the understanding of program impacts and outcomes. Specific to Master of Education programs, Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) offer a model to evaluate training effectiveness at multiple levels, from participant satisfaction to long-term changes in professional practice. Mandel (2022) conducted a study evaluating the conversion of 14-week courses to be in an accelerated mode for a master's program in a U.S. university. Mandel (2022) found that condensed topics worked best for students. Breaking down larger assignments into manageable chunks also helped instructors maintain a regular grading schedule, ensured higher quality work, increased time for reflection, and fostered a sense of community among students (Mandel, 2022).

2.2. Faculty Teaching in Accelerated Programs

For instructors teaching in accelerated programs, they should not only be knowledgeable in their disciplines but also understand how to teach adults in an accelerated mode (Miller, 2017). Instructor expertise and enthusiasm, good course organization, a collegial classroom environment, a relaxed learning context, and in-depth discussions are considered high-quality attributes that motivate students and create a positive learning experience for learners (Wlodkowski, 2003). These attributes are all considered to foster active learning (Wlodkowski, 2003). When these attributes are missing, students may find these courses tedious and unrewarding (Ibid). The reality is that while many faculty members are experts in their content areas, they often have little or no exposure to the art of teaching, especially teaching adult learners in accelerated programs (Wlodkowski, 2003). In addition, Chicca and Matthias (2023) suggest that providing orientation before the program start date can help outline the program offered in alignment with students' schedules, plans, and needs. Shelby and Fralish (2021)

2.3. Importance of Student Experience for Program Evaluation

Student experiences in Master of Education programs have also been the focus of numerous studies. Matus, Rusu, and Cano (2021) conducted a systematic literature review to understand the student experience in higher education that may potentially help educational institutions better address student needs. Jaap et al. (2021) examined the effects of remote online exam delivery on student experience and performance, providing insights into the challenges and benefits of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Buckley et al. (2021) analyzed the transition of large higher education classes to online learning due to the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of understanding student and staff perspectives to improve online teaching and learning environments. Shelby and Fralish (2021) explored the use of Edpuzzle to improve student experience and performance in biochemistry laboratories, highlighting the role of technology in enhancing student engagement. Additionally, Dollinger and Lodge (2020) explored the concept of value in student experiences through student–staff partnerships. Their study, conducted in the Australasian context, used qualitative data from surveys and interviews to highlight how these partnerships can enhance the perceived value of educational experiences for students. Kasworm (2001) conducted a qualitative case study exploring the experiences of adult students in an undergraduate accelerated program and found that students appreciated having a supportive environment for learning with a predictable program structure. Kasworm (2001) emphasized the importance of caring for fellow students and instructors. However, participants expressed paradoxical beliefs about their learning in that they valued the nature of the accelerated program but reported anxiety and stress over trying to be the 'perfect students' in coping with the demands of work, family, and children.

Integrating findings from both program evaluation and student experience offers a comprehensive view of the effectiveness and impact of Master of Education programs. This synthesis suggests that programs need to be evaluated on traditional educational outcomes such as knowledge acquisition and skill development, as well as on how they foster reflective practice, adaptability, and professional growth.

2.4. The M.Ed. AOP at the Study University

The study university is an HSI located in South Texas. The university has a total of 32,166 students, with 93% being Hispanic, making it the second-largest HSI in the U.S. The Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction (MED-CI) program at the university is an accelerated online program (AOP) that can be completed in 10 months with 30 graduate credits. There are six short semesters (called modules) in a year: Fall 1, Fall 2, Spring 1, Spring 2, Summer 1, and Summer 2. Each AOP course is designed to be 7 weeks long, allowing two modules to fit into a traditional 16-week semester. For each module, enrolled M.Ed. students may take two AOP courses and thus complete the program in 10 months. If a student takes one AOP course per module, the program can be completed in 20 months. Students in the program are mainly current or prospective educators, or professionals working in the educational field. Accepted graduate students can start the program in any module.

During the academic year (AY) 2019-2023, the MED-CI program offered four different specializations/concentrations: Content Mathematics, Content English, Elementary Mathematics and Science Education (EMS), and Math and Science Education (MS). Content Mathematics (CM) and Content English (CE) were concentrations primarily designed for high school educators intending to teach dual enrollment program courses but requiring a graduate degree with 18 credits in their specific disciplines. Their program of study (POS) included five MED-CI core courses from the College of Education and five additional courses from colleges that offered their specific discipline. For example, the five content courses for Content Mathematics were taught by graduate faculty in the Department of Mathematics in the College of Sciences; and the five content courses for Content English were taught by graduate faculty in the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts. Students in the Content Mathematics and Content English specializations might take one extra non-required selective course in their specific content area to obtain 18 credits while enrolled in the program. Elementary Mathematics and Science Education was a concentration mainly designed for elementary school educators and elementary school curriculum/instruction professionals. Math and Science Education was a concentration mainly designed for secondary school educators and middle/high school curriculum/instruction professionals. Students in the Elementary Mathematics and Science Education and Math and Science Education specializations took all ten courses from the College of Education.

2.5. Program Completion Criteria

To complete the program and earn the graduate degree of M.Ed. in C&I, a student needs to 1) complete and pass the required ten courses with a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or above, and 2) complete an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio).

The following Table 1 shows an example of the ten courses on the POS for the four specializations from Fall 1, 2022, to Summer 1, 2023.

Table 1. MED-CI POS example from fall 1, 2022 to summer 1, 2023.

Fall 1, 2022	Fall 2, 2022	Spring 1, 2023	Spring 2, 2023	Summer 1, 2023
Elementary mathematics and science education				
EDCI 6342	EDFR 6302	EDCI 6351	EDCI 6304	EDCI 7353
EDFR 6388	EDFR 6300	EDCI 6348	EDCI 7334	EDCI 7354
Math and science education				
EDFR 6388	EDFR 6302	EDCI 6351	EDCI 6304	EDCI 7353
EDCI 7355	EDFR 6300	EDCI 6348	EDCI 7334	EDCI 7354
Content English				
ENGL 6329	EDFR 6302	ENGL 6360	EDCI 6304	ENGL 6325
EDFR 6388	EDFR 6300	ENGL 6355	EDCI 7334	ENGL 6322
--	--	--	ENGL 6328	--
Content mathematics				
EDFR 6388	EDFR 6302	MATH 6325	EDCI 6304	MATH 6352
MATH 6365	EDFR 6300	MATH 6329	EDCI 7334	MATH 6388
--	--	--	MATH 6331	--

Table 2 presents all course offerings in the MED-CI AOP program with the course prefix, course name, and POS specializations from Fall 1, 2022 to Summer 1, 2023.

Table 2. MED-CI AOP course offerings.

Offering Dept	Course prefix	Course name	POS spec.
Teaching & learning	EDCI 6342	Models and methods in science education	EMS or MS
Teaching & learning	EDFR 6302	Foundations of learning, cognition, and human development	MED-CI Core
Teaching & learning	EDCI 6351	Teaching math for understanding	EMS or MS
Teaching & learning	EDCI 6304	Assessment of learning	MED-CI Core
Teaching & learning	EDCI 7353	Teaching and learning algebraic concepts	EMS or MS
Teaching & learning	EDFR 6388	Introduction to the historical and sociocultural foundations of education	MED-CI Core
Teaching & learning	EDFR 6300	Research methods in education	MED-CI Core
Teaching & learning	EDCI 6348	Science and mathematics education project	EMS
Teaching & learning	EDCI 7334	Curriculum problems and processes	MED-CI Core
Teaching & learning	EDCI 7354	Teaching and learning geometric concepts	EMS or MS

Offering Dept	Course prefix	Course name	POS spec.
Teaching & learning	EDCI 7355	Current issues and research in mathematics education	MS
English	ENGL 6329	Assessing and responding to writing	Content English
English	ENGL 6360	Introduction to descriptive linguistics for teachers	Content English
English	ENGL 6355	Literature for secondary school teachers	Content English
English	ENGL 6325	Studies in composition techniques	Content English
English	ENGL 6322	Theory in rhetoric, composition, and literacy	Content English
English	ENGL 6328	Special topics in rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies	Content English
Mathematics	MATH 6365	Probability and statistics	Content Mathematics
Mathematics	MATH 6325	Contemporary geometry	Content Mathematics
Mathematics	MATH 6329	Number theory	Content Mathematics
Mathematics	MATH 6331	Algebra I	Content Mathematics
Mathematics	MATH 6352	Analysis I	Content Mathematics
Mathematics	MATH 6388	Discrete mathematics	Content Mathematics

Instead of writing a thesis, students in the program are required to complete an e-portfolio before graduation. The e-portfolio should contain basic professional information and a self-reflection. It should demonstrate the graduating student's knowledge of students/learners, curriculum, instruction/pedagogy, pedagogical content knowledge, assessment, research and scientific inquiry, technology integration, and professional practice.

2.6. Research Questions

Due to the lack of literature exploring educational graduate students' perceptions and experiences regarding an AOP at an HSI, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do Master of Education students perceive their learning experience in the online accelerated graduate program at an HSI?
2. What are the students' suggestions for improving the quality of the AOP at an HSI?

3. Research Method

The study aims to report exit survey results from graduating master's students in an online accelerated Master of Education program at an HSI and to explore their experiences in the program.

3.1. Participants

Convenient sampling was conducted by the then-program coordinator (AY 2019–2023), who is a tenured faculty member at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in Texas, USA. All graduating students in the M.Ed. program from 2019 to 2023 were invited to participate in the study. A total of n = 204 students participated. Most responses were from n = 196 participants.

Among them, there were 163 females (83.2%) and 33 males (16.8%). This gender distribution suggests a female majority within the surveyed group and reflects the overall gender distribution in the College of Education. Participants had an average age of M = 34.44 (SD = 8.64), with a minimum age of 21 and a maximum age of 62. The sample was primarily composed of Hispanic respondents (87.6%; n = 170), with smaller representations of White (2.1%), Black or African American (2.6%), Asian and Pacific Islander (0.5%), and other ethnicities (7.2%). This distribution highlights a predominantly Hispanic demographic within the surveyed group (See Table 3).

Table 3. Ethnicity.

Ethnicity	#	%
Hispanic	170	87.6
White	4	2.1
Black or African American	5	2.6
Asian/Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.5
Other	14	7.2
Total	194	100.0

3.2. Data Collection

The data for this study was collected between AY2019-2023 through an online survey. Participants were sent an email by the then-program coordinator, with the survey link, inviting MED-CI students to participate voluntarily. The target audience included students who were graduating and/or had recently graduated from the study university. The survey served as an exit survey, aimed at gathering insights from graduating students and graduates about their experiences in the program. The Ethical Committee of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA, granted approval for this study on April 2, 2019 (Ref. No. IRB-18-0486).

3.3. Data Analysis

Appropriate statistical methods were used to analyze quantitative data from the survey. These included exploratory data analysis (EDA), such as correlational analysis, ANOVA, and t-tests. Thematic analysis and content analysis were conducted for qualitative data collected from open-ended questions.

4. Results

4.1. MED-CI Program Enrollment Statistics: Start Date, Specialization, and Financial Aid

Regarding the start years of participants in the program, 39.7% began in 2021, 25.5% in 2020, 18.6% in 2022, 10.8% in 2023, 1% in 2018, 0.5% in 2019, and 3.9% did not answer the question. When considering only valid responses, the majority of respondents started in 2021 (41.3%), followed by 2020 (26.5%) and 2022 (19.4%), with smaller groups beginning in other years (See Table 4).

Table 4. Program start year.

Program start year	#	%
2018	2	1.0
2019	1	0.5
2020	52	26.5
2021	81	41.3
2022	38	19.4
2023	22	11.2
Total	196	100.0

Regarding the module start term, 45 individuals (22.1%) began in Fall 1, 42 (20.6%) in Spring 1, 30 (14.7%) in Summer 1, 29 (14.2%) in Summer 2, 27 (13.2%) in Spring 2, 23 (11.3%) in Fall 2, and 8 individuals (3.9%) did not respond. When considering only valid responses, the largest groups of respondents started in Fall 1 (23.0%) and Spring 1 (21.4%), with smaller percentages beginning in other terms (See Table 5).

Table 5. Program term start date.

Module	#	%
Summer 1	30	15.3
Summer 2	29	14.8
Fall 1	45	23.0
Fall 2	23	11.7
Spring 1	42	21.4
Spring 2	27	13.8
Total	196	100.0

In terms of the program specializations of EMS, MS, CE, and CM, the largest specialization among respondents is Elementary Math and Science (45.3%), followed by Content English (28.1%) and Mathematics & Science Education (21.9%), with a smaller representation in Content Mathematics (4.7%). This distribution indicates a strong focus on Elementary Math and Science within the group (Table 6).

Table 6. Program specialization.

Program specialization	#	%
Elementary math and science (EMS)	87	45.3
Mathematics and Science Education (MS)	42	21.9
Content English (CE)	54	28.1
Content mathematics (CM)	9	4.7
Total	192	100.0

The majority of respondents (71.9%) reported receiving financial aid assistance, while 28.1% did not. This distribution suggests a high reliance on financial aid within the surveyed group.

Table 7. Financial aid assistance.

Financial aid assistance	#	%
Yes	141	71.9
No	55	28.1
Total	196	100.0

4.2. MED-CI Program Enrollment Statistics: Marital Status and Employment Status

In terms of marital status, 110 individuals (53.9%) are married, 70 (34.3%) are single, 8 (3.9%) are separated, 7 (3.4%) are divorced, and 9 did not answer.

When considering only valid responses, the majority of respondents are married or in a domestic partnership (56.4%), followed by those who are single (35.9%), with smaller percentages identifying as divorced (3.6%) or separated (4.1%).

This distribution indicates a predominant representation of individuals in committed relationships within the sample. It also reflects the nature of the students interested in online accelerated programs (Table 8).

Table 8. Marital status.

Marital status	#	%
Single	70	35.9
Married or in a domestic partnership	110	56.4
Divorced	7	3.6
Separated	8	4.1
Total	195	100.0

In terms of employment status, 176 individuals (90.3%) indicate being fully employed, followed by part-time employment (4.6%) and students (3.1%). Note: Full-time employment is defined as 40 or more hours per week, and part-time employment is up to 39 hours per week. See Table 9.

Table 9. Employment status throughout the master's program.

Employment status	#	%
Employed full time	176	90.3
Employed part-time	9	4.6
Unemployed and looking for work	2	1.0
Student	6	3.1
Self-employed	2	1.0
Total	195	100.0

4.3. Findings on Perceived MED-CI Program Students' Knowledge Gain

Participants were asked to rate eight areas of potential knowledge and expertise gain: curriculum, instruction, pedagogical content knowledge, students, research, assessment, professional practice, and technology integration. Table 10 shows high ratings across various areas of increased knowledge and expertise, with all means (M) ranging from 4.51 to 4.78 on a 1-5 scale, indicating a generally favorable perception of learning outcomes. Specifically, knowledge gain of Assessment (M = 4.78, SD = 0.629) and Research (M = 4.76, SD = 0.637) received the highest ratings, suggesting strong perceived improvements in these areas, followed by knowledge of instruction (M = 4.65, SD = 0.673) and knowledge of students (M = 4.65, SD = 0.700). The standard deviations are relatively low, indicating consistency in respondents' perceptions. The negative skewness values, ranging from -2.064 to -4.430, suggest that most participants rated their experiences highly, with fewer individuals providing lower ratings. The data reflects a generally positive and highly consistent view of the program's impact on various aspects of students' knowledge gain.

Table 10. Increased knowledge and expertise.

Knowledge gain	n	M	SD	Skew
Curriculum	55	4.58	0.686	-2.811
Instruction	55	4.65	0.673	-3.245
Pedagogical content knowledge	55	4.64	0.704	-2.991
Students	55	4.65	0.700	-3.104
Research	55	4.76	0.637	-4.213
Assessment	55	4.78	0.629	-4.430
Professional practice	55	4.64	0.704	-2.991
Technology integration	55	4.51	0.814	-2.064

4.4. Likelihood to Recommend the MED-CI Program

MED-CI graduating students rated, on a scale of 1 to 3, how likely they are to recommend the master's program to a friend or colleague. Table 11 shows their rating results. They yielded a mean (M) of 2.71 (SD = 0.563). When asked to rate from 0 to 10, the participants yielded a mean of 9.13 (SD = 1.499). This indicates a high likelihood of recommendation, favoring the program. The majority of respondents (76.2%) indicated high satisfaction with the master's program, classifying as "Promoters" who are likely to recommend the program. This suggests an overall positive sentiment toward the program.

Table 11. Likelihood to Recommend/Ease of Program.

Program ratings from master's students	n	Min	Max	M	SD	Skew
From 1-3, likelihood to recommend the program to a friend or colleague?	202	1	3	2.71	0.563	-1.802
From 1 to 10, how likely are you to recommend the program to a friend or colleague?	202	0	10	9.13	1.499	-2.515
Easiness to reach professors	197	1	5	1.63	0.808	1.420
Easiness to reach the program coordinator	201	1	5	1.57	0.892	1.636
Satisfaction - Program Coordinator	200	1	5	4.59	0.771	-1.932
Easiness to contact graduate college	201	1	5	1.87	1.002	.987
Satisfaction - graduate college	201	1	5	4.41	0.873	-1.489
Professors' teaching	198	1	5	4.35	0.703	-1.152
Overall satisfaction	198	1	5	4.68	0.672	-2.970

The data reveals generally positive responses across several dimensions of the program. For instance, it is easy to reach professors (M = 1.63, SD = 0.808), easy to contact the program coordinator (M = 1.57, SD = 0.892), and easy to contact the Graduate College (M = 1.87, SD = 1.002). In addition, the overall satisfaction (M = 4.68, SD = 0.672) and satisfaction with the program coordinator (M = 4.59, SD = 0.771) were rated highly, with negative skewness values suggesting a concentration of positive responses. Overall, the data reflects high satisfaction, particularly with teaching quality and administrative support, alongside high accessibility for certain services.

4.5. Gender Differences

To explore potential gender differences in the MED-CI program, which is housed in a female-dominated college of education, t-tests were conducted to compare the means of knowledge gains and other program-related variables, such as perceived ease of obtaining answers from the program coordinator and Graduate College, perceived professors' teaching, and satisfaction with the program. Table 12 presents t-tests results for potential gender differences.

Table 12. t-Tests: Gender differences.

Gender differences	Gen	n	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Increased knowledge: Curriculum	M	12	4.67	0.492	0.613	50	0.543
	F	40	4.53	0.751			
Increased knowledge: Instruction	M	12	4.75	0.452	0.660	50	0.512
	F	40	4.60	0.744			
Increased knowledge: PCK	M	12	4.75	0.452	0.737	50	0.465
	F	40	4.58	0.781			
Increased knowledge: Students	M	12	4.67	0.651	0.175	50	0.861
	F	40	4.63	0.740			
Increased knowledge: Research	M	12	4.83	0.389	0.500	50	0.619
	F	40	4.72	0.716			
Increased knowledge: Assessment	M	12	4.83	0.389	0.389	50	0.699
	F	40	4.75	0.707			
Increased knowledge: Professional practice	M	12	4.58	0.669	-0.175	50	0.862
	F	40	4.63	0.740			
Increased knowledge: Technology integration	M	12	4.58	0.793	0.485	50	0.629
	F	40	4.45	0.846			
From 0-10, likelihood to recommend to a friend or colleague	M	33	9.15	10.278	0.163	194	0.871
	F	163	9.10	10.562			
Ease of obtaining answers from the program coordinator	M	33	1.76	10.146	1.176	193	0.241
	F	162	1.56	0.841			
Satisfaction - Program Coordinator	M	33	4.52	0.834	-0.544	192	0.587
	F	161	4.60	0.770			
Ease of obtaining answers from graduate college	M	33	1.82	0.983	-0.397	193	0.692
	F	162	1.90	10.019			
Satisfaction with graduate college	M	33	4.55	0.794	1.002	193	0.317
	F	162	4.38	0.899			
Professors' teaching	M	33	4.52	0.566	1.463	194	0.145
	F	163	4.32	0.726			
Ease of reaching professors	M	33	1.58	0.936	-0.467	193	0.641
	F	162	1.65	0.784			
Ease of registering for courses	M	33	1.36	0.699	-0.035	194	0.972
	F	163	1.37	0.657			
Overall satisfaction with the program	M	33	4.85	0.364	2.412	90.96	0.018
	F	163	4.64	0.717			

Note: N.B. for Easiness items, reverse ratings used.

There are no significant differences between males and females in increased knowledge or expertise across all eight areas, the likelihood to recommend the program to others, satisfaction with the program coordinator, and satisfaction with the Graduate College, among other variables ($p > .05$). However, regarding overall satisfaction with the program, a significant difference exists between males and females ($t = 2.41$, $df = 90.96$, $p = .018$), with Cohen's $d = .304$, indicating a small to medium effect size. Males reported higher satisfaction ratings ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.364$) compared to females ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.717$). Overall, the data reveal few gender-based differences in most program-related variables, with overall satisfaction being an exception.

4.6. Ethnic Differences

To explore potential ethnic differences in the MED-CI program, a series of analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to compare the means of knowledge gains and other program-related variables, such as perceived ease of obtaining answers from the program coordinator and Graduate College, perceived professors' teaching, and satisfaction with the program. Table 13 presents ANOVA results showing no ethnic differences.

Table 13. No ethnic differences.

No ethnicity differences	*F*(df1, df2)	*p*
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Curriculum	0.193 (3,48)	0.901
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Instruction	0.119 (3, 48)	0.948
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Pedagogical content knowledge	0.585 (3,48)	0.628
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Students	0.610 (3,48)	0.612
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Research	0.171 (3,48)	0.915
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Assessment	0.170 (3,48)	0.916
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Professional practice	0.585 (3,48)	0.628
Increased knowledge/ Expertise - Technology integration	10.180 (3,48)	0.327
From 0-10, likelihood to recommend the program to a friend or colleague.	0.692 (3, 189)	0.599
Easiness of obtaining answers from the program coordinator	10.041 (3,188)	0.387
Satisfaction - Program Coordinator	0.557 (3,187)	0.694
Easiness of obtaining answers from graduate college	10.561 (3,188)	0.186
Satisfaction with graduate college	20.083 (3,188)	0.085
Overall, professors' teaching.	10.109 (3,189)	0.354
Easiness to reach professors	0.735 (3, 188)	0.569
Easiness to register for courses	10.726 (3, 189)	0.146
Overall satisfaction with your experience in the master's program	0.821 (3,189)	0.513

Note: N.B. AAPI in Other, with a total of 4 ethnic groups in the analysis.

The results of the analysis indicate no significant differences across the groups in all areas related to increased knowledge and expertise, ease, and program satisfaction ($p > .05$).

4.7. Financial Aid Differences

To explore potential differences in receiving financial aid in the MED-CI program, t-tests were conducted to compare the means of knowledge gains and other program-related variables, such as perceived ease of obtaining answers from the program coordinator and Graduate College, perceived professors' teaching, and satisfaction with the program. Table 14 shows no financial aid differences after t-tests.

Table 14. No differences in the use of financial aid (FA).

No financial aid differences	FA	n	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Curriculum	Yes	41	4.59	0.499	0.350	10.921	0.733
	No	11	4.45	1.214			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Instruction	Yes	41	4.66	0.480	0.481	50	0.632
	No	11	4.55	1.214			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- PCK	Yes	41	4.63	0.536	0.361	50	0.720
	No	11	4.55	1.214			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Students	Yes	41	4.66	0.530	0.462	50	0.646
	No	11	4.55	1.214			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Research	Yes	41	4.80	0.401	0.699	10.593	0.500
	No	11	4.55	1.214			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Assessment	Yes	41	4.80	0.401	0.657	10.600	0.657
	No	11	4.64	1.206			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Professional practice	Yes	41	4.66	0.530	0.544	11.041	0.597
	No	11	4.45	1.214			
Increased knowledge/ Expertise- Technology integration	Yes	41	4.49	0.711	0.117	50	0.907
	No	11	4.45	1.214			
On a scale from 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend this program to a friend or colleague?	Yes	141	9.19	1.320	1.174	194	0.242
	No	55	8.91	1.927			
Ease of obtaining answers from the program coordinator	Yes	140	1.60	0.863	0.253	193	.800
	No	55	1.56	0.996			
Satisfaction - Program Coordinator	Yes	139	4.59	0.760	0.411	193	0.682
	No	55	4.56	0.834			
Easiness of obtaining answers from graduate college	Yes	140	1.86	0.969	-0.391	193	0.696
	No	55	1.93	1.120			
Satisfaction - Graduate College	Yes	140	4.42	0.840	0.411	193	0.682
	No	55	4.36	0.988			
Overall professors' teaching	Yes	141	4.40	0.631	1.440	194	0.151
	No	55	4.24	0.860			
Easiness to reach professors	Yes	140	1.59	0.729	-1.384	193	.168
	No	55	1.76	0.981			
Easiness to register for courses	Yes	141	1.34	0.653	-0.911	194	0.364
	No	55	1.44	0.688			
Overall satisfaction with the program	Yes	141	4.70	0.620	0.546	194	0.586
	No	55	4.64	0.802			

The results of the analysis indicate no significant differences between the groups in all areas related to increased knowledge and expertise, ease, and program satisfaction ($p > .05$).

4.8. Students' Challenges/Suggestions to Improve the Program

From student answers to open-ended questions, researchers found the following emerging themes that could potentially improve the program.

4.8.1. Un-Updated Courses

One issue raised by surveyed students was the lack of updated courses. Some students reported that a few professors did not update the courses and submission deadlines, which caused confusion. One student commented, "The issues with deadlines not matching the syllabus. Then the deliverable dates on weekly Blackboard activities not having the correct dates. Many issues with the shell of the course and every course having different formatting." Another student wrote, "A few professors did not know how to adjust due dates on Blackboard, which would make it extremely confusing for students when submitting by deadline." These inconsistencies created frustration, as reflected in another comment: "Some courses were not updated accordingly at the beginning of the module, which caused confusion." Another student shared, "Some professors also did not update due dates between modules. For example, a class I am in at the moment has due dates that are all from June 2021. This makes it hard to ensure deadlines are being met."

Students speculated about the causes of the issues by pointing out that, as one student wrote, "some of the professors were just given the classes last minute without preparation. Therefore, the dates were wrong on the syllabus and on Blackboard. It was hard to keep up and understand some of the assignments, especially for those professors who were not organized." This is an issue that should be addressed, as students should have updated courses that clearly outline the accurate dates with the correct names of professors. One student wrote, "I do not know if they only transfer assignments from one term to the other, but some of the due dates of assignments were not updated." Another student wrote, "I think Professor [X] is using another professor's lectures or perhaps he was a last-minute substitution, and hence all lectures (even the syllabus) had the name of the other professor." Students

would lose faith in their instructors if they did not see that they are well-prepared to teach their courses. "It was unfortunate that more than once a professor started the class by saying, 'I was given this course last minute,' so I don't know much about this class yet. I feel that even when we are in the classroom, we will never tell a student that we don't know what we are doing. It was also sad that these same professors were the worst in the program."

4.8.2. Lack of Communication with Course Instructors

Another challenge reported by surveyed students was the lack of communication due to the online nature of the program and some instructors' unresponsiveness to students' emails or questions. A few students expressed a desire for more communication with their professors. One student wrote, "Professor [X] was a decent teacher, but I struggled greatly to communicate with him." Another student stated, "I did not like the fact that some professors never met with their students or, when asked about assignments, they simply referred to the syllabus without further explanation." Students emphasized the need for improved communication with their instructors to reduce stress, address questions, and clarify ambiguous assignment requirements. One student mentioned, "Some professors were very difficult to reach and communicate with. They were not considerate of the issues we were dealing with." These concerns should be addressed, as students in online programs need to feel supported by instructors who are responsive and accessible. The findings align with Miller (2017), which found that while adult learners prefer accelerated programs, they often struggle with communication, overwhelming assignments, and unresponsive support services. Miller recommended that students in accelerated programs adopt student-centered teaching approaches, hire faculty experienced in adult learning, provide professional development opportunities, and create platforms for students to express their expectations and needs in the program.

4.8.3. Overwhelming Workload

Some courses appeared to have a heavier workload. However, as reported in the survey, the majority of students were employed full-time. One student wrote, "It seems almost unethical to require multiple assignments weekly with short deadlines. Additionally, Dr. [X] was rather unorganized with the course, which made things contradictory at times." Another student mentioned that the workload was excessive because he had to read four chapters for one class and four chapters for another while working full-time. Other students echoed these concerns, with one stating, "Sometimes the workload was a bit much for a one-week timeframe to complete," and another noting that "sometimes the workload was overwhelming, especially with a full-time job." Many students felt unable to manage the demands of full-time work, family responsibilities, and the program's rigorous coursework. These challenges align with Chicca and Matthias (2023), which highlighted the difficulties of completing intensive coursework in a short period while managing other responsibilities. Tight deadlines and the relative isolation of online learning were reported as significant hurdles for adult learners.

4.8.4. Creating E-Portfolios

Students who were surveyed frequently identified issues with creating the e-portfolio. One student said, "We are already completing the assignments, so having to create an online portfolio seems unnecessary. Professors do not update due dates, which can be confusing." Many students pointed out that they needed more guidance with it. One student wrote, "The portfolio needs some clarification. Not much guidance is provided, or at least someone is available to answer our questions. I emailed the professors listed for the portfolio, but there was no response." Another student described feeling overwhelmed, stating, "There were many times when I did not know where to go next. It was extremely overwhelming to seek information about what to do for the portfolio at the end of the master's program." Feelings of being lost were so overwhelming and confusing. One student wrote, "I was a little lost at graduation regarding the requirements, such as the e-portfolio. The sample page and how-to page are outdated, and the WordPress website has changed drastically since the tutorial was made. I wish there had been more assistance in creating the WordPress portfolio."

Creating an e-portfolio is a form of experiential learning. Understanding the experiential learning experiences of students enrolled in Master of Education programs is crucial for enhancing program effectiveness and aligning educational outcomes with the evolving demands of the educational sector. Recent studies continue to build on these foundations. For instance, Wooding (2020) discusses the principles of experiential learning and their application in higher education settings, emphasizing the importance of hands-on experiences in learning outcomes. Kolb and Kolb (2022) further elaborate on Experiential Learning Theory as a guide for educators, highlighting the significance of the learning cycle and learning spaces in fostering student engagement and understanding. Moreover, the integration of experiential learning in specific educational contexts has yielded promising results. Xu and Tao (2023) explore authentic experiential learning in translator education, showcasing how real-world tasks can enhance learning effectiveness (Xu & Tao, 2023). Similarly, Motta and Galina (2023) conducted a systematic review of experiential learning in entrepreneurship education, underlining the value of practical experiences in developing entrepreneurial skills (Motta & Galina, 2023).

5. Discussion

The results of the study indicated students' high overall satisfaction with the program. The students' satisfaction stemmed from improvements in their knowledge and expertise in curriculum, instruction, pedagogical content knowledge, research, assessment, and technology. The findings align with Burke (2019) study, which reported high satisfaction among students in an accelerated online program but also found unsatisfactory communication as a reason for their withdrawal from the program. The participants in Burke (2019) study pointed out that lack of clarity and inconsistency were examples of poor communication with their instructors. Similarly, most participants in our study were satisfied with the program coordinator, which positively influenced their experience. This echoes Burke (2019) findings, where participants emphasized appreciation of the administrator's positive interaction, support, and assistance. This further enhanced their overall experience. Even though the students praised the program's flexibility, accelerated online format, and knowledgeable, supportive professors whose feedback created an enriching experience, some students highlighted issues that could potentially help improve the program. Similar student

challenges were identified by Colclasure, LaRose, Warner, Thoron, and Roberts (2018), who reported feelings of stress, problems with time management difficulties, and teachers' expectations among students.

5.1. What Can Be Improved

Although most students were satisfied with their overall experience, many offered suggestions to improve the courses and program. One suggestion was to add more Zoom meetings and provide timely feedback. One student commented, "Improvements can be made by adding Zoom meetings once a week to explain what is required. But in terms of improved teaching, I improve based on understanding and feedback, so the other would be to get timely feedback." Students also expressed a need for more guidance with assignments and e-portfolio creation. One student revealed, "Would have liked more guidance on the e-portfolio. I think that every class should have had a module or assignment that had us update our portfolio. I procrastinate, and I think this would have helped." This highlights the need for better interaction with instructors. Another key suggestion was for professors to "check their syllabuses to make sure dates match to avoid confusion in due dates," which seemed to be a real problem for students.

5.2. Limitations of the Study

The study relied solely on quantitative data collection. Incorporating interviews with some surveyed students could provide deeper insights into their individual experiences and feelings about the program. Additionally, examining different institutions would allow for a comparison of student perceptions and the factors influencing their satisfaction and commitment. Including the instructors' perspectives could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the program and its design.

5.3. Directions for Future Research

Future research could explore instructors' perspectives and compare them with students' views to develop a systemic model for program evaluation. The findings of this study, including students' feedback on what they liked and disliked, could inform the future design of programs considering the issues raised by students. Additionally, more research with action research plans that can implement the students' suggestions could provide further insights into how these accelerated programs can be improved.

6. Summary and Conclusion

This study investigates the experiences of Master of Education (M.Ed.) students enrolled in an accelerated online program (AOP) at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in South Texas. The research focuses on students' perceptions of the program's structure, instructional quality, and overall effectiveness, with a focus on how these aspects influence learning outcomes and satisfaction. Using a mixed-methods approach, the researchers gathered quantitative and qualitative data from n = 204 students who graduated between 2019 and 2023. The participant pool was predominantly female (83.2%) and Hispanic (87.6%), reflecting the demographic characteristics of the institution and the broader trend of adult learners seeking flexible educational pathways.

The AOP program under investigation compresses the typical academic calendar into a 10-month cycle, with each course spanning seven weeks. Students may select from four specializations, including Elementary Math and Science (EMS), Math and Science Education (MS), Content English (CE), and Content Mathematics (CM). The study's aim was to assess student satisfaction and identify areas for programmatic improvement through exit surveys and subsequent data analysis. Students reported high satisfaction, particularly in areas of knowledge gain such as assessment, research, and instructional strategies, with an overall mean satisfaction score of 4.68 out of 5.

Findings reveal that while students valued the program's flexibility and relevance, several challenges emerged. These included inconsistencies in course updates, unresponsive faculty communication, and an excessive workload, which was particularly difficult for students balancing full-time employment and family responsibilities. These concerns were echoed in open-ended responses, where students cited outdated course materials, conflicting deadlines, and limited faculty engagement as significant stressors. Additionally, the e-portfolio requirement was sometimes perceived as lacking clarity and sufficient support, contributing to feelings of confusion and overwhelm toward the end of the program. Statistical analyses, including t-tests and ANOVA, indicated minimal differences in satisfaction or learning outcomes based on gender, ethnicity, or financial aid status, although males reported slightly higher overall satisfaction. The study also found no significant disparities across ethnic groups or between financial aid recipients and non-recipients, suggesting broad program efficacy across diverse populations.

The discussion contextualizes these findings within the broader literature on adult and online education, highlighting alignment with theories of experiential learning and adult learning principles. Recommendations include the need for improved course maintenance, enhanced faculty training in online pedagogy, and structured support for assignments and portfolios. Emphasizing the importance of student feedback in program evaluation, the study calls for systemic reforms to support learner engagement, equity, and retention in accelerated graduate programs.

In conclusion, the study offers valuable insights into optimizing AOPs at HSIs by balancing flexibility with academic rigor. It underscores the importance of continuous improvement driven by the student experience, aiming to inform educational administrators, policymakers, and instructors about best practices in designing and implementing accelerated online graduate education.

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