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Examining an Alternative Teacher Education Undergraduate Program: Possibilities for Teaching and Extending What It Means to Be an Educator Outside of the Classroom

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Abstract
As part of efforts to become more interdisciplinary, socially embedded, and innovative, leaders of a large college of education reimagined a program originally designed to retain struggling students to target students interested in nontraditional educational careers (e.g., nonprofits). Researchers in this study explore reasons why this program has increasingly become a program of choice through both quantitative and qualitative analyses of institutional data across the program's history and surveys of current students and instructors. Findings about shifting demographics of students enrolled in the program toward nontraditional students who appreciate the accessibility and flexibility of the online modality, as well as shifts in program focus on preparation for a broader range of educational career options are presented. Findings also highlight the possibilities of this type of program to prepare students for further educational opportunities, including graduate programs, to also facilitate university-business partnerships. Implications for continued improvement and growth of this program and the design of similar programs targeting the preparation of students for non-traditional teaching positions are also discussed.

Key Words: Teacher education programs, online teacher preparation, mixed methods, non-traditional education careers

Introduction

Traditionally, teacher education programs have focused solely on preparing classroom teachers. There is a growing need, however, for high-quality educators in settings outside classrooms (e.g., corporate learning, community health, non-profit organizations). Generally, educators in non-classroom settings are prepared through discipline-specific degrees (e.g., business, health-related) and on-the-job or professional training (Olaniran et al., 2017; Rosch et al., 2017). However, researchers of this study focus on an undergraduate program specifically targeting the preparation of educators for positions outside classrooms. This program, like others across the U.S. and internationally (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Dyment et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2017), need examination.

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, a teacher education college located at Arizona State University (ASU), offers multiple, undergraduate and graduate programs and

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pathways into teaching. While historically considered a traditional college of education, the College changed its mission in 2012 and, as aligned with its new mission, developed a new bachelor's titled Bachelor of Arts in Education in Educational Studies.

The program goal was to prepare students seeking educational careers working with children, youth, or adults through community, nonprofit, civic, and other non-traditional educational settings (ASU, n.d.a) via 11 career tracks, like environmental education, nonprofit administration, and family and human development. The program includes both online and in person course options.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the program using a theory-driven approach. Specifically, researchers sought to assess program enrollee demographics, participation, strengths, and challenges as pertinent to understanding and improving the program of interest herein and, perhaps, other similar non-traditional education programs. To inform this study, researchers explored three areas of scholarship related to key aspects of the program of interest: online programs for non-traditional educators, alternative programs in teacher education, and work-based educational degree programs.

Online programs for non-traditional educators

Online programs increased in popularity with advancing technologies (Dyment & Downing, 2020; Shin & Lee, 2009) and diverse student populations' needs for flexibility and accessibility (Walker et al., 2020). Online programs have been oft-populated by non-traditional students balancing multiple, competing demands, including familial and job responsibilities (e.g., mature-aged females with various work and family commitments; Dyment et al., 2018), who also reside far from universities or university satellites (Pelliccione et al., 2019; Ornelles et al., 2019). Additionally, these programs support increased enrollment and initiatives surrounding global learning (Pellicione et al., 2019; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Walker et al., 2020) and yield more ethnic and gender diversity (Harrell & Harris, 2006).

The online learning environment is also a significant part of the higher education landscape, yielding benefits and challenges. First, successful student engagement is essential (Ornelles et al., 2019). Pelliccione and colleagues (2019) found that students participating in fully online teacher education programs showed higher achievement in both the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching. When comparing online and face-to-face programs focused on professional learning, Fishman et al. (2013) found significant gains in both. While similar gains occur online, establishing and cultivating engagement among students and teachers is more essential to online success (Thompson et al., 2013; Thornton, 2013). Thompson et al. (2013) added that teaching and social presence are also important, whereby online environments pose more transformative environments with increased accessibility.

Alternative programs in teacher education

Much research on alternative teacher education focuses on programs allowing students to get certified more quickly than through traditional teacher education programs (Whitford et al., 2017). According to this research, the alternative classroom teaching programs are a valuable source for the recruitment of diverse teachers (Feistritzer, 2007; Lahann & Reagan, 2011). Findings have been mixed, however, with researchers emphasizing that program effectiveness is likely due to program-specific factors (e.g., Lahann & Reagan, 2011; Weinberger & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2016). For example, Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) found that non-certified teachers and teachers licensed through alternative routes felt less prepared in several categories, including their abilities to promote student learning. Other researchers suggest that such findings matter less than the simple fact that the number of alternative paths toward teacher certification is growing as a result from school marketization and the economic benefits such alternatives bring to universities (e.g., Zeichner, 2010). Researchers of few studies, however, have focused on alternative teacher education programs like the one discussed here that seek to prepare educators for contexts outside the classroom.

Work-based educational degree programs

There is also growing interest in degree programs specializing in integrating pedagogy, curriculum, and instructional practice, while emphasizing student engagement in practice-based learning experiences (Billett, 2009; Smith et al., 2016). As global job markets increasingly become service- and information-based, many universities are expanding their focus from liberal arts to programs for more specific occupations (Lomas 1997; Billett, 2009). With this shift, degrees are becoming more important, with graduates more interested in how to successfully transition from college into professional careers (Billett, 2009; Jackson, 2017).

Despite the introduction of programs aligned with professions, however, traditional pedagogy-focused curricula remain important (Smith et al., 2016). For example, education should focus on general (e.g., communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership) and work-related technical skills (Jackson, 2017). Formal education, including traditional liberal arts courses, helps students gain skills and knowledge to earn credentials valued in local communities (Kim et al., 2006). As a result, a practice-oriented teacher education approach (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2016) - which integrates traditional pedagogy, curriculum development, and work-related practical experiences into educational programs - is also becoming increasingly valuable and necessary (Billett, 2009; Chen et al., 2017). Challenges persist, though, in determining and assessing the skills and knowledge students should acquire from a university education generally (Glisczinski, 2007), and a university teacher education more specifically (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2016). Students have a wide variety of career goals, interests, and paths, all with different timelines (Duval-Couetil & Long, 2014).

Thus, institutions also need to establish systems to better assess student outcomes and the quality of such programs as they expand.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, researchers based their work on the framework of a theory-based (or theory-driven) program evaluation to (1) gain a better understanding of the program and (2) develop a program theory (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2011) asserted that researchers must "gain understanding of the context in which the program operates and the effects of that context on success or failure" (p. 166). Such a theory-based evaluation goes beyond a single-minded focus on decontextualized program objectives to understand and describe the program as it currently exists, in addition to determining the program theory.

A program theory is defined as "the process through which program components are presumed to affect outcomes and the conditions under which these processes are believed to operate" (Donaldson, 2007, p. 22). Developing a program theory combines stakeholder input, relevant social science research, and researchers' knowledge and expertise (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Once developed, a program theory guides all aspects of an evaluation study, including identifying research questions, determining what to study, identifying constructs, analyzing results, and providing recommendations (Donaldson, 2007). The program theory for this program is described in the methodology section.

According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2011), theory-based evaluation frameworks provide researchers a way to better understand program participants' experiences between the beginning and end of the program and to better determine reasons for a program's successes or failures. Thus, researchers sought to address the following research questions (RQs): RQ1: Who were the students enrolled in the program (by race, gender, age, geographic location, and so forth) and how have these demographics changed over time? RQ2: Why did students and instructors choose to participate in the program? RQ3: What were the strengths and challenges associated with the program, as perceived by students and instructors?

As part of a theory-based (or theory-driven) approach, researchers aligned research questions, protocols, and instruments with these domains (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). The research questions (RQs) researchers answered follow: RQ1: Who were the students enrolled in the program (by race, gender, age, geographic location, and so forth)? How did enrolled students' demographic variables change over time? RQ2: What were the strengths and challenges associated with the program, as perceived by students? What were the reason(s) students initially chose to enroll? RQ3: What were the strengths and challenges associated with the program, as perceived by instructors? What were the reason(s) faculty chose to work in the program?

Program theory

A critical first step in a theory-based evaluation is determining the program theory (Donaldson, 2007). For this study, researchers centered the program's theory on helping students achieve specific learning outcomes, determined by track and the time students earned their degrees. Researchers clustered these items under five domains identified, defined, and also exemplified by program leaders. Researchers then aligned research questions, protocols, and instruments with these domains. See Figure 1 for these domains, definitions, and examples (see also ASU, n.d.a).

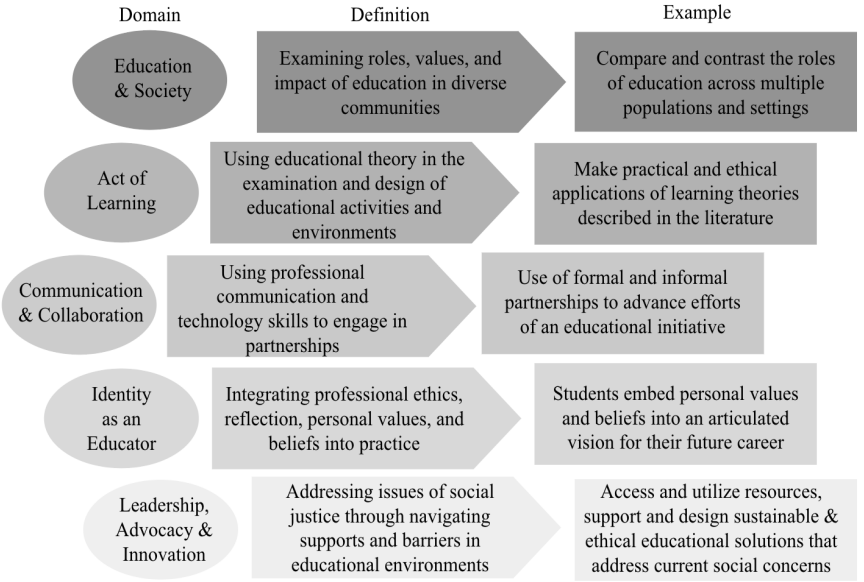

Figure 1. Program Domains and Definitions

Research design, sources, and analysis

To address the three RQs questions noted prior, researchers used a mixed-methods approach. Researchers used a triangulation design, whereby researchers collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data concurrently, placing equal emphasis on both types of data sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This design allowed researchers to form a more comprehensive picture of program effects, and also informed program theory to augment program outcomes (Chen, 2006). More specifically, researchers collected data via survey research methods and archival data analyses as detailed in the following sections.

Institutional data collection and analyses (RQ1)

To address RQ1 and gain an understanding of the students who enrolled in the program over time, also as per their backgrounds, researchers used institutional data

containing students' demographic information. Institutional data included two sets of data for 691 enrolled students and 353 graduated students between 2015 and 2018. For both sets of quantitative data, researchers calculated descriptive statistics on enrollee demographics, admission and transfer rates, academic performance, and other related data using the statistical package SPSS (IBM Corporation, 2018).

Student survey instrument (RQ2-3)

In coordination with program leaders, researchers constructed a survey instrument to explore current students' perspectives and experiences in the program, primarily for formative purposes. Researchers piloted this instrument internally and revised the instrument. The instrument ultimately included 26 questions, six of which were Likert-type (Miller, n.d.) with scales that ranged from "Strongly Agree"=4 to "Strongly Disagree"=1, with additional response options offered (e.g., "Not Applicable," "No Opinion"). Researchers also included 10 open-ended and 10 demographic items. See this instrument in Appendix A in the supplemental materials. Questions related to enrollment and participation in the program informed RQ2 and perceptions of the strengths and challenges of the program informed RQ3.

Team members distributed the instrument via Qualtrics (2018) to all current students via their course instructors in spring 2019, with 161 students ultimately responding (n=161/691; 23% response rate). Given this response rate, team members did not seek to generalize across responses or beyond. Instead, they aimed to represent students' individual and collective voices through naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) whereby readers would be able to learn and pull from this study the study findings that made sense to them in and as per their particular contexts.

Of the students who responded, no more than 75.8% (122/161) responded to each of the demographic items within the survey instrument. The majority of these students were female (n=98/122; 80.3%), full-time students (n=93/122; 76.2%) who spoke English as their first language (n=109/121; 90.1%). Additionally, most were juniors or seniors (n=88/122; 72.1%) and primarily participated in online classes (n=107/122; 87.7%). Student participants' average age was 30 (SD=4.4; range=$18<x<57$). The majority were White/European (n=83/120; 68.6%), and most respondents resided in the U.S. (n=107/111; 96.4%). Although, others were residents of Saudi Arabia, Japan, and England.

For the quantitative data derived via this instrument, researchers also analyzed the instrument's internal consistency, or reliability, again, using SPSS (IBM Corporation, 2018). Using Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha ($0.00<\alpha<1.00$), which helps to estimate "the proportion of test variance attributable to common factors among…items" (p. 331) included within survey instruments, researchers found the instrument yielded good reliability (α=0.89), given Cronbach alphas greater than 0.70 ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) are oft-considered acceptable (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010; see also Merrigan & Huston,

2008, Sullivan & Artino, 2013). Resultant alphas warranted item use, again, to interpret current students' perceptions of the program. Researchers used SPSS to calculate and interpret subsequent means, medians, and standard deviations (SDs).

For the qualitative data, researchers engaged in a two-phase coding process to analyze student responses to open-ended questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In Phase 1, researchers read the complete set of participant responses and assigned codes to data segments related to the research questions. They then identified prevalent themes, reconciling any discrepancies across interpretations. In Phase 2, researchers condensed findings into major themes to provide more general representations of student responses.

Instructor survey instrument (RQ2-3)

Researchers developed and validated a survey instrument for program instructors to explore instructors' perspectives and experiences in the program, also primarily for formative purposes. After piloting and revising this instrument, it ultimately included 39 questions with three demographic questions, 13 Likert-scale items, 12 open-ended questions, and 11 multiple-choice or short-answer questions, all of which covered three constructs. Construct one included items that were included to capture instructors' perspectives on the program's goals, as well as course alignment with those goals. Construct two included items to capture instructors' perspectives on understanding the importance of program goals, as well as course alignment with those goals. Construct three included items to capture instructors' perceptions about program quality, strengths, and challenges. Likert-scale responses across constructs ranged from "Very Confident"=5 to "Not at All Confident"=1, "Very Important"=5 to "Not at All Important"=1, and "Strongly Agree"=4 to "Strongly Disagree"=1, respectively. See this instrument in Appendix B in the Supplemental Materials.

Again, utilizing Qualtrics (2018), researchers sent the electronic survey instrument to 138 program instructors via email. Just over one-third of instructors responded (*n*=48/138; 34.8% response). Researchers sought only to represent instructors' voices as per their individual and collective experiences in the program, to support readers' opportunities, again, to help others make naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

Of the instructor survey respondents, 85.1% instructors were female (*n*=40/47). Their average age was 50 (median=48; SD=11.4; range=29<x<80). Most instructors were White/European (79.2%; n=38/48). Most held a part-time position (89.4%; *n*=42/47), and 78.6% (*n*=33/42) reported concurrently working in other positions such as K-12, substitute, or online teaching, instructional technology and design, or school district-level positions. Most instructors (*n*=42/48, 87.5%) held a bachelor's degree in educational fields (e.g., elementary education, psychology, special education) or other fields including agriculture economics, broadcast journalism, music performance, and

public relations and a master's degree in or related to the field of education, instructional design or technology, counseling and psychology, or educational leadership. Approximately one-third (*n*=18/48; 37.5%) held PhDs in education or related to education. Similarly, 68.8% (*n*=33/48) indicated having additional certifications, endorsements, and credentials (e.g., state teaching certifications, reading endorsements, administrative credentials).

Researchers also used SPSS (IBM Corporation, 2018) to calculate Cronbach's alpha for the three sets of Likert-scale items, per construct. The overall alpha for all Likert-type items was α=.62, and all of the alphas for the three constructs were α=.79, α=.81, and α=.90, respectively, indicating adequate levels of reliability across all survey constructs (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010; see also Merrigan & Huston, 2008, Sullivan & Artino, 2013). Researchers used SPSS to calculate and interpret subsequent means, medians, and SDs, and they used the same coding process detailed in the previous section (see also Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Program demographics (RQ1)

Institutional data sets showed that a total of 691 students were enrolled in the program at the time of this study. The mean age of enrolled students was 26.5 (median=24.0; SD=7.2; range=18≤x≤72), the majority were female (*n*=576/691; 84.4%), the majority were from out-of-state (*n*=524/691; 75.8%), and the majority identified as White/European (n=444/691; 64.3%). The percentage of enrolled students by undergraduate year was seniors (35.0%), juniors (32.0%), sophomores (19.1%), and freshman (13.9%).

In terms of how students came to enroll in the program, 67% (*n*=463/691) transferred in from outside the university, 28.4% (*n*=196/691) enrolled as first-time freshmen, and 4.2% (n=29/691) transferred from another university program. Only 5.1% (*n*=35/691) were previously enrolled in a college teacher preparation program. Most students (*n*=571/691; 82.6%) took program classes entirely online, while 17.4% (n=120/691) took classes in-person.

Institutional data sets also illustrated that 353 program students graduated between August 2015 and May 2018. Graduates' mean age during their final semester in the program was 28.4 (median=26.0; SD=7.0; range=21≤x≤63). Of these graduates, the majority (*n*=285; 80.7%) also identified as female, and over half (*n*=203/353; 57.7%) as White/European. Of the students with admission information who graduated between August 2015 and May 2018 (*n*=315), 58.7% (n=185/315) transferred into the program from outside the university, 30.5% (*n*=96/315) enrolled as first-time freshmen, and 10.5% (*n*=33/315) transferred from inside the university. Almost half (*n*=145/315; 46.0%) of these students were previously enrolled in a college teacher preparation program prior to starting the program. Just under half (*n*=150/315; 47.6%) of these

students graduated with honors. In addition, the program experienced a 149% increase in graduates from the academic year 2016-2017 (*n*=102) to 2017-2018 (*n*=144).

Researchers compared common domains between the currently enrolled and graduated student data, from 2016-2018, to examine noteworthy changes. Overall, these findings illustrate a substantive decrease in the proportions of resident students enrolled in the program (61.9%-to-21.7%= -40.2%) and a substantive increase in the proportion of non-resident students enrolled (34.3%-to-75.8%= +41.5%). The proportion of students who were residents of other nations stayed the same, more or less; although, the proportion of students who took classes online substantively increased (35.1%-to-82.6%= +47.5%), as anticipated (e.g., Shin & Lee, 2009).

Program participation (RQ2)

Student program enrollment and goals

The majority (n=111/161; 68.9%) of student respondents answered the open-ended question on the student survey regarding why they chose to enroll in the program, providing 169 unique reasons, given some students provided more than one reason. See Figure 2 illustrating students' reported reasons for entering the program.

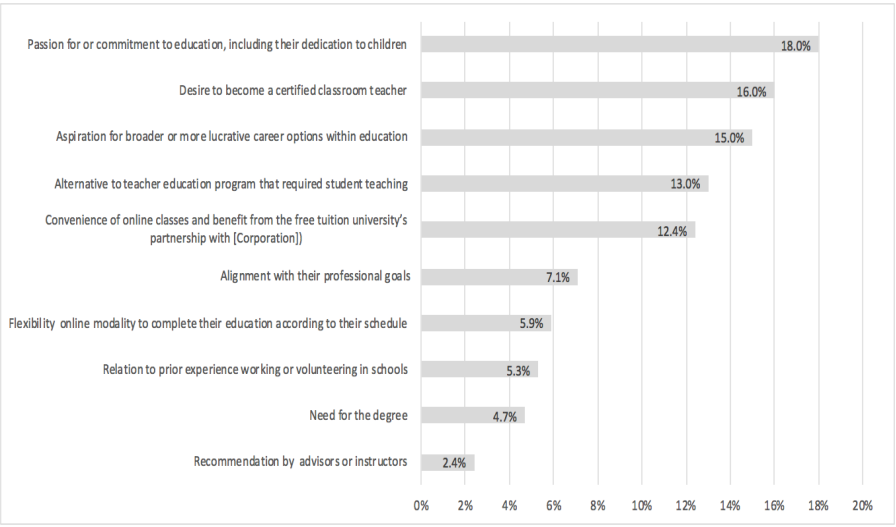

Figure 2. Students' Reported Reasons for Entering the Program

The most common reason enrollees gave for enrolling in the program was their passion for and commitment to education, including a general dedication to working with students. A similar percentage of responding students noted that becoming a classroom teacher, which was and still is not the program's primary purpose, was the goal. Interestingly, these students saw this program as more of a gateway into teaching, or a precursor to a graduate program that might lead to a teaching certificate. Also,

Figure 2 suggests that a key driver for student respondents to enter the program was the free tuition benefit from a high-profile partnership between ASU and Starbucks, called the Starbucks College Achievement Plan (ASU, n.d.b).

Next, focusing on current student respondents' post-graduation plans, 67.7% (n=109/161) of students responded, yielding 126 unique responses about their self-reported career plans. As similarly noted prior, the majority (31.7%) of student respondents reported their plans to continue their higher education, including in teacher education, and as per the findings in the previous section, respondents most often reported planning to ultimately obtain a teaching certificate. Related, a high percentage reported expecting to ultimately obtain a teaching position in traditional education settings (30.1%). Again, though, this was and is still not the program's intended purpose. This is important to note in that regardless of the program's purpose, students seem to be entering and exiting this program with intentions beyond, and in contradiction to program goals. While others (4.7%) certainly, and collectively reported that they were seeking employment in non-traditional education environments, the least frequent response indicated that student respondents did not intend to do what was foundational to the program (i.e., educate program students to enter non-traditional education settings). Clearly, this was a recurring theme.

Instructors working in the program

The majority of program instructors found out about the opportunity to teach in the program through "word of mouth" (*n*=27/42; 64.3%) or a college/university job posting (*n*=9/42; 21.4%). Respondents (*n*=42/48; 87.5%) also provided reasons as to what drew them to apply to teach within the program, resulting in 74 unique responses, including a passion for teaching and alignment with their personal interests (*n*=19/74; 25.7%); flexibility to work from home and online (*n*=16/74; 21.6%); being committed to impacting the future workforce (*n*=7/74; 9.5%); working with adults in higher education (*n*=7/74; 9.5%); or simply being recruited to teach in the program (*n*=5/74; 6.8%).

Instructors (*n*=43/48; 89.5%) also shared how they came to teach specific program courses, resulting in 67 original responses. Many (*n*=42/67; 62.7%) indicated that they were assigned courses, while others noted the program's alignment with their professional interests (*n*=13/67; 19.4%) or areas of expertise (*n*=10/67; 14.9%). Two instructors (*n*=2/67; 3.0%) were recruited to teach a course in the program. Most (*n*=42/48; 87.5%) of the part-time instructor respondents indicated that their concurrent/prior work experiences and professional interests aligned "directly," "greatly," or "very well." One instructor commented that their "prior work experiences, interests, and skills align[ed] beautifully" with their assigned courses. Similarly, a majority of the full-time faculty (*n*=4/5; 80.0%) indicated that their areas of expertise aligned with the courses they taught.

Instructors also responded to questions regarding their specific teaching experiences within the program. A majority (n=36/48; 75.0%) taught exclusively online, 6.3% (*n*=3/48) taught exclusively face-to-face, and the remaining 18.8% (*n*=9/48) taught in both modalities. Respondents taught particular courses one-to-13 times prior, three-to-four times prior, on average. Most (*n*=28/41; 68.3%) taught in the [College] for between two and five years, and most (*n*=32/45; 71.1%) taught in the program between two and five years.

Overall, these findings illustrate that a majority of instructors in the program are relatively new to their positions, despite the program being nearly a decade old, and work part-time teaching online courses. While most instructors are assigned courses to teach, they generally feel their assigned courses relate to their professional expertise or interests.

Instructors (*n*=47) also responded to three sets of Likert-scale items regarding the extent to which they were confident in knowing and understanding the program, using a five-point scale from "Very Confident"=5.0 to "Not at All Confident"=1.0. Despite the disconnect between the students' future plans and the program purpose noted prior, the instructor respondents generally reported feeling confident that they understood the program's goals (mean=4.5; SD=0.7), the program's courses and course alignment given program goals (mean=4.0; SD=1.0), as well as understanding the program's student-oriented skills and knowledge goals and outcomes (mean=3.9; SD=1.0).

Program strengths and challenges (RQ3)

Students' perceptions of the program

Next, researchers solicited students' perceptions of the program at the time of administering this survey instrument. For these items, researchers obtained students' responses using a "Strongly Agree"=4 to "Strongly Disagree"=1 Likert-type scale. Researchers filtered out all other responses (e.g., "Not applicable," "No opinion"). Researchers found that most respondents (88.2%) strongly agreed or agreed that the program was preparing them for their futures (however defined, as described prior) through their coursework (79.5%) and via their instructors (87.6%) and advisors (73.9%). However, respondents' (66.9%) opinions of the collaborative opportunities provided via the program were more neutral, or relatively less favorable; though, most respondents (79.9%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the program overall.

Students' responses to the open-ended questions included in this section, regarding aspects of the program generally and program courses specifically, provided insight into their responses to the Likert-scale items. Just over half (n=85/161; 52.8%) of the students provided 127 unique responses for program strengths. See Figure 3 illustrating students' perceptions of the program's strengths.

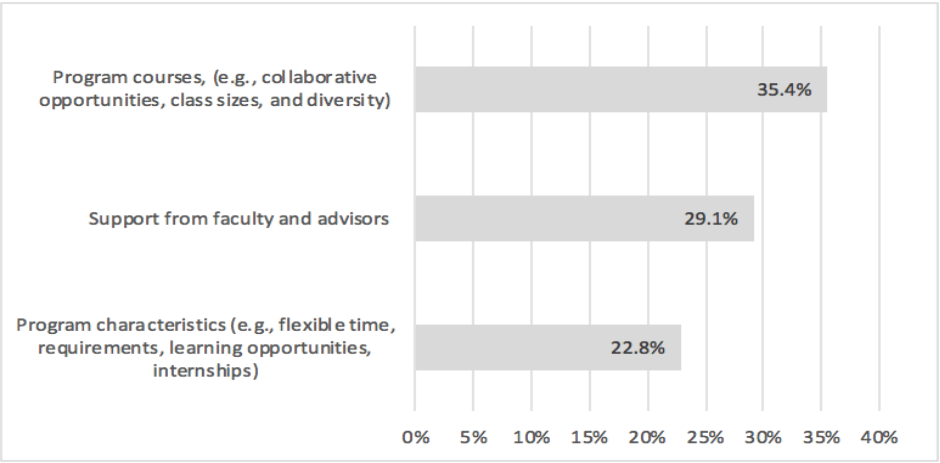

Figure 3. Students' Reported Perceptions of the Program's Strengths

Beyond what is illustrated, and more specifically, 63.3% (*n*=102/161) of students responded with 128 unique answers and 91 reasons as to why they believed specific courses were beneficial. Students mentioned three types of courses as most beneficial: courses related to teacher education and leadership (n=25/128; 19.5%); special education (*n*=24/128; 18.7%); and the social, cultural, and linguistic aspects of education (*n*=12/128; 9.3%). Additionally, 8.5% (*n*=11/128) responded that they found all program courses to be beneficial. Students most commonly believed courses were beneficial if courses resulted in learning new content and acquiring new knowledge and skills (*n*=17/91; 18.6%), were applicable or practical (n=14/91; 15.4%), focused on a student's interests (*n*=14/91; 15.4%); helped students achieve their goals for future careers or education (*n*=13/91; 14.3%), or involved quality training and professional development for educators (*n*=10/91; 11.0%).

Just under half (*n*=78/161; 48.4%) responded to questions about program weaknesses, providing 94 unique responses. See Figure 4 illustrating students' perceptions of program weaknesses.

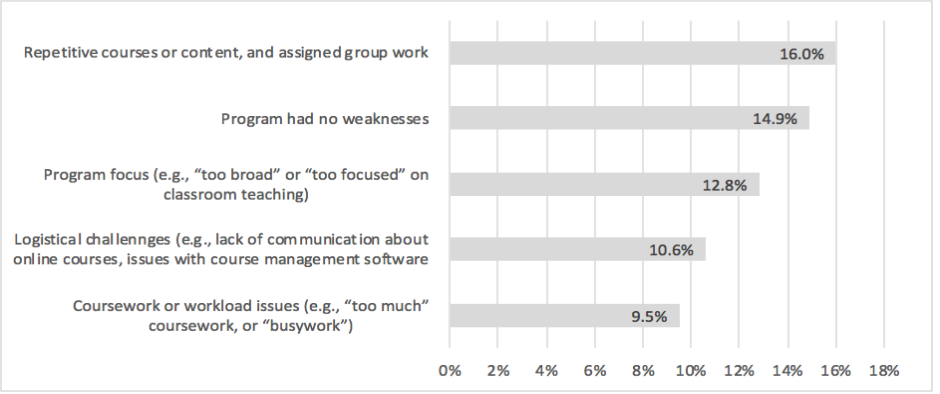

Figure 4. Students' Reported Perceptions of the Program's Weaknesses

Given that courses and course content were of most concern as illustrated, 60.8% (*n*=98/161) of responding students expanded upon their reasoning, yielding 92 unique responses; although, only 10.9% (*n*=10/92) of students' responses noted specific classes as not being beneficial. Regardless, students described group work and collaboration (*n*=14/92; 15.2%) as unbeneficial, or specific issues with course instructors (*n*=9/92; 6.5%) such as instructors' lack of communication, excessive work assigned, or "bad" exams as also required. Other responses indicated that some students (*n*=7/92; 7.6%) felt the program lacked sufficient career-oriented coursework and support to navigate their future career paths, or that the program's scope was "too broad or vague." Students also reported that the internship program needed to be more diversified and goal-oriented (*n*=4/92; 4.3%).

Students (*n*=69/161; 42.9%) provided 74 unique suggestions for helping to improve the program for future program students. See Figure 5 illustrating student participants' suggestions to improve the program.

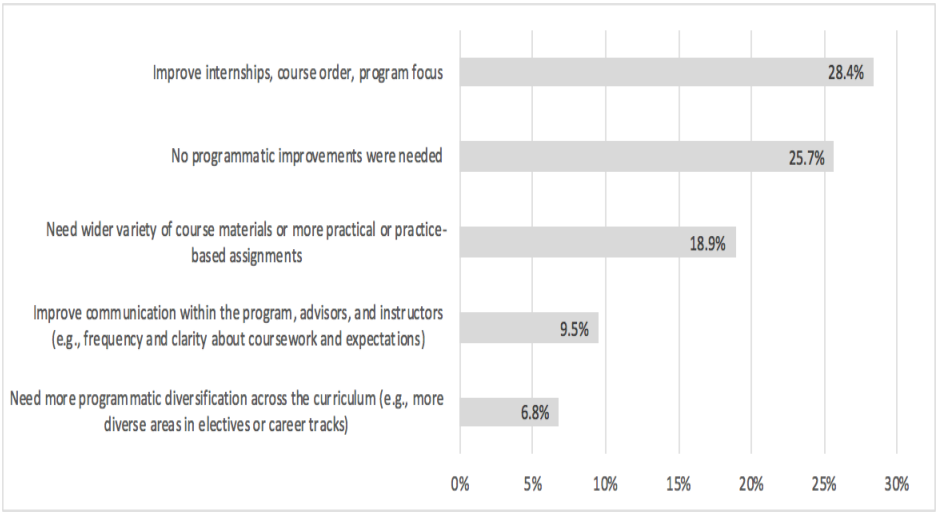

Figure 5. Students' Suggestions to Improve the Program

Important to note is that student respondents agreed that for the program to improve, program leaders needed to focus on improving internships experiences, the order and sequence of program courses, and delimiting and clarifying the program focus, explicitly to students and implicitly through program objectives, courses, outcomes, and the like. Student respondents also called for related needs for program leaders to diversify the curriculum, mainly adding more elective courses or career tracks options. Finally, just over a fourth of students expressed that no program improvements were needed.

Instructors' perceptions of the program

Figure 6 displays descriptive statistics of the five Likert-scale items related to instructors' perceptions of how students are prepared while enrolled in the program using Likert-type responses that ranged from "Strongly Agree"=4.0 to "Strongly Disagree"=1.0.

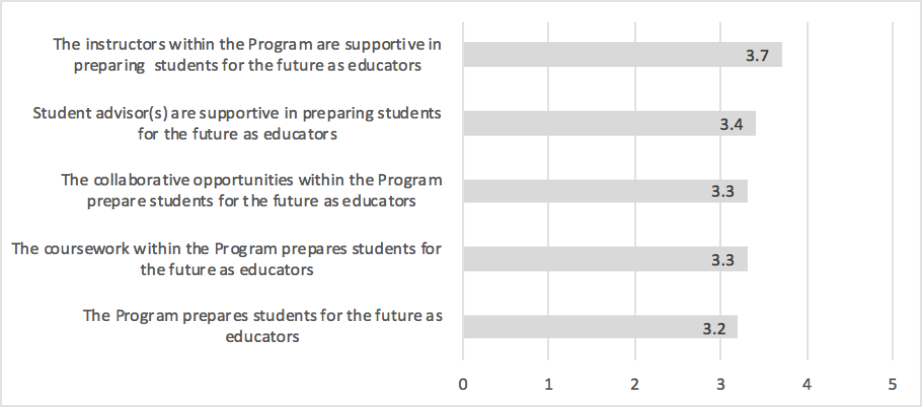

Figure 6. Descriptives of Instructors' Program Perspectives by Mean

Overall, instructors most agreed that program instructors were those who most prepared students for their futures as educators (mean=3.7; SD=0.5). Perhaps this is not surprising given program instructors were answering this question quasi-evaluating themselves. Instructors least agreed, however, that the program actually prepared students for their futures as educators in general (mean=3.2; SD=0.5). This is interesting in that noted prior was that many students were enrolled in this program to ultimately become teachers, even though this is not one of the goals of the program. Evidenced here, perhaps, is that program instructors might seem to agree that the program is not preparing them for what students want to do as contrary to the program's mission.

Researchers also included two survey questions pertaining to instructors' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Of the instructors (*n*=39/48, 81.2%) who responded with strengths (*n*=62), a majority (*n*=32/62; 51.6%) highlighted student experiences as the primary strength of the program. Specifically, respondents mentioned flexibility (e.g., online classes and class schedules), the extent to which students learned critical information about educational issues in the program, and the student support services offered by the program to support student success. One instructor commented on the non-traditional educator focus of the program, explaining that "the strength of the program is that the program supports other professions outside the traditional educator role." Although, again, such a statement may be more of an anomaly than collective belief in that, clearly, there is a disconnect between what students are aiming to gain from the program as potentially contrary to program goals.

Inversely, 81.2% (*n*=39/48) of responding instructors wrote 51 unique weaknesses (n=51) of the program. Just over one quarter (*n*=13/51; 25.5%) felt the program lacked sufficient career preparation for students; this, again, makes sense, as also noted prior. One instructor, for example, questioned, "What are the specific careers this program is geared towards?" Further, a few responding instructors mentioned a lack of com-

munication about opportunities outside of teaching, that some students still – albeit falsely – believed they would have a teacher certification at the end of the program, or that the program was not effectively preparing students with the skills needed for their internships (e.g., presenting, collaborating, research methods). Moreover, some instructors indicated the need to update course content more frequently (*n*=5/51; 9.8%). For example, one respondent mentioned that their assigned course had not been updated since they started working in the program years prior. Another respondent noted, though, "I hope as the course content/courses offered change, we don't lose emphasis on the ideas of global citizenship and having the students analyze the world around them to 'see' the bigger picture of their part in our society (both big and small)." Just over half (*n*=27/51; 52.9%) of the instructors gave specific, unique responses researchers categorized as "other," pertaining to overlapping course content, a general need for more creative assignments, a lack of or too much rigor in specific courses, and the like.

In terms of responses to a survey question soliciting from program instructors their ideas on areas of program improvements, 72.9% (*n*=35/48) of instructors provided 43 responses. Of the respondents, 25.6% (*n*=11/43) mentioned a need to update curriculum to reflect current policies and technology tools, diversify learning assessments, and increase cohesiveness across courses and the program overall. Program instructors also expressed concern for improving student experiences (*n*=9/43; 20.9%), particularly in reference to more applicable and beneficial experiences for students in the internship component. Others expressed concerns about program improvements (*n*=5/43; 11.6%), such as increased alignment and clarity of purpose, program outcomes, and particular program components, such as including more writing, public speaking, and online learning support for all students (*n*=5/43; 11.6%). Additionally, 14.0% (*n*=6/43) of instructors did not offer any areas for program improvement.

RQ1: Who were the students enrolled in the program and how have these demographics changed over time?

At the student-level, the most notable program changes over time centered around enrollment. The majority of students now participate in the program online versus face-to-face, which is likely related to the increased out-of-state enrollment observed. This finding aligns with those of previous studies (e.g., Pelliccione et al., 2019). Further, the online option seems to be allowing more students participating in the aforementioned Starbucks and ASU partnership to enroll, who now account for over 40% of students.

Teacher education programs often lack diversity of ethnicity and gender, which can be problematic as many student populations become more diverse. Thus, the trend in this program toward online participation is promising, as online teacher education programs have been shown by some to facilitate more diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender (e.g., Harrell & Harris, 2006). However, this program still has a student population that is quite homogeneous in its demographics, with most students being

online, full-time, white, females who primarily speak English living in the U.S. These findings align more closely with those of Dyment et al. (2018) and past and current trends in teacher education (Gay et al., 2003; Partelow et al., 2017). Additionally, most instructors identified as white females. Further ethnic and gender diversification in this program, as likely with others, is needed both in terms of students and instructors.

RQ2: Why did students and instructors choose to participate in the program?

In terms of why students enroll, the program seems to be one of choice for students with an interest in education, in general, or teaching outside of the traditional K-12 classroom setting. However, students still seem to be enrolling in the program to earn teaching certificates which is not a primary or even secondary goal of the program. While some respondents mentioned they purposefully enrolled in the program in pursuit of an educational career outside of classroom teaching, many reported ultimately pursuing a teaching career, even if as a step towards entering a master's or alternative teacher education program to gain certification (e.g., Whitford et al., 2017).

Like students, many instructors chose to work in the program because of their interest in teaching in general or teaching a specific content area. Instructors also highlighted their appreciation of the specific job conditions, such as the flexibility of working from home and online or working with adult students. The instructors generally felt that their expertise and interests aligned well with the courses they were teaching, most often because of a background in classroom teaching. The instructors' background experiences likely shape their instruction and may contribute to the continued focus of students on classroom teaching rather than a profession as an educator in another context.

RQ3: What were the strengths and challenges associated with the program, as perceived by students and instructors?

Based on survey results, responding students reported being satisfied with the program and feeling that their courses and instructors were adequately preparing them for a future in the education workforce (even if defined by them as teaching). However, respondents also expressed concerns about issues with course and course assignments. In addition, students reported being concerned about their ability to effectively visualize their professional places in the future, or effectively visualize entering the job market with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions they gained throughout the program. This makes sense given the disconnect with program and program student goals as mentioned prior. Clearly, better alignment of such a non-traditional education program is needed, as is clearer recruiting, marketing, advising, and the like.

Similarly, responding instructors reported enjoying the program but reported feeling that they understood the program's goals, objectives, and internal alignment, albeit relatively more than their enrolled students. On a positive note, many instructors

expressed enthusiasm about revising the program, in terms of better serving student needs given better alignment and clarity, but also if outdated courses were updated to reflect new information, resources, technologies, and policies. The instructors' most common concerns, again, were about ensuring the program explicates clearly communicated trajectories to support students' future careers in terms of program goals.

Implications for this and other similar programs

In terms of students' and instructors' survey responses, researchers suggest study implications as per the five conceptual domains they used throughout this study (recall Figure 1). In terms of the Education in Society domain, students indicated courses related to special education, culture, language, and leadership were most beneficial to their learning. This suggests students found meaning when engaging with ideas of education in diverse communities and settings. Yet, some students also reported the program was too focused on classroom teaching, even though it is not a teacher certification program. Another reason for the disconnect between purpose and enactment might be that most program instructors have backgrounds in teaching. As most instructors learned about the program through "word of mouth" and university job postings, future recruitment of instructors using these approaches should target professionals in non-traditional educational contexts. If the goal of this or any such program is to prepare students for education careers other than classroom teachers, alignment, as well as solid means of recruitment, marketing, and advising are critical.

In terms of the Act of Learning domain, students reported that the most beneficial courses were those of practical value and those that were applicable to real-life situations. However, students also expressed concerns about courses and coursework that was highly repetitive or "busy work," emphasizing the need for more streamlined approaches to ensure students are also learning what is intended in the program. Here is also an opportunity for program leaders to update courses to reflect current understandings in education, also to better prepare students to have a direct, timely, and ethical (see also Maxwell et al., 2016) impact in and on a variety of non-traditional educational contexts. Program leaders should also ensure the purpose and alignment of these updated courses is clearly communicated to course instructors, perhaps through asynchronous online trainings, as most instructors work part-time and online.

The domain of Communication and Collaboration elicited a wide variety of responses from students and instructors. Some responding students felt they were building communication and technology skills in meaningful ways to collaborate with others. Others struggled with online versions of collaboration, especially discussion boards. Given facilitating and supporting the social learning aspects of online courses are critical (DeWert et al., 2003; Thornton, 2013), this could be another area for improvement, perhaps, with emphasis on non-traditional careers in which students could engage (e.g., Billett, 2009; Smith et al., 2016) and the specific modes of collaboration

and communication currently being used in those careers.

The program seems to have a strong foundation in the domain of Identity as an Educator in that the main reason for enrolling or working in the program, as per students and instructors, respectively, was their passion for teaching and education writ large. Again, most students reported having at least general career goals related to education; though, how the program prepared students for careers outside traditional classrooms was duly lacking. Clearly, program leaders of this or any such program must consider, again, increased efforts and possible resources towards strengthening recruitment, marketing, advising, and the like. Efforts surrounding better career counseling might also help, so students could be more aware of non-traditional career options as well (e.g., DeWert et al., 2003).

The final domain of focus in this study was about Leadership, Advocacy, and Innovation, which entails preparing students to address issues of social justice by navigating supports and barriers in educational environments. Very few respondents mentioned issues pertaining to social justice, suggesting that this is likely a relatively new focus of the program, if not void. Regardless, because of the critical and central nature of social justice issues in education (Stetsenko, 2017), and beyond, program leaders should focus on ensuring that this domain is better embedded across courses, instructors and, simply put, throughout all program aspects, again, possibly through a formalized professional development structure or, at minimum, through carefully documented, aligned, and communicated program outcomes, theory, career tracks, and the like.

Implications for Future Research

At the conclusion of this evaluation, researchers presented all findings and implications to program leaders. Accordingly, future research should focus on program changes and outcomes in relation to this evaluation. Additionally, future researchers on this or other such programs might consider ways to track program students more systematically, perhaps also by subgroup (e.g., online vs. face-to-face), to continuously monitor student enrollment as well as attrition and retention. While researchers did attempt to contact 25 students who had recently left the program for their feedback regarding why they left, researchers struggled with obtaining feedback for obvious reasons (e.g., students who dropped the program probably did not want to tell anyone even close to the program why). As such, researchers might consider better feedback systems to explore the salient strengths and challenges of being involved in any such program more methodically, before students might leave, and given how student populations in such programs apparently change as these types of programs grow. Program leaders might also consider using formative assessments given the constantly changing environment of careers and society at large to adjust to the program to the needs of program students as non-traditional education careers come and go (after issues with

program alignment are resolved). Also concentrating future research efforts on more focused conversations with students, for example, via student interviews as well as student exit interviews, might help program leaders better understand what supports are needed to ensure higher retention and satisfactory completion rates. Another recommendation might be to set up a systematic way to, for example, reflect on such programs three-or-so years post program to determine in what professional positions they work, in what locations they are working, and how what they learned in the program helped (or hindered) their non-traditional careers at that point.

Finally, and in addition to continuously adapting and developing such programs to meet student needs, program leaders may also want to consider including systematic ways to continuously collect data from program instructors. For example, to keep abreast of the various experiences and expertise of instructors, and also program advisors, instructors might better contribute to program alignments guides, as aligned with courses and course assignments, program support systems, and so forth (e.g., DeWert et al., 2003). In short, future research involving instructors and advisors would help program leaders better understand and support students, not only in terms of programmatic but also many student-level goals.

Conclusion

Researchers found that the Bachelor of Arts in Education in Educational Studies program – an interdisciplinary, undergraduate, degree-granting program within a teacher education college – showed promise as a rapidly-growing program of choice for nontraditional education students; although, some of the nontraditional education students enrolled were ultimately aiming for traditional teaching positions. Hence, researchers also found that alignment, as well as implicit and explicit messaging about the program very much lacked. Notwithstanding, findings also suggest that this type of program can provide flexibility for students wanting to explore a variety of educational career options who might also need or prefer an online program, which is especially relevant since the beginning of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Related, this program has, since its inception, become a large and important part of a remarkable Starbucks and ASU partnership, that also continues to grow in numbers, but also in reach and impact. Accordingly, further attention and research is needed given these growing numbers and as leaders of this and other similar programs continue to help reconceptualize traditional teacher education and help prepare and transition nontraditional education students into nontraditional educational careers.

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