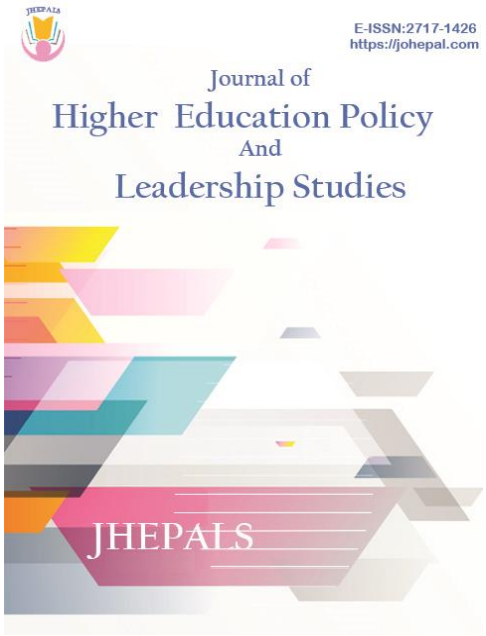
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Leveraging Flexible Trajectories to Meet the Needs of Non-Traditional Graduate Students in Master of Education Degree Programs



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Abstract

Program coordinators/faculty members of two Master of Education Degree programs at a university in the United States of America meets the needs of nontraditional graduate students through flexible trajectories related to course sequence, program progression, and course formats. These Master of Education Degree programs for teachers (licensure and non-licensure) have transitioned from strict cohort models to specialized course sequences codesigned between the program coordinator and each student. Each program has undergone course format changes based on student need. The licensure (secondary education) M.Ed. program originally started with mostly onsite classes and transitioned to utilizing a mix of course formats to meet student needs – onsite, asynchronous online, and hybrid. The non-licensure M.Ed. program used to offer students a choice of two course formats- onsite or asynchronous online; however, due to course enrollment trends, the program transitioned to all asynchronous online coursework. As a result of these programmatic changes, students have benefited and the programs have grown, combatting challenges of recruitment and retention at the university.

Keywords: Online Course Formats; Higher Education; Student Retention; Graduate Programs; Non-Traditional Graduate Students

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Introduction

Higher education enrollment has declined for both undergraduate (4.2% over two years) and graduate (1%) students in the United States of America (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). The pandemic and economic conditions are cited as possible reasons for the declining enrollment that has forced colleges and universities "to re-evaluate their long- and short-term strategies, particularly as they pertain to enrollment management and student support services" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023, para. 1). Recruiting and retaining students requires a focus on student needs (Field et al., 2021). According to Doug Shapiro who leads the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, students now seem more open to online degree programs (Nadworny & Carrillo, 2023). Online learning transcends geographic boundaries and can provide culturally rich, inclusive, and accessible experiences to diverse types of people – ill, disabled, international, etc. (Liu et al., 2010; Pang & Jen, 2018). The flexibility that online courses/programs provide could help retain overtaxed and overstressed students (Jackson & Konczosné Szombathelyi, 2022; Lin & Gao, 2020; Pang & Jen, 2018). Of particular concern is the recruitment and retention of nontraditional graduate students who are teachers or school leaders because teacher attrition is at an all-time high, and teachers who are often trained through university graduate programs are used to fill vacant teaching positions (Bryant et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

This article focuses on two Master of Education Degree programs (M.Eds.) in a college of education at a state university in the United States of America. Most students in these degree programs are non-traditional graduate students who teach in unique educational settings (preschool – adult learning) and have diverse personal/work responsibilities. As such, M.Ed. degree program designs have transformed from strict cohort models to more flexible program progressions co-designed between each student and the program coordinator. Additionally, justifying a shift from traditional onsite course formats to online formats (asynchronous online and hybrid/blended) has been driven by student interest. This was evidenced by student enrollment patterns in the years prefacing the COVID-19 pandemic. When these part-time graduate students were given a choice between onsite and online courses, the online asynchronous course enrollment numbers surpassed the onsite sections.

In fact, often the onsite courses had so few enrolled that those sections were canceled for failing to meet the university's course student enrollment threshold. For some onsite courses, the pandemic provided a necessary transition to online formats – asynchronous online and hybrid or blended learning. Although many students may prefer online course/program formats and the university remains flexible to student needs, pivoting to online formats requires tremendous planning, including online course development and approval processes, as well as ongoing improvement efforts. This paper describes how program coordinators/faculty members in a college of education at a state university have leveraged online Master of Education degree programs to meet the needs of nontraditional graduate students through flexible trajectories related to course sequence, program progression, and course formats.

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Background - Master of Education Degree Programs

A state university's college of education houses two types of Master of Education degree programs - M.Eds. (non-licensure and secondary education teaching licensure) that are the focus of this paper. These education programs underwent multiple changes over a five-year span to keep up with the preferences and needs of the enrolled and prospective student population. Most of the enrolled graduate students in both M.Ed. programs are practicing K-12 teachers seeking graduate degrees to further their educational knowledge, advance their career status, and increase their salary. The majority are non-traditional learners with full-time jobs and take graduate classes part-time. Thus, they often have work-related (coaching sports, sponsoring clubs, hosting parent meetings, etc.) and family obligations that require extensive work hours.

Program I - Secondary Education Licensure M.Ed.

The Master of Education degree with a specialization in secondary education teaching licensure (6^{th} - 12^{th} grade English, history, math, and science; kindergarten - 12^{th} grade art, music, and physical education) includes graduate students who have a bachelors' degree in a content-specific area (English, history, math, science, etc.), then decided later to become a teacher. There are two types of students in the licensure M.Ed. Most students in the secondary education teaching licensure M.Ed. program have been hired as employees of local school districts with the expectation that they must complete the requirements of the university's educational preparation program (alternatively licensed or job-embedded teachers). The other group of students in this program are completing the M.Ed. degree and seeking initial teaching licensure before entering the teaching profession. Due to teacher licensure requirements and the need for synchronous course meetings during the pandemic and beyond, this program needed to take a different approach when shifting online to meet student needs. The licensure M.Ed. program that originally started with mostly onsite classes transitioned to utilizing a mix of formats to meet student needs – onsite, asynchronous online, and hybrid – asynchronous online with synchronous meetings.

Program II- Non-Licensure M.Ed.

Alternatively, the Master of Education degree program with a concentration in teaching and innovation in PK-16 (preschool – adult learners) does not provide teaching licensure. Most students in this non-licensure M.Ed. are practicing K-12 teachers with an undergraduate degree and teaching license. Some M.Ed. students in this non-licensure pathway teach a range of students from preschool to college settings. Many of these M.Ed. students prefer to take one or two courses a semester to complete the degree as a part-time graduate student while working full-time jobs; however, a small group of students in the non-licensure M.Ed. enroll right after completing their undergraduate degree with teacher licensure and want to quickly complete 33 credit hours in a year before entering the teaching profession. The non-licensure M.Ed. program transitioned from a mix of onsite and online classes to a fully online asynchronous program.

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Program Design - Flexibility Over Time

The Master of Education degree program coordinators have been flexible to student needs in various ways over a five-year period that spans from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic era. Student needs have dictated changes in course sequence and progression for both M.Eds. – from a strict cohort model to a specialized course sequence. Close monitoring and guidance from program coordinators helps keep students on track while completing their graduate program of study.

When program directors are designing a program of study, they must adhere to various existing university requirements. For example, a required minimum number of students is set as a threshold to meet before a class is offered (8 students for an M.Ed. graduate level course for the university discussed). Also, students are required to enroll in a minimum number of course hours to be eligible for financial aid (six hours/semester for the university discussed). Both requirements can be circumvented by requiring students to maintain a designated course sequence during their program of study, for example the cohort model or the specialized course sequence.

Cohort Model

One way to achieve a designated course sequence is through a cohort model in which students progress through the same classes as a group of their peers. Cohort models can be used for both onsite and online course designs. Being a part of a cohort can foster a sense of belonging which is a predictor for academic success and mental health (Dopmeijer et al., 2022). Connecting with others also helps build a professional learning network, mitigate anxiety and stress, and provide accountability/motivation (Bekkouche et al., 2022; Mauldin et al., 2022; Umekubo et al., 2015).

Before student needs facilitated a change in program design, both M.Ed. programs at the university utilized strict cohort models. For example, when the M.Ed. non-licensure program began fully online, students were required to follow a strict progression for finishing the degree in two years (students enrolled in two courses in fall one, two courses in spring one, three courses in summer, two courses in fall two, and two courses in spring two). All students entered the program during the same semester and graduated together. The strict cohort model helped facilitate stronger familiarity between students within courses which helped create stronger connections within course discussions; however, over time, it became challenging to adhere to this strict model.

Specialized Course Sequence

Despite the benefits of requiring a specific course sequence like in the cohort model, some students desired a slower or faster progression through their program of study. Therefore, it became difficult to identify a single program/course format that was a definitive solution for all prospective students. Likewise, sometimes the tight window for accepting program applications dissuaded prospective students from enrolling. As a result, M.Ed. program coordinators decided to disband the strict cohort model and began accepting applications on a rolling basis to allow new students to enter the program in either fall, spring, or summer semesters. This precipitated the creation of a specialized course sequence co-developed

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between the program coordinator and each student. Now, M.Ed. courses are offered on a semester rotation to adhere to existing university requirements and to meet student needs.

Sometimes, students need to slow down or stop-out due to inability to maintain work-life-school balance. If students find it difficult to maintain continuous enrollment, they can request permission to interrupt their studies on a temporary basis by completing a "stop-out" form that is signed and approved by the program coordinator and the College of Graduate Studies. This period of time does not count toward the time limit for degree completion and readmission to the program is automatically granted if the student is in good academic standing. However, a stop-out may not be used more than once and if it exceeds one academic year, the student may be required to reenter the program under the current catalog year. A continued line of communication between the students and the program coordinator can encourage students to readmit to the program and finish the degree when life circumstances become more manageable for them.

Program coordinators/advisors for online programs often utilize email, telephone, or videoconference methods to provide on-demand coaching/mentoring and help maintain each student's trajectory (Ohrablo, 2016). The program coordinator/advisor can monitor student progression by maintaining an open line of communication and a social presence in online coursework which can encourage students to address issues sooner. Creating a sense of belonging is critical to student success (Field et al., 2021). With the help of the program coordinator, students can create milestones or step-by-step academic goals that lead to graduation. For example, the non-licensure M.Ed. students are encouraged to communicate with their program coordinator each semester before registering for courses to develop a plan for the upcoming semester. Students often ask the coordinator for course suggestions after reflecting on their work/personal schedules and how much time they can devote to their graduate coursework during a given semester. Setting measurable goals and closely monitoring student progress have been cited as effective retention strategies (Hanover Research, 2024). Thus, staying flexible and trusting students to co-develop their own program trajectory with the help of the program coordinator/advisor could reduce stress and anxiety and increase student retention.

Course Formats

Higher education institutions often provide more flexibility and choices in course formats to meet students' various needs (Beatty, 2019; Hodges et al., 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online asynchronous courses were already in high demand at this university as well as other universities cited in research (Halpin et al., 2018; Halpin, 2022). When online Master of Education courses were offered during the same semesters as their synonymous onsite counterparts, the course enrollment proved that online classes were the more utilized course format. In fact, many onsite classes for the M.Ed. programs were cancelled due to low enrollment and not meeting the university's minimum student enrollment threshold. Likewise, many onsite classes suffered from frequent student absences and often students expressed the desire to "make-up" the content in asynchronous formats. Because of the challenges of these experiences and the desire to meet the unique needs of students, the program coordinator for the non-licensure M.Ed. converted the entire program to an asynchronous online course format. In contrast, the M.Ed. for secondary education teaching licensure included a mix of onsite and asynchronous courses prior to the pandemic.

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However, much like other universities experienced, the pandemic brought with it opportunities to redesign existing onsite coursework to online formats (Halpin, 2022).

Asynchronous Online

Both Master of Education degree programs (licensure and non-licensure) utilize asynchronous online courses in which learners can independently investigate course topics at any time and from any location. Many students have reported positive perceptions of active and collaborative learning experiences in asynchronous learning environments (Halpin, 2022; Metz & Metz, 2022). Students might select asynchronous online programs to reduce strict schedules and the fear of not being about to balance their school, work, and personal responsibilities because asynchronous coursework is more self-paced and flexible (Lin & Gao, 2020; Pang & Jen, 2018). Employment pressures, dependent children, and illness have been cited as having an impact on student withdrawal or delayed progression; some students have noted that distance education helps alleviate some of these problems (Carroll et al., 2009). Flexible coursework allows for multitasking and can be a well sought characteristic of learning; but, for some, it can negatively impact family life and provoke stress (Kahu et al., 2014). Therefore, students must consider which learning format is best for them, and program coordinators/advisors can help students make those decisions.

Asynchronous online courses at this university house all coursework in the learning management system, and students access asynchronously to view course content and submit assignments. Coursework is divided into specific themes or modules. Since work is completed asynchronously, students must learn to self-pace and adhere to course deadlines. Many course developers/instructors create checklists for each module to help students stay on track while completing readings, discussions, and assignments. There is some diversity in terms of how instructors design and instruct these types of courses; for example, some instructors upload course content, such as videos and articles, weekly while other instructors open the entire course to students at the beginning of the semester to allow students a preview of all content before they begin their first content module. Some ways that instructors help students manage course workloads include setting due date windows for assignment submissions, permitting assignment extensions if students notify the instructor prior to the submission deadline, and allowing assignment revisions. These options still hold students accountable for their assignments and allow student autonomy but give grace when students are struggling to maintain work-life balance or when unexpected life circumstances impact their trajectories.

Hybrid or Blended Learning

Although asynchronous online courses were already popular for many students prior to the pandemic (for both licensure and non-licensure M.Ed. programs), many onsite classes (like the university's secondary education licensure M.Ed. courses) needed revamping. The pandemic helped transition faculty's initial concerns because onsite courses were quickly moved to synchronous remote meetings out of necessity (Halpin et al., 2018; Halpin, 2022; Lemay et al., 2021). Because of the additional preparation that students in the M.Ed. licensure program need to meet the requirements of teaching licensure, some faculty members sought to retain synchronous course meetings with students; however, they still wanted to include many of the flexible components associated with online learning. Thus,

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some courses were redeveloped to use more of a hybrid or blended approach which combines face-to-face synchronous class sessions (either onsite or virtual) with asynchronous coursework (Siegelman, n.d.). This transition occurred, in part, because hybrid or blended learning is often seen as a compromise that potentially alleviates student burnout by balancing face-to-face and online learning and accommodating a greater number of students (Jackson & Konczosné Szombathelyi, 2022).

Since the pandemic, some licensure M.Ed. courses that were traditionally offered through onsite formats have undergone the full online development and approval processes to align with FERPA, accessibility, and accreditation standards and transitioned to hybrid formats - asynchronous online with some synchronous online meetings, alleviating the need for a physical space to meet for class attendance. Online synchronous course meetings have helped with physical logistics and allow students to attend live class sessions despite unforeseen circumstances that happen such as illnesses. Post-pandemic, the licensure M.Ed. program mixes the use of onsite and online courses to meet the needs of students.

Flexibility in course formats has been particularly beneficial for one subgroup of students in the secondary education licensure M.Ed. program, the alternatively licensed or job-embedded teachers. These students are working on teacher licensure through a graduate program while simultaneously completing the expectations of being teachers of record in local school districts. Often, they have additional expectations to coach sports, sponsor clubs, attend school functions, etc. Many of these students find themselves driving home late from school functions, and the flexibility of synchronous online class meetings allows them to attend class sessions in the car, at school, or alternative locations if necessary (Tipton et al., 2022). This flexibility is needed during a time when teacher attrition is high, and alternatively licensed teachers are being relied upon to fill vacant teaching positions (Bryant et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Flipped Design

One way that faculty members in the licensure M.Ed. have approached hybrid or blended learning is through a flipped design; students "view digitized or online lectures as pre-class homework, then spend in-class time engaged in active learning experiences such as discussions, peer teaching, presentations, projects, problem solving, computations, and group activities" (Roehling & Bredow, 2021, para. 3). An example of a hybrid course that used a flipped learning model is described by Tipton et al. (2022); teacher candidates in a licensure M.Ed. course completed asynchronous coursework (viewing videos, reviewing other course documents and articles, participating in asynchronous online discussions, and submitting assignments) prior to synchronous online meetings, occurring monthly on Saturdays. At the monthly meetings, instructors shared key takeaways and encouraged student progress moving forward in the course, and students asked questions to clarify content, expectations, and assignments. This format also helped teacher candidates prepare for upcoming teaching licensure exams by allowing them to practice individual tasks asynchronously, share drafts of lesson plans with their classmates, and engage in peer feedback and reflection opportunities in the synchronous online meetings via breakout groups.

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Online Course Development Process

Despite the sudden shift to remote online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, all online courses have now returned to utilizing the full development and approval process. Because the online development and approval process is lengthy, it takes several years for program coordinators to integrate new online courses and redevelop older online courses. As such, programs continually develop over time.

Every newly proposed course (whether onsite or online) goes through department, college, and university curriculum approval processes to be added to undergraduate or graduate catalogs. Some of the essential items that are approved through the curriculum review include: course description, objectives, justification, projected enrollment, relation to departmental curricula, research and service needs, learning resource materials, course topics outline, required student activities, proposed evaluation procedures, and references and text. However, an asynchronous online or hybrid course must undergo an additional rigorous and lengthy development process to ensure standard qualities for online learning. Like other institutions, the university offers extra compensation for online course development. This helps stifle some of the overwhelming aspects of adding another duty to overtaxed faculty members (Herman, 2013; Singleton et al., 2019).

In contrast to an onsite class which does not have additional oversight, for a course to be offered online (either from its initial inception or a transition in formats), the course developer (usually a program coordinator or a faculty member who teaches in the program) must complete additional steps. The coordinator of the university's online department pairs the course developer with an online instructional designer to begin an online development, review, and approval process that, in part, ensures adherence to standards such as FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), accessibility, and accreditation requirements. At the conclusion of the online development portion of the process, the course developer conducts a self-evaluation, and then the assigned instructional designer performs a comprehensive review. Key criteria assessed on a course review evaluation rubric include: 1) course overview and introduction, 2) course objectives/student learning outcomes, 3) assessment and measurement, 4) module/unit introduction and instructional materials, 5) learning activities and interaction, 6) learner support, 7) accessibility/usability, and 8) course technology. As noted by Singleton et al. (2019), the partnership between the instructional designer and faculty member is an important part of a successful online course. Next, the evaluation is forwarded to the department chair for final approval. These processes can delay the initial offering of an online course for almost a year, therefore careful planning is necessary in advance of the anticipated course launching. Others have noted that the online course development process takes from six to nine months (Hodges et al., 2020). It is important to consider the logistical and timing challenges that program coordinators face as they attempt to meet student needs that arise and as trajectories change.

Conclusion

The decline in student enrollment in higher education has caused a need for change (Nadworny & Carrillo, 2023; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Providing students with a balance of course formats and flexibility could help retain

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overtaxed and overstressed students (Jackson & Konczosné Szombathelyi, 2022; Lin & Gao, 2020; Pang & Jen, 2018), particularly for nontraditional graduate students who are teachers or school leaders because teacher attrition is at an all-time high (Bryant et al., 2023). As with the Master of Education degree programs described in this paper, nontraditional graduate student needs related to work-life balance have driven versatility in course sequence, program progression, and course format choices. To provide more flexible trajectories, program coordinators can codesign a specialized course sequence with each student. Higher education institutions can also offer asynchronous online formats as well as hybrid or blended formats, including flipped classroom models (Beatty, 2019; Hodges et al., 2020; Roehling & Bredow, 2021; Tipton et al., 2022). However, because transitioning to online formats can include lengthy and complex processes, depending on university requirements, program coordinators must carefully plan (Hodges et al., 2020). Whether it is due to need or preference, embracing the complex trajectories of individual students through flexibility and student choice can lead to student success in higher education programs.

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