

Evaluating a Middle Level Master's Program at Southeastern University: Recommendations and Outcomes

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This article describes original research to determine reasons graduate students do not complete requirements for a Master's (M.Ed.) in Middle Level Education degree at the Southeastern University. Since the program's initial cohort the graduation rate has decreased. Program faculty was concerned about the increasing difference between the number of applicant completers, as well as the decreasing number of applicants. In the original study, the data revealed that the most favorable outcome of completing a Master's in Middle Level Education degree was receiving a pay raise. The analysis also revealed barriers to the Master's in Middle Level Education program such as limited provisions of financial assistance. In 2014, the researcher completed a follow-up comparison of numbers of applicants and completers to determine if the downward trend of numbers had continued. The number of applicants had steadily declined. The author revisits the original recommendations for the faculty and discusses courses of actions for the future of the degree.

Introduction

In efforts to close the achievement gap among students in the United States, the Elementary and Secondary Education "No Child Left Behind" Act was enacted in 2001. A section of the law was devoted to preparing, training, and recruiting high quality teachers and principals (U.S. Department of Education). The necessity for highly qualified teachers in middle schools was included in this legislation. Prior to 2005, South Carolina did not have a requirement that teachers who teach middle school students have a specific middle level certification. In response to the need for teachers to be considered qualified to teach middle level students, a small Southeastern University created a Master's in Middle Level Education advanced degree program. The program did not award initial certification but it did provide a way for teachers to attain the knowledge necessary to teach and work with early and young adolescents

Literature Review

"The middle school model is grounded in a belief that teaching students ages 11-14 is inherently different from teaching students in elementary grades or high school" (Huss, 2007, p. 1). Often middle grades teachers have had elementary or secondary preparation (Cooney, 2000; Southern Regional Education Board, 1998). There is variation among states as to teacher preparation and licensing of middle level teachers. The consensus among middle level educators is "teachers of young adolescents need specialized professional preparation to be highly successful" (National Middle School Association, 2006) and this must be a high priority to middle level teachers preparation programs.

As stated in the Association for Middle Level Education Middle Level Teacher Preparation standards ("Professional Preparation"):

1. Middle level teacher candidates demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of young adolescent development. They use this

understanding of the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral characteristics, needs, and interests of young adolescents to create healthy, respectful, supportive, and challenging learning environments for all young adolescents, including those whose language and cultures are different from their own; and

2. Middle level teacher candidates demonstrate a depth and breadth of subject matter content knowledge in the subjects they teach (e.g., English/language arts, mathematics, reading, social studies, health, physical education, and family and consumer science). They incorporate information literacy skills and state-of-the-art technologies into teaching their subjects.

Not only are these the prerequisites for teachers candidates but they also apply to in-service teachers.

Preparation for elementary and secondary teaching is not adequate for teachers who teach 11-14 year-old students. Middle level educators need to know their content as well as their students (Huss, 2007; Southern Regional Education Board, 2003; Frome, Lasater, & Cooney, 2005; "Professional Preparation"). Because of this need for preparation for middle level learners, especially among teachers already in practice, the Southeastern University middle level faculty created an advanced degree in middle level education. This degree enabled those teachers to be considered highly qualified in their field of knowledge.

Description of the University

The Southeastern University is a medium-sized university with a population of approximately 6,200 students located in northeastern South Carolina. The Southeastern University is a liberal arts college consisting of colleges in arts and sciences, education, business administration and visual and performing arts ("Academics").

**Description of the Master's of Education in
Middle Level Education Program
(M.Ed. in Middle Level Education)**

The Master's in Middle Level Education program is "a cohort-based" model and was designed to "provide foundational material in young adolescent pedagogy and subject matter content for licensed teachers in middle grades" ("Master's of Education in Middle Level Education," 2008, ¶1). The Master's in Middle Level Education degree was not designed for initial teacher licensure. Rather, it was designed for currently certified teachers to gain advanced knowledge and experience in their field. The Master's in Middle Level Education program trains teachers to understand and use the main organizational structures of middle school, developmentally responsive practices for young adolescents, and to be effective in contemporary classrooms ("Master in Middle Level Education", n.d.). The M.Ed. program at the Southeastern University gave teachers access to add-on certification while acquiring an advanced degree.

Statement of the Problem

The first cohort of students in the Master's in Middle Level Education program began in fall 2000. At the end of the coursework, 80% of the students had completed the program. By the time Cohort 4 graduated in 2005, the completion rate had dropped to 62.96%. There was some percentage change from 2002-2003 but starting in 2004, the rates began to drop steadily and were down to less than 50% by 2008. See Table 1.

Faculty were concerned as to the reason for the decline. Their question was whether the applicant and completer numbers decreased due to the quality of the program.

Table 1

Master's in Middle Level Education Cohorts

	Applicants	Completers	Non-completers	Percentage of Completers
Cohort 1 (2000)	10	8	2	80%
Cohort 2 (2002)	16	11	5	68.75%
Cohort 3 (2003)	17	15	2	88%
Adjacent State School District Cohort (2004)	20	14	6	70%
Cohort 4 (2005)	27	17	10	62.96%
Cohort 5 (2008)	17	8	9	47.06%

Purpose of the Study

The number of Master's degrees in education awarded nationally in 1986-1987 was 74,045 and increased to 101,242 by 1994-1995 (as cited in Blackwell & Diez, 1998). According to the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), "at the national-level, graduate enrollment has been consistently growing for at least two decades" (CGS, 2006, p. 3). Even though research has shown an increase in enrollment in master's programs, the master's degree has lost its prestige due to lack of quality (Blackwell & Diez, 1998). According to Blackwell and Diez, two reasons existed for lack of quality in Master's programs. First, master's programs had become completion of course work and lacked practical application and meaning. Blackwell and Diez also asserted that often students decided to enroll in a different type of advanced program promoted by their

school, college, or department of education. Programs, such as National Board Certification, "offer a way for teachers to use data from their own practice and from the work of their students to demonstrate the impact of their teaching on student achievement" (Isenberg, 2003, p. 13). In a study by Dawkins and Penick (1999) regarding teacher preference for advanced degrees, the researchers found that the most prevalent barriers teachers listed for pursuing a master's degree were time (to devote to the degree), money and family responsibilities, test anxiety, inability to complete assignments, and the manner in which courses are offered such as spring and fall only courses which may delay graduation.

The low percentage of completers caused concern for program faculty and university administrators. Faculty involved in recruitment and retention specifically cited the M.Ed. in Middle Level Education as a concern. The researcher was asked by the program coordinator to determine why enrolled students failed to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program and whether it was based on the quality of the program. Using Dawkins and Penick's (1999) list of prevalent barriers, the researcher determined if any of these reasons existed in the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the Southeastern University.

Limitations

The researcher based her data analysis on information collected from one college of education housed in one university with a small sample of students from the Southeastern University. The results of the study are representative of a very small population.

The researcher is a former graduate of the Master's in Middle Level Education program and is currently a part of the program faculty of the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Due to the researcher's status, participants may have been less likely to participate in focus groups and one-on-one interviews due to the lack of anonymity. Because the researcher is connected with the Master's in Middle Level Education program, her research could be viewed as biased.

Participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis. There were no rewards or punishments for participants. Because participation in the study was voluntary and there were no incentives, participant numbers were low.

Delimitations

A number of participants for the study were not easily accessible. The researcher was able to obtain contact information for 68 completers. Contact information for non-completers was unavailable, limited, or incorrect. The researcher was only able to contact 12 non-completers.

This mixed-methods case study was designed to determine answers to questions in the minds of the Southeastern educational personnel. The following research questions were designed to determine the status of the current program.

Research Questions

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the Southeastern University?
2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education at the Southeastern University fulfill its program goals and objectives?
3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the Southeastern University?
4. What are the barriers to an effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at the Southeastern University?
5. Are the declining numbers due to the quality of the program?

Methodology

At the Southeastern University, the Master's in Middle Level Education candidates were divided into cohorts. The first cohort began in the fall of 2000 and since then, four other cohorts have completed the program. The fourth cohort known as the adjacent state school district (ASSD) cohort was an off-campus cohort. During cohorts one through four (ASSD cohort included), the completion rate decreased from 80% to 62.96%.

This study assessed resources provided, goals and objectives met, outcomes, and barriers of a Master's in Middle Level Education degree at the Southeastern University as perceived by graduates and non-completers of the program. Participants of the study were questioned about outcomes of the program and reasons they had for completing or not completing the program.

Participants

The participants for this study came from three counties in the university's state and two counties in an adjacent state. The participants included all applicants of the Master's in Middle Level Education program who completed the program as well as applicants who did not complete the program. Seventy-three applicants completed (completers) the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education program and thirty-five applicants did not complete (non-completers) the program.

Research Design

A mixed-methods case study was used for data collection. A case study was used because "the distinguishing characteristic of the case study is that it attempts to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context..." (Yin, 1981, p.1). The bounded system (Creswell, 2007) includes the applicants and completers of the Master's in Middle Level Education Program at a Southeastern University. The design of the study was primarily qualitative in nature because the results were based on themes instead of statistics unlike quantitative studies whose results are normally statistical (Patten, 2007).

A survey was used to collect data from all participants (completers and non-completers) who enrolled in the first five cohorts in the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the Southeastern University. Information from the survey assisted the researcher in developing questions for the focus groups as a first step in triangulating and verifying responses and to distinguish emerging themes. Focus groups were used with completers and non-completers to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the program. Focus groups also gave the participants the opportunity to cite other reasons for non-completion. Individual interviews with completers and non-completers were conducted to verify themes from focus groups and gave participants an opportunity to cite other reasons they wanted to express. See Table 2.

The researcher used the four phases of responsive evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to formulate the following questions to guide the study, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. See Table 3.

The information gathered from the mixed-methods case study was used to make informed decisions about needed changes for the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the Southeastern University. Of the barriers listed by Dawkins and Penick (1999), time constraints, money, and family reasons were the top three.

Table 2

Crosswalk of Data Collection

Research Questions	Data Collection Instrument(s)	Evidence	Themes Indicated in Question
1. Southeastern University provided resources	Survey	Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis	Financial aid opportunities Course offerings (online)
2. Master's in Middle Level Education goals and objectives	Survey	Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis	Leadership Middle level philosophy Adolescent development Responsive middle school
3. Master's in Middle Level Education outcomes	Survey	Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis	Career advancement Salary increase Leadership opportunities
4. Barriers to completing the Master's in Middle Level Education	Survey	Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis	Financial aid Personal reasons Teacher certification Reasons Program satisfaction
5. Enrollment due to quality	Survey	Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis	Due to barriers Not due to program quality

Table 3*Phases of Responsive Evaluation*

Phase	Description	Role of the Researcher
Data reduction	The process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appears in written-up field notes or transcriptions. This is a continuous process throughout the length of the project.	Begin thinking about research questions, types of data collection to be used and how data collection will occur. The researcher will code the data using related themes.
Data display	A display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action. Better displays are a major avenue to valid qualitative analysis.	Display the data in a way that will be easily understood by others.
Conclusion drawing and verification	From the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst is beginning to decide what things mean. Final conclusions may not appear until data collection is over.	Test the validity of the data (triangulation)

Adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 10-11.

Information from the study provided data for the Southeastern University program faculty, which were used in a meeting about making programmatic changes. Because of the decreasing number of graduates of the program, program faculty at the Southeastern University wanted data-driven information in order to determine factors impacting retention, and to inform decisions about needed programmatic changes.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed questions from parts 1, 2, and 3 of the survey, focus group questions, and one-on-one interviews for this question. In the survey, participants were asked about barriers to the program and then the participants were able to explain their answers in question 5. The researcher reviewed explanations for recommendations. Part 3 of the survey posed specific questions about predicted barriers. The participants chose responses from a menu of items and had an opportunity to give an explanation for each item. During focus group sessions, participants were asked to discuss barriers or disadvantages. See Table 4. Of the six completers who partici-

pated in the focus groups, two had been part of a special tuition free cohort. The others did not mention finances as a disadvantage. They also did not mention personal issues or course offerings being inconsistent. Two completers mentioned wanting more content-related courses but this did not fall under the course offerings inconsistent/inconvenient theme. In the case of the non-completer focus groups, there were no participants to give responses.

Based on the data, the top three recurring themes were inconsistent/inconvenient course offerings, financial hardship, and program dissatisfaction. Participants made several comments about classes being offered out of sequence, sporadic course offerings, fewer courses, specifically a lack of online classes. Non-completers' comments support the data collection findings: "I did not finish the program because there were no online classes or distance learning opportunities. I could not hire a babysitter as a stay-at-home mom to finish my course work and go to the Winthrop campus to attend classes" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009);

Table 4*Frequencies of Themes Emerging from Each Data Collection Method Regarding the Barriers to an Effective Master's in Middle Level Education*

Themes	Completers			Non-completers		
	Survey	Focus Group	One-on-one	Survey	Focus Group	One-on-one
Financial hardship/tuition too expensive	5	0	2	1		5
Course offerings inconsistent/inconvenient	11	0	0	2		2
Personal issues	2	0	2	0		1
Non-certification program	3	1	0	0		0
Program dissatisfaction	2	5	2	0		1

I would finish the program if I could complete it online-it is too difficult and expensive to find sitters to attend evening classes, but most importantly, attending evening classes means I lose time with my children in the evenings that I already lose by working during the day (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

There were “fewer options in classes and timing of classes” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Both completers and non-completers expressed financial hardship as a barrier to completing the Master’s in Middle Level Education. Even though completers did not allow financial hardship to deter the completion of their degree, they were equally concerned about tuition increases. Comments were as follows: “Financially, it is kind of expensive as compared to surrounding state programs and especially on a teacher’s salary” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “Tuition is very high and continues to rise” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “The cost is definitely a disadvantage when trying to pay for it on a teacher’s salary” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “The cost was the biggest reason that I could not find a way to finish (Master’s in Middle Level Education)” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

In looking at the responses from the surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews, inconvenient or inconsistent course offerings was the biggest barrier or disadvantage for completers and non-completers. Even though this theme was not mentioned during the focus group sessions, 39.39% (n=13) of the participants mentioned it on the survey and 100% (n=2) of the non-completers mentioned it during one-on-one interviews. This data could not be triangulated because responses were missing for several theme categories for surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews.

Recommendations from Original Study

Participants agreed with program faculty about the declining enrollment in the Master’s in Middle Level Education program. Based on the responses from participants, the declining enrollment appears to be impacted by the barriers, rather than the quality of the program. For example, one participant pointed out, “The program is good, but the cost makes it hard for me to recommend it to other teachers (Anonymous, November 8, 2009). The most common barriers indicated in the study were inconvenient or inconsistent course offerings and little financial assistance provided. Participants made comments about classes being offered infrequently or options such as online classes not being provided. Specifically, during the focus group sessions and one-on-

one interviews, three participants commented about the lack of content-specific instruction and how more content-specific classes are needed. This would indicate program faculty need to address this component of the program.

With the exception of an off-campus cohort who received tuition from their district, the Southeastern University provided limited resources to participants. Three completers who were part of the off-campus group agreed they remained in the program because financial assistance was provided. Based on the number of respondents who commented on the lack of resources, this might be a barrier to future participation in the program. Program faculty may want to discuss this issue and explore options for supporting students.

Although completers mentioned barriers to the Master’s in Middle Level Education program, the barriers did not prevent them from completing the program. However, several said they would not recommend it to others because of the barriers described. The completers were also easier to locate and more willing to discuss their feelings about the program. Because of the difficulty in locating non-completers, the researcher recommends to the Southeastern University College of Education faculty that an exit system be set up for non-completers similar to those who graduate from a program.

Follow-Up Study

In 2014, the researcher was asked by middle level program faculty to revisit the original study, with a focus on comparing the percentage of applicants to completers to the program. Additionally, they were concerned that the overall number of applicants was dropping. They requested that she compare the overall numbers and make additional recommendations to program faculty.

Statement of the Problem

Originally, the percentage of completers was an area of concern. However, a newer concern is the number of applicants, which also began to decline. The M.Ed. in Middle Level Education program admission numbers have decreased drastically since 2009. Cohorts now start over the course of two years, rather than one. Yet, the numbers are still lower, and the most recent cohort included only six applicants. Program faculty were interested in whether the newer data continued the earlier trend of lower completion rates, as well as how the applicant numbers compared to earlier numbers.

Data Collection

Since the program faculty was primarily concerned with a comparison of numbers, the researcher-compiled rates of applicants, completers, non-completers, and the percentage of completers compared to applicants. The updated numbers are detailed in Table 5.

Table 5

2009-2014 Data on Applicants and Completers

	Applicants	Completers	Non-completers	Percentage
Cohort 6 (2009-2010)	14	12	2	86%
Cohort 7 (2011-2012)	13	10	2	77%
Cohort 8 (2013-2014)	6	5**	1	84%

Purpose of the Study

Program faculty was primarily interested in two questions:

1. Has the number of applicants decreased over time?
2. Has the percentage of completers decreased over time?

The researcher compiled data in order to report to program faculty with recommendations.

Analysis of Additional Data

The research did a numerical comparison of the applicants and percentage of completers over time. There were mixed results. For example, Cohorts Six and Seven had comparable applicant and completer percentages, but the overall number of applicants was less, especially considering that newer cohorts were formed over two years, rather than one year. This indicated that, while retention rates were steady, gaining new applicants to the program was becoming problematic. See Table 6.

Table 6

Master's in Middle Level Education Cohorts

	Applicants	Completer Percentages
Cohort 1 (2000)	10	80%
Cohort 2 (2002)	16	68.75%
Cohort 3 (2003)	17	88%
NC School District Cohort (2004)	20	70%
Cohort 4 (2005)	27	62.96%
Cohort 5 (2008)	17	47.06%
Cohort 6 (2009-2010)	14**	86%
Cohort 7 (2011-2012)	13	77%
Cohort 8 (2013-2014)	6	84%

**1 Student was readmitted to the program

Recommendations Based on Updated Information

Because the program faculty was mainly interested in numerical data comparisons, the researcher was limited in the data collection process. There were no interviews, surveys, or focus groups held to determine if the original barriers to completion were still true. Had this occurred, the researcher may have been able to discover possible reasons for the lowered number of applicants to the program. Given the limitations of the new study, the researcher noted three recommendations for consideration by program faculty.

1. Applicant numbers to the program are fewer than in past years, and program faculty should gather data from current students and other stakeholder groups, including area middle school teachers without a master's degree to determine possible reasons.

2. Completer numbers have been steady, with the exception of Cohort Five (2008), therefore, program faculty should evaluate the current strengths of the program and continue to build upon them.

3. Program faculty should revisit the original data, especially the comments from former completers to determine issues that may impede students from applying to or completing the program.

Conclusion

In the original study, the researcher conducted a mixed-methods case study, using Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four phases of responsive evaluation, to determine the quality of the program as well as to receive feedback from former graduates (completers) and applicants (non-completers) of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. A survey, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews were used to collect data. Participants were given multiple opportunities to participate in all three data collection methods and were encouraged to be honest and share any thoughts

about the Master's in Middle Level Education program. The researcher concluded that there were several barriers to the program that impacted enrollment, but they were not related to the quality of the program.

In the follow-up study, the researcher completed a numerical comparison of applicants and completers, in order to determine whether program faculty should be concerned about the decreasing number of applicants, as well as the success rate of those applicants in terms of program completion. Although the completion rate was comparable to earlier cohorts, the applicant rate had decreased, and cohorts were formed

over two-year periods, rather than each year. The researcher concluded that program faculty should discuss this further, and additional data should be collected to determine the cause for the decline.

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