

Adapting the ALP Model for Student and Institutional Needs

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Abstract

With the increasing adoption of accelerated models of learning comes the necessary step of adapting these models to fit the unique needs of the student population at each individual institution. One such college adapted the ALP (Accelerated Learning Program) model and made specific changes to the target population, structure and scheduling, and faculty course loads and salary, all with the motivation of making the program work for the students' and institution's needs. The college discovered that the participating students had good success in their college-level course and had higher retention rates than those students who were eligible for, but did not participate in, the program.

Acceleration has become the new buzzword in education and particularly within the field of developmental education. With developmental students testing one, two, and even three levels below what an institution has deemed "college ready," educators are earnestly seeking ways to shorten the time that students spend in developmental courses, as lengthy course sequences may, unfortunately, give students more opportunities to become academically discouraged and may contribute to high attrition rates (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Asera, 2011).

One of the most popular acceleration models stems from The Community College of Baltimore County's (CCBC) Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), a co-requisite program designed to allow students the opportunity to take a college-level course while simultaneously taking a supplemental course that helps support the students' learning in the college-level course. With more than 180 institutions in the United States that have implemented their own ALP programs, it is clear that this model is both popular and far-reaching (Community College of Baltimore County). With the advent and increasing adoption of pedagogical models of acceleration for developmental students comes the inevitable step of adapting those models to fit individual, institutional, and student population needs.

Making the Decision to Accelerate

Saxon, Martirosyan, Wentworth, & Boylan (2015) argue that full-scale implementation of popular trends for instructional redesigns is not as wise as instituting a well-designed pilot study, a point well-taken for developmental educators. It is best for each individual institution to thoroughly research, plan, implement, and objectively assess pilot programs, which is what Northwest-Shoals Community College (NW-SCC) decided to do after extensive research and planning, as well as sending a college representative to the ALP conference in Baltimore for training. In addition to creating a pilot program for the ALP model at NW-SCC, educators at the college also carefully considered the possibilities for how long they would assess the program on a small scale before making any decisions to increase the number of sections offered or to consider eliminating developmental English completely and placing all students in college-level courses. The instructors agreed that keeping at least one level of developmental English was necessary to assist those students who needed basic grammar and writing instruction to prepare them for the college-level English course. Significant planning and training in advance of offering the course to students was crucial to the overall success of the pilot program.

Adapted ALP Course Structure

After making the decision to begin an acceleration program, faculty and administrators began the necessary task of deciding how to design the ALP course and to what extent they wanted to stay in keeping with the specific facets of CCBC's model. Rather than following the CCBC's ALP model exactly, NW-SCC made the decision to adapt the ALP ideas for its developmental English students,

finding that the adapted characteristics worked well for its institutional and student population needs.

Target Population

Rather than accelerate all developmental English students, the institution focused specifically on students who scored between 55 and 61 on the English portion of the COMPASS test, a score range that would have previously and automatically relegated them to the highest developmental English course the college offers (ENG 093). However, faculty and administration members both felt that students in this upper score range could handle the workload of the transfer-level course (ENG 101), with the help of a one-hour supplemental course (ENG 080B).

Structure and Scheduling

In keeping with the original ALP model, the supplemental course is taught by the same instructor and is scheduled directly after the transfer-level course (Adams et al., 2014). Ten of the thirty seats in a typical ENG 101 class are reserved for ALP students. Instead of a three-hour supplemental course, NW-SCC decided to offer the ALP course as a one-hour course (ENG 080B) in an effort to provide some additional motivation for students to take the course, since the one-hour course allows them to save both time and money, as they would not be taking or paying for the two extra credit hours that would make up the three-hour course. Further, a one-hour course made it easier for first-semester students to also add the one-hour Student Success/Orientation course to their schedule without overloading the course schedule. This scheduling choice allowed students to meet for the ALP course on Monday afternoons at 1 p.m. and meet for their Orientation course on Wednesday afternoons at 1 p.m., thus easily utilizing that time block.

Faculty Course Loads and Salary

Faculty members teach the course voluntarily and are paid for a one-hour course overload in addition to the regular three-hour credit course. Although asking faculty members to teach the ALP course as part of their full-time load was well within the parameters of the faculty employment contracts, the administration believed that faculty would be more motivated to teach the course if they were paid for the additional one-hour course on top of their faculty contracts. As a result, faculty members were more invested in the course as part of their faculty workload and were more willing to devote extra time to it. Additionally, instructors are more invested in finding new ways to help students be successful in the upper-level course, something that might not have been actively discussed before this time.

Results

The ALP course has shortened the course sequence for certain students and has given faculty confidence in students' abilities to meet the challenges of the upper-level course. Students are now moving through their courses at a faster pace and are appropriately challenged and more confident in their abilities. As Table 1 shows, a comparison of ALP students who chose to take the course with ALP-eligible students that chose to stay in ENG 093 reveals that retention rates are significantly higher for the ALP students. In addition, Table 1 also lists students' success in the courses, revealing that half or more of the ALP students successfully completed ENG 101.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF ALP STUDENTS WITH ALP-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS WHO DID NOT TAKE THE COURSE

Semester	ALP student success* in ENG 101	% ALP students retained to next semester	ALP-eligible student success* in ENG 093	% ALP-eligible students retained to next semester
Fall 2013	50% (N=8)	75%	59% (N=39)	64%
Spring 2014	60% (N=5)	60%	60% (N=20)	50%
Fall 2014	83% (N=18)	89%	58% (N=19)	74%

*Success as measured by a final grade of A, B, or C

Discussion

The ALP students represented in Table 1 would have previously been relegated to the developmental course sequence had they not had the opportunity to take the accelerated option, saving many of them time and money, particularly for those students whose degree programs only required the completion of ENG 101, rather than multiple college-level English and composition courses.

The success and retention rates for the eligible students who did not participate in the ALP program were particularly revealing to the faculty and administration at NW-SCC. It is entirely plausible that the non-ALP students who were eligible for the course would have actually done well in the ENG 101 course and, presumably, would have been retained at a rate higher than they were by taking the developmental course.

The ALP program thus had positive outcomes for the students that chose to participate in it, which contributed to positive outcomes for the program and the overall institution (in terms of student success and retention). Faculty members responded positively to the program and felt encouraged by their students' success and the realization that developmental students, with proper guidance and assistance, could be successful in the college-level courses. In their evaluations of the course, the ALP students also gave positive feedback about the program and their desire to "spread the word" to their fellow students about how it had helped them succeed and give them confidence in their abilities as writers.

The Future of ALP

The future of the ALP program at NW-SCC hangs in the balance due to the institution's new ACT score guidelines and the movement away from the COMPASS test. The new ACT guidelines make it unclear as to whether there will be enough students who will be eligible to participate in the ALP program. In addition, at the time of this writing, the state board has not yet issued guidelines about what will replace the COMPASS test when it ceases production in the winter of 2015, leaving the state's educational institutions in a quandary about planning for incoming students who do not have ACT scores. However, the demand for the course has grown and both faculty and staff agree that the course is not only a good idea, but it is also another avenue for the institution to take to help students be successful while saving them time and money. As more institutions try to find ways to accelerate their students through the developmental course sequence, it is crucial to remember that one model does not fit all; each acceleration model can be successfully adapted while still maintaining the most vital components of the model to ensure as successful an experience as possible.

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