ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to: 1. uncover the decision making factors which potential adult learners consider in their determination to enroll in a graduate program; 2. explore their unique program experiences; and 3. identify anticipated outcomes. The following themes were uncovered: Reasons for Enrollment, Nature of Program Experiences: Transformations, Outcomes: Broader Outlook on Program Impact. Findings demonstrated the impact masters’ programs could have on students in terms of intellectual, employability, and marketability capacities. It also suggests students’ decision making in terms of pursuing a master’s degree might not be as well thought out and calculated as the literature suggests.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Career and Technical Education, Higher Education, Master’s, Online Learning

PARTICIPATION

Overshadowed by the doctoral and baccalaureate degree, the master’s degree has historically been, and continues to be perceived as a marginal credential. Many times, the master’s degree serves as a consolation prize for students exhibiting less than satisfactory progress in a doctoral program (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993; Glaser, 1986). Some authors have even characterized the master’s degree as a credential going through an identity crisis (Conrad et al., 1993; Glaser, 1986). Interestingly, the master’s degree seems to be the least understood by administrators, faculty, and students, compared to its baccalaureate and doctoral degree counterparts. According to Glaser (1986), “...the Master of Arts and Master of Science degrees occupy a position between the baccalaureate and the doctorate that is often tenuous and ill defined” (p. 4). In that context, it is not surprising that the authors quite frequently respond to inquiries from potential applicants to our Master’s in Career and Technical Education program wanting...
to gain a better understanding of the value of a master’s degree as well as what the degree leads to in terms of possible career pathways. This indecisive behavior seems quite endemic in the field of Career and Technical Education (CTE). For example, many current teachers who are master’s degree seekers, question the value of a degree with a general focus—such as one in CTE—rather than one on a specific content area. Further, many of these individuals teeter between pursuing a degree within their field—in this case, CTE—or earning a degree in Educational Leadership or Administration as they sort out what is valued in the field based on the perspectives of school administrators within their individual school districts, if they plan to become administrators.

A contributing factor potentially explaining the lack of understanding of the purpose, value, and impact of a master’s degree may undoubtedly be attributed to the nearly complete disregard it has received in the literature. Few studies have explored experiences of masters’ students and associated outcomes (Conrad et al., 1993; Conrad et al., 1998; Glaser, 1986). Although a wealth of literature has examined adults’ decision making patterns when choosing to enroll in graduate degree programs (Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004; Polson, 2003; Stein & Wanstreet, 2006), the majority of studies are focused at the doctoral level.

The lack of research on experiences and decision making patterns of master’s students is particularly troubling given the alarming student attrition rates of programs (Polson, 2003). In particular, the highest attrition rates plague online graduate programs (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004; Fletcher, 2013). These programs are beginning to grow exponentially, as institutions seek to respond to a need to be “adult friendly” and accommodate historically underserved adult learners who have complex life challenges, family obligations, and non-negotiable working needs and demands (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011).

Despite the lack of understanding, and disparity of research about the purposes and value of master’s degrees, the role of master’s programs in providing students with inspiring learning opportunities, professional development experiences, and leadership capacities has been acknowledged in the literature and society at large (Conrad et al., 1998). Thus, given this important role, administrators and faculty could better assist potential master’s students—i.e., screen candidates for proper fit, provide more informative levels of advisement, create enhanced learning experiences for their students, and provide conditions needed to promote greater participation—if they were better informed about: (a) the decision making factors which adults consider when selecting a master’s degree program; (b) prior students’ experiences in master’s degree programs; and, (c) likely anticipated outcomes for graduates of master’s degree programs. Research on these related topics could help faculty and administrators make better assessments in terms of student-to-program fit as well as promote higher retention rates of students in master’s degree programs. Accordingly, the purpose of this case study was threefold to: (a) uncover the decision making factors which potential adult learners consider in their determination to enroll; (b) explore the unique program experiences of adult learners; and (c) identify anticipated outcomes from the perspectives of adult learners. The participants in this research study were adults enrolled in an online master’s degree program in CTE.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**Adult Decision Making Patterns**

Adult learning takes place in a myriad of settings, from highly formal and structured to non-formal and informal learning environments, and include online learning as well (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Online learning is recognized for serving adults, particularly those who have historically been largely ignored by higher education institutions. Adults typically make voluntary decisions to participate in adult education, and for the past
Using Technology and Community Partnerships to Improve Educator Preparation: Changing the Landscape for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder
Kristin S. Lierheimer, Mary M. Murray, Deborah G. Wooldridge and Sheila Smith (2014). International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology (pp. 34-44).
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