

Proposal for an Accelerated Dual Degree Program -A Dissenting Report

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Introduction

At a March 2020 Senate meeting, the Senate called for the formation of an ad hoc committee on programs that combined undergraduate and graduate degrees. The committee was charged with recommending guidelines for the development and approval of accelerated programs. The Senate chose me to be a committee member. I appreciated the opportunity. And I deeply appreciated the time and effort my fellow committee members put in to create the document the Senate will consider.

The committee initially agreed that the report would reflect a consensus of the opinions of the committee members. During our discussions it became clear that “philosophical” differences would make a consensus impossible. My point of view was distinctly different from at least two of my fellow committee members. Because I thought the committee was doing important work and because I am committed to providing our students with a quality education, I chose to remain on the committee. I also informed the committee that I would be submitting a dissenting report. This is my dissenting report.

The Problem

The committee defined an accelerated dual degree program as “an academic program that is structured to make it possible for students to complete a combined bachelors and master’s degree within five years. To achieve this outcome, accelerated dual degree programs use a variety of program design models. Each model provides for an expeditious completion of the bachelors and master’s degree. These programs may also arrange for students to complete the full credit load of a bachelor’s degree, 120 credits, and the full credit load of a master’s degree by allowing the student to take an optimum number of credits during the summer and winter sessions. These models may reduce the amount of time and/or the number of credits needed to obtain the combined bachelor’s and master’s degrees” (Wright et al.,2020).

While I see the value of creating accelerated programs, I took exception to three propositions made by some committee members. These propositions caused me to question whether the programs developed under the proposed guidelines would have the level of academic quality our students deserve. The propositions are as follows: #1: we need to compete with other universities that already have accelerated programs, #2: having accelerated programs will attract students to New Jersey City University (NJCU), and #3: the same 500-level courses that are used to fulfill the 120-credit baccalaureate requirement can also be used to fulfill the requirements for a master’s degree. Students would receive undergraduate and graduate credit for the same 500-level courses. “The committee recommends that no more than 9 credits or 25%, whichever is less, of the graduate program consist of shared courses, that is, graduate courses that are used to fulfill the requirements of both the graduate and undergraduate degree” (ibid).

The three propositions are imprudent and will serve to 1) weaken the quality of the education that we offer our students, 2) further weaken our reputation as an institution of higher education, and thusly 3) weaken our ability to attract students who are ready to pursue a college education.

Competing with other universities that offer accelerated programs is an unwise battle. If we intend to compete by creating accelerated programs that reduce the number of credits a student needs to obtain a masters to let us say 30 credits, how do we respond when St. Peters offers a 24 credit masters? Do we then offer a 21 credit masters? Secondly, the areas where accelerated programs are being developed, for example business, are saturated. A document presented to the Senate by the Business Department and document produced by one of our committee members attest to this reality. Kim & Mauborgne (2017 and 2015) have shown the futility of attempting to gather market share in highly contested markets.

I am also not sure whether this approach makes sense economically. NJCU will be one of the last entrants into shrinking markets that have an overabundance of accelerated programs. We will have to invest enormous resources if we are to catch up.

I have the most difficulty, however, with Proposition #3, double counting courses. First, double counting courses might be legal, but it seems unethical. By double counting courses, we are suggesting to our students that their 27 credit masters is, in terms of the knowledge acquired, equivalent to a 36 credit masters. How is that possible? Also, by reducing the number of credits students need for a masters, we are calling into question the quality of the graduate level courses we require.

One of my fellow committee members argued that seat time, time spent in the classroom, does not equate to learning. If that is the case, why have students spend any time in any class. I assume, while acknowledging that the quality of instruction varies, that students receive value in all their classes. I also refuse to believe that a student who has completed a 27 credit masters is as well prepared as a student who has completed a 36 credit masters. If we are not able to assume that taking additional courses at NJCU leads to additional knowledge, then we need to question the quality of the undergraduate and graduate education we are providing our students.

Double counting courses is like paying \$300.00 to see Hamlet on Broadway, watching act two twice, and being told to leave the theatre at the beginning of act three because you have seen enough of the play to appreciate its full value.

Developing reduced credit accelerated programs is the response of some of our colleagues to declining enrollments. Declining enrollments should concern all of us. Unfortunately, when people get desperate their vision narrows and they opt for short-term solutions that provide immediate relief. See, for example, Mullainathan & Shafir (2013). These short-term solutions, however, often result in unfortunate long-term consequences that could have been avoided (ibid).

I am well aware of our budgetary concerns and the need for more robust enrollments, but institutions that put finances before their mission maybe successful in the short-term, but often experience unfortunate long-term consequences. See, for example, Enron, Wells Fargo, Lehman Brothers.

Alternative Solutions

There is no doubt that some students will opt for accelerated programs that reduce the number of credits that they have to take. How many students is an open question. But what happens when they or their employers discover, after they graduate, that they are not as knowledgeable, i.e. competitive, as those students who had to take a full load. They will not complain to us. They will tell their friends. Their employers will not complain to us, they will just not hire our students.

Our enrollment problems started well before the present administration. In order to address budgetary concerns, a previous administration opted for a short-term solution. NJCU accepted students who, in many cases, did not have the prerequisite skills to be successful college students. This open admissions policy was not necessarily a strategically poor move, but not providing adequate support services was. Not providing those services resulted in a decline in the retention and graduation rate. Accepting and graduating poorly prepared students eventually lead to NJCU being perceived by some as a diploma mill. Cost is a factor, but it is the university's reputation that attracts students.

Because I am deeply committed to our university, it pains me to know that given the choice of going to the College of New Jersey, Montclair State University or NJCU, the student's choice is all too often not NJCU. We can, however, purchase the students' enrollment by offering especially attractive scholarships. Many colleges are employing this strategy and many of those colleges are closing (For evidence, see Selingo, 2013). I believe that continuing to offer attractive scholarships to

students is unsustainable. I also believe that offering programs that allow students to double count courses is a short-term strategy with unfortunate long-term consequences.

I argue that there are ways to address our enrollment concerns without compromising the quality of the education we offer our students. I start from the assumption that accelerated programs are only for ambitious, academically well-prepared students. Thus, given NJCU's tuition structure, a student could accelerate achieving their masters, without incurring additional costs, by graduating with 126 credits with 6 of those credits being 500-level courses that could be applied to the masters. An ambitious, academically well-prepared student could take six (6) 15-credit semesters and two (2) 18-credit semesters, or take the six (6) additional credits during the summer or winter sessions.

We can also help our students accelerate their graduating by instituting a 15-week summer session. That would allow an academically well-prepared, ambitious student to take 15 credits during the summer. At 45 credits a year, an undergraduate could achieve a BA in three years. There would also be a modest cost savings. The cost to an in-state student to attend NJCU for 4 years is \$51,390.40. The cost to an in-state student to attend NJCU for three years (\$38,542.80) and two 15-credit summer sessions (\$12,763.50) would be \$51,306.30. In both case, an ambitious, academically well-prepared student can achieve a bachelors and a masters in five years without our compromising the quality of the education we provide our students.

I also argue that rather than competing with other Universities, we could apply a strategy multiple enlightened corporations, government organizations and educational institutions have found to be especially effective: discovering, bolstering, and highlighting our strengths. (See, for example, Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003 and Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2020) . No other University in New Jersey can lay claim to having an urban mission. Or can lay claim that with a diversity index of .71, after Rutgers-Newark, as having the most diverse student body in a public university in New Jersey. Our University looks more like the future of the US than almost every other university in the region. We should be boasting about our ability to prepare students to take on the challenges that are unique to diverse communities and urban environments.

Or, better yet, I strongly recommend that we use our limited resources to provide the services necessary to graduate students who, regardless of their level of academic preparedness, are especially well prepared for graduate school and the job market. If we became known as the University that offers high quality academic programs that transforms academically underprepared students into scholars, we would have no problem attracting students. Proposition #2 would be satisfied.

In Conclusion

The solution to our enrollment problem is not to produce accelerated programs that reduce the opportunities for our students to acquire knowledge, but to enhance and highlight our strengths, and to test, create and apply pedagogically sound procedures that will greatly enhance the quality of the students we are graduating.

If we commit ourselves to the transforming primarily urban, first generation students, regardless of their level of academic preparedness, into socially responsible scholars and citizens, who are well-prepared to engage people who are different from them, we will be fulfilling our mission as a university, and like the College of New Jersey, we would have no problem attracting students.

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