



CHANGING TRENDS IN A CHANGING WORLD: THE NEED FOR BEING TIMELY AND FLEXIBLE

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Abstract

The article will describe the challenges and changes across time in the teacher education programs at Marist College, a small liberal arts university in the North-East of the United States. Changes took place due to modifications in the State education requirements, resource allocation, and the interest to increase enrollment in a time of economic down turn and competition. Starting with a very small number of graduate students, and a small number of faculty in the Teacher Education Department; the education program has changed and expanded. The Advanced Certificate program was changed into a full Master of Education program for graduate students seeking the initial teaching certificate. The Master of Arts in Educational Psychology program was developed for those preparing for professional teaching certification, which in the New York state requires candidates to have a Masters degree. This degree is offered on ground and in hybrid format to attract those students who are working full-time, or do not live and work in proximity. Beside these two programs a more recent format of the MA in Educational Psychology was developed to allow undergraduate students to begin graduate study as they complete the Bachelors degree and then continue with the completion of the Masters degree in a fifth year of study. This new program seems to be very successful and is attracting a good number of students. Changes across history will be presented along with results from discussions and survey with graduate students in these education programs.

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Trends of change in teacher education

The changes in the economy in the past decade and especially in the past five years have impacted the content and process of teacher education programs across the world. Large and small universities alike try to cope with the pressures created by the economic change. Economic hardship in the US had an impact on education at all levels. Public and private K-12 schools struggle with cut in funds and in number of positions for qualified personnel. Higher education on the other hand feels hit from both sides; lack of resources for optimal functioning of the institution as well as plummeting enrollments, while tuition costs increase each year. In addition, accountability creates extra tensions. Salerno (2006) states that “as competition for scarce public funding intensifies, so too have tensions between institutions of higher education (IHEs) and the public they serve” (p. 281). Results from Milton, Watkins, Studdar, and Burch (2003), uncovered that adult education programs were changing in structure due to changes in student enrollment and in the number of full-time faculty. These changes led graduate adult education departments to be reconfigured or renamed to “educational leadership, HRD, higher education, or instructional technology” (Milton, Watkins, Studdar, & Burch, 2003, p. 35). According to Milton et al. (2003), program integration, responsiveness to change, and leadership were significant factors for an adult education program to succeed. Most adult education programs in the study were located in the colleges of education. The study reported that adult education programs that created boundaries within their institutions could become marginalized.

There is also a debate concerning graduation rate between public and private institutions. The topic of effectiveness by institution type is controversial. Scott, Bailey, and Kienzl (2006) argue that institutional resources, selectivity, and student type and demographics matter significantly in what concerns graduation rates. The major variables in graduation rates are related to the type of funds and type of student body attending the respective institutions. The authors mention that often times private colleges have larger resources, faculty might have higher professional credentials as well as salaries. However, by comparison, most teacher education programs struggle to keep

their full-time instructors, since it is well known that education instructors receive lower pay than their counterparts in other departments.

Students at all levels feel the impact as well. Despite the economic challenges, it seems that more and more adults return to complete their education, and undergraduates move directly into graduate education, as a way to postpone job searching in a time of scarce employment opportunities. Graduate education students are in large number teachers, substitute teachers, or individuals who hold part-time jobs while they complete their education to become teachers. They also face economic hardships since their pay is low (if they have a job of any kind), or they may rely completely on financial aid. In order to attract students, often graduate education programs have lower tuition than science, business or engineering programs. The result is that many teacher education programs do not generate major benefits for the institution and are considered a burden especially if they are not able to increase enrollment numbers.

Education programs have to compete in the tough market and recruit an increasing number of students to enhance benefits for their institution. They also need to be aligned with national and state requirements for teacher preparation (in the United States requirements might be different from state to state), and at the same time they need to be sustainable from economic point of view.

Statistics regarding graduate enrollments show a steady increase of almost 40 percent between 1985 and 2001, with 15.9 million students enrolled in 4,047 American colleges and universities in late 2001, with 1.4 million graduate students in master's level education (NCES, 1993, 2002). Despite the increase in numbers evidence shows that students in the United States are not at the forefront based on results from standardized testing (Boe & Shin, 2005). Across the years researchers (see Messer & Wolter, 2010) focused on factors influencing the pursuit of higher education, and their possible relationship to graduation rates such as behavior of undergraduate and graduate students, employment while studying, rise in tuition fees (Garibaldi et al., 2007), decline in the resources available to students (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2007), or exchange semesters (Messer & Wolter, 2007).

A very interesting investigation of the cyclicity of educational decisions was conducted by Dellas and Koubi (2003) who used US data from 1950 to 1990 to investigate high school dropout rates, college enrolment rates,

and the percentage of persons attending a school. They analyzed the impact on the time of the educational decision produced by the level of wages, the unemployment rate, the expected real interest rate and the cyclical tightness of credit constraints. The pattern identified by Dellas and Koubi (2003), shows that in a recession (at a time when it is difficult to find work and salaries are fairly low) people are more likely to opt for a higher level of education. At the same time, the authors note that the level of education opportunity costs and direct costs (e.g., cost of education paid by the student out of pocket, compared to situations when education costs are covered with scholarship, assistantship, or other monetary forms), play a major role in education decisions. Similarly, Dellas, and Sakellaris (2003) found a cyclical demand for higher education, and state that people respond accordingly to changing business cycles. When the economic market shows salary levels being fairly low in relation to the expected future salary for a prosperous economy, students are more likely to replace work with education; thus an increase in the number of students attending higher education for longer periods of time. Students view a recession as a period usefully spent investing in improving their future marketability, skills, and earning power by raising their level of education. These studies conducted by Dellas and colleagues demonstrate that in the US, the business cycle has a significant impact on students college enrollment.

Similar results come from Brunello and Winter-Ebmer (2003), who conducted a research in 10 European countries to explore the relation of possible labour market variables (unemployment, wage levels, employee protection, and educational parameters), and their impact on graduation time. Results from their study show that students with a large number of semesters till graduation are likely to expect a longer-than-average time-to-degree. At the same time a shorter time-to-degree is correlated to higher salary bonus for university graduates as compared with non-graduate members of the workforce. The authors concluded that students are more inclined to graduate when the costs of a longer time-to-degree increase, and the higher the income post graduation. A study by Brunello and Winter-Ebmer (2003), concluded that the extension of time-to-degree is strongly related to a high national unemployment rate among university graduates. The potential of Post-university unemployment increases the time-to-graduation, students choosing to stay longer in school.

Messer and Wolter (2010) conducting an empirical investigation, using a representative data-set from Swiss university graduates from 1981 to 2001, explain individual time-to-degree variances taking into consideration business cycle fluctuations. In general students take into account the cost-benefit of an extra semester of studying and not yet working. The authors use the hypothesis that the general economic environment during the study period should, in turn, influence the individual time-to-degree. Their results show that changes in the unemployment rate have a significant impact on individual time-to-degree.

Lewis (2006) draws attention that half of college students now borrow money to attend college, up from 35% in 1993. Overall graduate students have an average debt load of \$19,000, which is a modest sum when compared to those who enroll at prestigious institutions. However looking at the economic downturn college graduates will be making less than college graduates of a few years ago, and only two-thirds of them will have jobs with health-care benefits, down from 71% in the early 2000s. Surveys show that 63% of school leavers in 2000 said they wanted to be working in professions like law or medicine by age 30. Despite the fact that the percent was relatively high, the current percentage of students who earned advanced degrees did not go up at all (Lewis, 2006).

Flexibility and timing across history

Marist College began as a novitiate for future Marist Brothers, a Catholic religious order, and started offering college-level courses in 1929. Later, in 1946, it was chartered by the State of New York, and now is a fully independent college governed by a lay board of trustees. Currently Marist College is a coeducational, comprehensive liberal arts college serving over 4,200 traditional undergraduate students (56% female, 44% male), and over 1,500 adult and graduate students. Marist offers 43 Bachelor's programs, 12 Master's programs, and 12 Certificate programs. Historically the student body was drawn from the neighboring cities and states, today is more diverse, and students come to Marist from as far as California on the West Coast, Florida on the south eastern coast, and in general from all across the country.

The college has a long history of preparing graduates to become certified teachers. As early as the mid-1970s Marist College was able to provide teacher preparation programs through a cooperative agreement with another local college. Comprehensive teacher preparation programs were successfully registered with the New York State Education Department

(NYSED), by the late 1980s. Marist teacher preparation programs are grounded in knowledge from the various fields of psychology relevant for the teaching and learning in the educational process. In fact, the first teacher certification program was designed as a track for undergraduate psychology majors and it prepared students to teach grades K-6. Marist continued to build on the psychology foundation and was a forerunner in recognizing the importance of preparing teachers who could work with students with disabilities. By the early 1990s the program was redesigned to require all undergraduate students to complete dual certification for teaching grades 1-6 and students with disabilities grades 1-6. All students in this program have psychology as their major.

In the same decade a second change was that Marist also began offering an initial certificate program for undergraduate students who prepare to teach adolescents (grades 7-12) in several content areas: Social Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, English, French, and Spanish. While these students are majors in their discipline they also complete psychology requirements as part of the pedagogical core curriculum. Upon graduation with their Bachelors they are granted initial teacher certification in adolescent education (grades 7-12) in their content area.

Adapting to change in 1990, Marist was approved to offer a Masters of Arts in Educational Psychology that fulfilled the academic requirements of the New York State Education Department (NYSED) for the attainment of a relevant master's degree for permanent/professional certification in childhood education grades 1-6. Starting 2001 the five-year BA/MA in Educational Psychology program was specially designed for those students who complete the undergraduate Childhood education program (Childhood grades 1-6/Students with Disabilities grades 1-6). Students complete 12 credit hours in the time of their undergraduate status, upon graduating with BA degree they complete in the fifth year additional 24 credit hours as full-time graduate students and finish with MA in Educational Psychology.

As a response to projected teacher shortages, in 1997 Marist developed an innovative program to provide initial certification through an alternative route for professionals in other careers who had a BA or BS degree and wanted to prepare to teach. Two 24 credit Advanced Certificate Programs were approved by New York State Education Department to prepare completers to teach in grades K-6 or in grades 7-12 in the same content areas as the undergraduate certification program.

While these programs were very successful, NYSED changed their policies in the early 2000s, and it was no longer viable to offer these Advanced Certificate programs. Instead of University based programs the NYSED shifted to individualized review as an alternative route for initial teacher certification. The development of school district based teacher preparation was encouraged. However, most recently NYSED is supporting experimentation with a variety of teacher preparation models that are essentially outside the university. As a replacement of the advanced certificates (and being flexible enough to adapt to quick changes), in 2004 Marist developed and was approved to offer a Masters of Education (M. Ed.) as an initial certification program for adolescent education in grades 7-12. The program reflects the particular areas of focus for which Marist College teacher education is widely noted, including an emphasis on assessment, human development, students with disabilities and technology as a tool of instruction, all of which are interwoven throughout the curriculum. Students seeking the M.Ed. with initial teacher certification in Adolescent Education complete a minimum of 36 graduate credits. Consistent with state regulations, this graduate program concurrently meets the master's degree requirements for initial certification. Applicants to this program have a baccalaureate degree in seven content areas: Social Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, English, French or Spanish. As a culmination of this program teacher candidates complete a full semester of teaching practicum in Middle and High school classrooms, and their capstone project is an electronic portfolio.

To be true to its flexibility, in 2004 the Masters of Arts in Educational Psychology program was also redesigned to include a track for initial certification in grades 5 and 6. This track made the degree a relevant and appealing Masters degree for those with initial certification in grades 7-12 in the stated content areas. With this change, teachers holding an initial teacher certificate in adolescent education (grades 7-12), by completing the Master of Arts in Educational Psychology at Marist, will fulfill the state requirements for professional teacher certificate in grades 7-12 and receive also initial certificate for Middle School grades 5-6 in the content areas listed above. Two years later in 2006, an alternative delivery format was also introduced based on a hybrid (on campus and online) delivery of courses. Students began the program in summer with a two week residence on campus, starting two courses (6 credits) in summer and then completing them online. During the academic year, while

most students were also teaching, they completed other two courses per semester (6 credits fall, 6 credits spring) online. They returned for a second two week residence in summer to campus, completing three courses (9 credits), and the remainder to be completed online, two courses (6 credits) in fall, and one (3 credits) in the last spring semester; to complete the 36 credit degree. Since summer 2010 the curriculum was modified, so students complete two courses at a time (6 credit hours) each semester: summer, fall, and spring. Specifically, students complete a short two-week residence of on campus courses in the summer, which continues with online courses for three more weeks. Over the fall and spring semesters students complete online courses. The program is completed in two years; 6 semesters of two courses each: 2 summer, 2 fall, and 2 spring.

Programs and flexibility in numbers

As it was mentioned before, the roots of Marist College are found in the seminary preparation of Marist Brothers who essentially were to be teachers in Marist Schools around the world. Therefore it is no surprise that as Marist evolved there was always a commitment to teacher preparation. However, in New York State, and of course influenced by the federal government, teacher preparation at the university level is tightly regulated. In addition, regulations change with some frequency making it necessary to revise programs, seek new approval, and then transition to the latest model. This can create some unstableness particularly when offering several programs which might be undergoing change at different times.

Teacher preparation programs also have to respond to institutional change. Through the 1980s and 1990s the College sought to expand the undergraduate population and as larger numbers of incoming students targeted careers in teaching these programs grew faster than resources could be allocated. Currently, the College has stabilized undergraduate enrollments as campus space is at capacity and the shift has been to grow graduate programs, particularly online programs.

The initial undergraduate teacher preparation program (K-6) was very small (about a dozen students). With the evolution to the dual certification program (grades 1-6 and Students with Disabilities 1-6), and the overall expansion of undergraduate enrollment, the program grew to 425 students over the four years. This number was burdensome and has leveled off to about 325

students. Resources were substantially increased, and especially faculty positions. However, it is a challenge to attract education faculty and leadership. At the same time the teacher preparation program for adolescent education (grades 7-12), began with about 20 students and has grown to about 200.

At their peak the Advanced Certificate programs, for the five years they were in place, were offered at two Marist Centers and served about 25 students each. These programs were less costly to deliver and were therefore discounted to attract students who were investing in a career change.

The Masters of Arts in Educational Psychology has had rather steady enrollment numbers since its inception of about 15-20 incoming students each year. About half of these are Marist undergraduates completing the BA/MA degree program. Enrollment increased with the introduction of the Hybrid model in 2006, where numbers grew from 16 to 23 incoming students (summer 2010 cohort); although current trends in education are lower again to 16 students for summer 2011.

From a slow start of about 10 students the on campus Masters of Education degree program (adolescent education grades 7-12), has seen steady growth with about 30 students entering over an academic year, reaching a program maximum of 74 students in 2010. However, the current economic downturn and competition from public universities resulted in the first decline in enrollments. Currently (for academic year 2011-2012) a total of 48 students are registered in this program.

The Master of Arts in Educational Psychology program (childhood 1-6 grades, and adolescence 7-12 grades), is offered currently in three modalities: (1) on campus, (2) the 5-year cohort-based program BA/MA in Educational Psychology (taking also on campus courses), and (3) the M.A. in Educational Psychology hybrid program (hybrid courses in the summer, online in fall and spring), which is a cohort based program. The on campus program had 41 students registered in the 2011-2012 academic year. Out of whom 26 students are in the 5-year program. The MA hybrid format, in the 2011-2012 academic year has 44 students registered.

In the past years the M. Ed. program has expanded significantly, as well as the interest for the MA Educational Psychology - Hybrid. Except the hybrid program (where students are required to follow the cohort based curriculum), and the 5 year BA/MA program (where students follow also a cohort curriculum), students in the on campus programs can choose to be full-time or

part time, taking a number of one (3 credits) to four courses (12 credits) per semester. Students have individually designed study plans that satisfy their intention to time-to-graduation; however, with the increase in enrollment a more systematic course offering has prompted the development of study plans according to course offering by semester. Given the costs of graduate education, many of the graduate students hold part-time or full-time jobs (as teachers mostly for students in the MA program, or other types of jobs for students in the M. Ed. program).

Changes in the department staffing

The department of Teacher Education is housed in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. For many of the early years the primary faculty resource for the teacher preparation programs was a part time coordinator. Part time adjunct faculty, made up of experienced master teachers from the local K - 12 schools, taught many of the required courses. Often retired teachers were hired to supervise the student teaching experience and work with the cooperating classroom teacher and the student teacher. In the mid-1980s two full time faculty members with doctorate degrees were appointed to teach the literacy sequence and the special education sequence. A full time program director was added to manage both the undergraduate and graduate programs including the advanced certificate programs. A part time clinical coordinator for student placement in teaching practicum was also added at this time.

The next wave of programs expansion in the late 1990s saw many positions added. Specifically, two additional faculty positions to teach literacy, another faculty to teach special education, two faculty to teach instructional technology, a faculty to teach research and social foundations, as well as a math methods, and a science methods faculty were added. All faculty members are expected to teach both undergraduate and graduate courses. Today there are 14 full time faculty positions in the department. However, to date not all positions have been filled and there has never been a time when there are not vacancies. In particular the leadership position has seen much turnover. Initially, the title was program coordinator, then program director. Within the college structure the program director fulfilled the same responsibilities as a department chair. The position was administrative appointment with faculty rank and no tenure. Depending on enrollments the program director was expected to teach at least one or two courses a year. In order to make the position more attractive the title

was changed to Associate Dean for Teacher Education Programs. However, essentially the responsibilities continue to be those of a department chair with more leadership and ownership of the programs expected. The salary was also significantly increased. While there have been some excellent administrators over the years, they often moved on after two or three years to positions of Deans of Schools of Education or other higher education administrative positions. When one Associate Dean leaves it also takes more than a year to fill the position. This interruption in leadership disrupts both internal and external relationships and also interferes with the strategic development of education programs.

The latest change to provide more leadership for the graduate programs was to create a new position, Director of Graduate Education programs to oversee and grow the graduate programs. This is a tenure track faculty position with released time for administrative responsibilities, which was filled August 2010. Also, the Associate Dean position was filled in August 2011, this gives the graduate programs the necessary leadership to flourish.

While there have been fewer turnovers in faculty positions, it has been even more of a challenge to make an appointment after presenting an offer. Earlier the main issue had been a less competitive salary and heavy teaching load. The discrepancy is visible especially when comparing this department of education in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, with those in free standing School of Education. Most recently entering salaries have been substantially increased and the teaching load reduced from 4-4 to 4-3 with a reduction to 3-3 with sufficient scholarship. This is beginning to result in some hires with one position filled in 2010 and another filled in 2011. However, two positions (one for Literacy and the other in Educational Technology) remain vacant after two years of active searches and three offers made. Reasons for not accepting offers now seem to be impacted by the economy with candidates not wanting to move out of their current location, either because they own property that they know they can not readily sell, or they are concerned about moving to this area where the cost of living continues to remain high in spite of the economic down turn. Since at the State level there was a new change in the accreditation process, the programs prepare to go through a new accreditation to be submitted in Fall 2013 to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Two of the important items that will draw attention will be the student enrollment and size of teaching faculty. With

enrollments growing a larger number of course offering is in place, while the number of full-time faculty stagnates, as well as the still open positions. At the present over 60% of instructors teaching graduate level courses are adjunct instructors. All have at least a Masters degree and extensive teaching experience in middle and high schools; however, very few of them have doctoral degrees.

As a consequence of the current economic down turn the enrollment in graduate programs declined, despite that undergraduate enrollment is stable. Without a full contingent of faculty the programs are vulnerable. State changes in teacher preparation requirements as well as economic pressures create difficulties for Marist graduate programs to take advantage of new opportunities or to prepare to deal with competitors, who may be both more secure and nimble to strategically respond to changes in teacher preparation. A score of state and private universities are in close proximity and offer lower tuition, better financial aid packages, scholarships, and other perks to attract students. In the time of economic changes and down turn managing education programs becomes an art to maintain equilibrium and push forward to growing by offering a high quality education.

Listening the voice of graduate education students

In Fall 2010 with the newly hired Director of Graduate Education Programs in place immediate work began to engage the faculty and graduate students. Discussion forums were initiated for graduate students and a comprehensive online site was developed to provide information and communication between the Director, education faculty, and students. The study presented below was an effort to listen to students. It had two phases taking place across two semesters, fall 2010 and spring 2011.

Phase one, over the Fall 2010 semester the director of graduate programs conducted two open discussion events with graduate students. The first one was a focus group with six graduating students from the M. Ed. program. The graduate students were completing their student teaching practicum and were in their last semester before graduation, having completed all course work required for the M. Ed. program. These six students seeking initial teacher certification pointed out their concern that upon graduation they will have difficulty finding full-time teaching positions, due to the dire job market. All were concerned that despite the energy and time spent on higher

education in the end it will take more time than expected till “pay off.” Some students had student loans, which made even more difficult the thought of not finding a position. All these six students graduating in Fall 2010 pointed out several curriculum issues, such as missing a classroom management course, and an assessment course to learn how to construct classroom tests before they started student teaching. One other point raised was the large number of adjuncts they had as instructors across the program, and inconsistencies in requirements across the different graduate level courses.

Based on the discussions with the graduating students in Fall 2010 another larger group discussion session was organized inviting students from all programs, and almost 20% of all graduate students participated. It was no surprise that the same issues were raised by graduate students. Students expressed concerns for “jobs after graduation,” they request assistance for networking with local schools or placement companies, and they had similar questions about being prepared as a new teacher. While graduate students from the MA program (especially those in the five year program and Marist alumni) pointed out that some parts of the masters program repeats what they studied in undergraduate education, and again they were concerned of the many Adjunct instructors teaching graduate courses. Based on feedback collected from students, on the enrollment in courses each semester, and due to the preparation for NCATE accreditation, faculty in the department have approved two course changes. One related to the graduate teaching seminar course to be transformed into a classroom management and field experience course, to be offered only spring semesters starting Spring 2012, and second, the two courses that cover topics in educational research will be merged into one course offered every semester, starting Fall 2011. The latter decision was made based on the low enrollment in the separate courses, and the need to better prepare future teachers with a more comprehensive knowledge in educational research. The director decided also to organize official graduate course teaching faculty meetings. The meetings take place three times each semester, and faculty discuss matters related to graduate education programs, courses, and any issues related to graduate students.

Phase two, of the study took place in Spring 2011 semester with a survey distributed to all 162 current graduate students from all graduate teacher education programs. The survey asked students a series of questions: to explain shortly the reason why they started graduate education, why they chose the

Marist education program, reason for choosing a teaching career, confidence in finding a job after graduation, and several other questions related to program organization concerning curriculum, activities, and use of facilities, as well as their suggestions for the graduate program they are registered in. Three questions were specifically targeted to students in the hybrid program and concerned with curriculum flow, as well as the on campus summer program management. A total of 108 students responded, representing 67% of total current graduate students.

Out of the 108 graduate students responding the survey 84 (78%) were female and 24 (22%) male. The ethnic and race distribution was representative of the total number of graduate students; with 94% Caucasian, and 6% Hispanic, African American, and other race.

When asked “what is the reason to begin graduate studies,” 95% of students mentioned *timing*, along with “financial issues” and “change of career.” When their open ended responses were analyzed the high majority of students (87%) explained that their decision to return to school or continue with graduate studies right after undergraduate was the economic downturn, lack of jobs, the need to have higher education to “have a foot in the door for a better job,” as well as the thought to postpone graduation and entrance into the work force till the economy improves and more teaching positions will become available. Especially the 5-year BA/MA Educational Psychology program students mentioned: “*the job market is very bad at this time and is better to stay one more year in school, earn my Master degree, and also save money since it takes me this way only one more year to complete the MA. Meanwhile I hope in this one year the economy will improve.*” Other students in the same 5-year program were concerned of the dire job market: “*Is very unlikely I will find a job right after graduation, so I better stay one more year in school.*” Several students responded that they were postponing entrance into the work force because of a scarce job market. For example a student in the M. Ed. program stated: “*I graduated in May with a BS in Mathematics and the job market is so bad that I thought I better return to school and earn a teaching certificate. I did not find any job with the degree I have, but I am VERY concerned that I won’t find with my Masters either.*”

Several career changing students mentioned that loss of their position pushed them into deciding to become teachers (we have several graduate students who lost their jobs working for pharmaceutical companies, or IBM).

Many students, like the following, state the reason as being a family situation related to the financial need to find a job. *“I have a job, but there are so many firings at my company that I really want to be prepared to fall on something. I need to have Plan B because I have two children in college and I cannot afford not having a job. Even if that means we are now three in the family in college. I just hope it will pay off.”*

Most of the MA students are in the program because of state requirements to complete the Masters in the required time (5 years from graduating with a BA), and that the only reason to come to Marist was because they were undergraduates at Marist. *“I loved my courses here and the Marist environment as undergraduate. I knew that I will come back here to do my Masters. Even if it is more expensive it is worth it.”* In general the response to the question “why Marist?” most of the students state that their decision was related to location proximity, or that they completed undergraduate studies at Marist. *“I live here and work here, so the choice was easy; to be close and not waste time with driving to my classes.”*

Several mentioned that the competitor state university in the proximity (with similar programs and significantly lower tuition) discontinued the program and Marist was the closest to home. Here we need to mention that starting Fall, 2011 the respective university restarted their program, and as an immediate effect out of the 49 new students who were accepted in the program to start over the summer and fall 2011 semester, nine withdraw their application. When asked why they withdraw, students mentioned the lower tuition at other university, better financial aid package, or assistantship, or scholarship as a reason.

Close to home and business, affordability, and reputation of the program were the most often mentioned reasons. Students in the Hybrid program mentioned that the online course offering is very convenient for all those who hold a full-time teaching position. *“I am a full time teacher and live one hour from Marist. The hybrid program is perfect for me. It offers me structure with the two courses per semester, and allows me time for my preparation for classes as a teacher. Then the two weeks on campus and three online in summer are very intense, but in 5 weeks I am done with two courses. And the tuition is lower. The best of both worlds!”*

When students were asked how confident they are in finding a teaching position after graduation; from all students who responded only 4% stated that

they have a full-time teaching position, 5% reported they are 75-100% sure they will find a position, 25% stated that they are between 50-75% sure they will find a position, 40% are only 25-50% sure, while all the rest (26%) are not sure they will find a teaching position after graduation. These results demonstrate and reinforce the feedback obtained from the group discussions (unfortunately even more accentuated). A very concerned voice stated: *“I am more than concerned. I am very concerned that after investing energy, time, and money, I will end up with paying back my student loans with another bank loan. There are too many teachers in my content area, and no one gives me encouraging news.”*

Many students (36%) taking on campus courses are interested in taking online courses, which complements their responses to the question “what is most challenging in your studies?” which was responded to by 67% of students as being *time management*. They also mention heavy course load and other work besides being a graduate student, and this complements the response regarding time management issues and the request for online course offering. *“I live far from campus, and I also hold a day-time job, along with having a family, is hard to come three nights per week to campus. Time management is of utmost importance. I would like to take online courses instead of coming to campus.”*

When asked to provide specific suggestions for program improvement the most mentioned suggestions were to acquire one extra certification: *Special education, literacy, leadership or other*, to have less Adjunct faculty teach the graduate courses, offer online courses, to create more networking and career placement help, and to provide more training in steps to apply for certification on the state web site, along with other diverse suggestions.

“I suggest the development of some extra certificate along with the initial teaching certification. I would like to have more opportunity to network with schools, and learn more about how to apply for jobs, since I am in the M. Ed. program, and I know the job market is really tough. It would be good also to see professors who teach our courses to be full-time PhD holding, while I know Adjuncts can give us the field experience, I wish they would be full-time in the department.”

Data from the focus groups, and student discussions, as well as survey results were discussed in department meetings and along with preparation for NCATE accreditation new changes in the program and courses are pondered.

There were discussions in the department for a new direction adding Special Education certification to the existent programs, or developing a new Special Education program. The changing times will press changes in the programs in order to keep up with the competition. Being small is an advantage for being flexible, however is a ground for more risk as well. A conclusion from the discussions in department meetings is that, in order to keep being competitive and attract more graduate students, change must come one way or the other. There is a general concern also for timely changes. New needs for better and more diverse prepared teachers in the field, general changes in teacher education, and competition for a shrinking pool of applicants, create more pressure and increase the need for education programs to be competitive while keeping up with all demands and changes.

Conclusions

Education programs at Marist have a long history and they have changed and developed across time. The changes in teacher education at Marist, following trends of change at State level, and need for new teachers in the field, were possible due to the smaller size and flexibility of our programs. It is expected that in the process of accreditation, with the current climate of fierce competition in the continuing economic down turn we will need to continue to be flexible and sensitive to external factors as well as to students' suggestions, demands, and interests. The increasing number of returning adults who change careers on one hand, and the undergraduate students who decide to postpone entering the work force, on the other hand, will continue to be a major focus for program change and development.

Based on group discussions and results from the survey, it is evident that graduate students are concerned about finding a full-time teaching position after graduation, and it is possible, as other studies in the literature show, that in a time of recession enrollment in higher education will increase, as well as will time-to-graduation. In order to offer teacher candidates a more competitive certification our programs need to become more appealing to potential applicants, and cater to needs for diversified certification. Program change and development should also consider new modalities of course offering, such as online or hybrid, and an increase in the number of graduate course teaching full-time doctoral degree holding faculty.

Even though going through the process of accreditation is a time consuming and intense one, given the present and near term changes that will be necessary, the process is very timely. Any future development needs to take into account economic issues such as sustainable enrollment and job market issues. Our programs' future is dependent on our responsiveness and flexibility.

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