Curriculum design and instructional practices: a case study use of theory in accelerated adult learning programs

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Curriculum Design and Instructional Practices:

A Case Study Use of Theory in

Accelerated Adult Learning Programs

by

Lorraine V. Beach

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Abstract

This is a qualitative case study that examined four institutions of higher education in New York to assess how well they have done at implementing a quality standard established by the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) in 2011 and 2019 calling for accelerated adult programs to incorporate adult learning theory within their curricula and instructional practices. Data collection consisted of interviews with faculty and staff, documentation reviews, and classroom observations. Through iterative case review processes, the author used this data to: a) clarify organizational policy and practices at each of the colleges/universities; and then b) to identify the impact of each organization’s policy, internal practices, and decision making structure on their ability to implement the CAP quality standard.

The study employed a unique blend of formative evaluation strategies and logic modeling to organize and interpret the case review data. Building on theoretical frameworks and evaluation technologies developed by Argyris and Schon (1978), Elmore (1979-1980), Friedman (2003), Kazi (2003), Langer and associates (2011), Scriven (1967), and Weiss (1998), the author developed two logic models: a) a practice model premised on the principles of adult learning theory that allowed for the identification of present versus missing criteria/factors needed for implementation; and b) a theory of change model that allowed for an assessment of “fit” of actual practice to the colleges’ professed policies on curriculum and instructional practice.

Findings indicate that only one of the four participating institutions successfully met the CAP standard. The remaining three institutions failed to achieve successful implementation. Indeed, the defining characteristic of these organizations was their inability to effectively collaborate and gain consensus within their membership on the fundamental need for an adult learning theory based practice model. Findings increase our knowledge of organizational implementation practices and their impact on instituting best practice standards.
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Chapter One: Introduction

In 2019, the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) reiterated its 2011 quality guidelines that stated degree programs should reflect adult learning theory while also maintaining academic rigor. While their recommendation was nonspecific and contained no true guidance as to how to implement such a guideline, it did demonstrate a commitment to utilizing adult learning theory to inform curriculum development and academic instruction.

This dissertation is a case study that examined four institutions of higher education in the United States (For Profit University, Midwest Community College, Non-Profit University, and Northern College) to assess how well they have done at implementing the CAP quality standard. It is a qualitative study that has utilized interviews with faculty and staff, documentation reviews, and classroom observations to identify the underlying structural factors that facilitated or impeded successful implementation of the CAP quality standard.

The importance of this research lies not only in its generation of descriptive knowledge about how organizations have (or have not) incorporated adult learning theory in curriculum development in their accelerated adult learning programs, but also in its analytic focus on understanding what organizational factors are critical for the implementation of theory informed, best practice standards. As noted by Gouthro (2019), despite the historical emphasis on pragmatism by adult educators, there still should be a “commitment to ensure that adult education is a practice that is informed by theory” (p.60). She goes on to argue that it is theory that will allow us to move beyond the “individualized and marketized” view of adult education and provide the “important grounding” needed by educators of adult learners to join the larger educational discourse on applied practice (p. 61). As will be stated below, the case study starts from the basic assumption that theory informed practice is foundational to the effective
education of adults—that successful implementation requires adult learning theory be incorporated into curriculum and instructional practices for these accelerated programs.

Adult learners can and will continue to represent a significant number of learners in U.S. higher education institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). These students have unique needs and issues for institutions to address and consider. Being able to ensure the development of effective curricula and instructional practices to address these needs will be contingent upon the establishment of protocols and standards that are grounded in sound practice principles and disciplined by a guiding framework for implementation. Currently there is no definitive research that informs practitioners and organizations on how to successfully design and implement curriculum or institute instructional practices to promote academic success for adult learners in accelerated programs. This study seeks to address that gap in knowledge.

**Adult Learners in Higher Education**

Students from a wide range of ages pursue higher education in the United States. In general, higher education institutions consider them in two groups. One group consists of “traditional” aged students, typically 18-24 years old, who begin higher education immediately after high school or within the first couple of years of high school graduation. Students over 24 years old are in a group often referred to as “adult learners.”

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that 60-65% of jobs will soon require a college degree. As of 2016, approximately 11% of the labor force (age 25 and older) had earned an associate degree and 25% had earned a bachelor’s degree. This gap is significant. The challenge is related to the fact that we currently live in a global society, and in order for the United States to maintain a competitive edge, we will need a college educated workforce. “The knowledge economy and global industrial production have
necessitated postsecondary education – individually and nationally” (Pusser, et al., 2007, p. 1). Additionally, for the adult students, earning their college degree enhances and improves quality of life for themselves and their families. Despite these incentives to seek a degree, however, many adult learners find themselves stressed by the demands of raising a family and/or holding down a job (Spaid & Duff, 2009, p. 1). For these reasons, higher education institutions have developed alternative educational delivery models such as accelerated adult learner programs to ensure accessibility to higher education for this specialized adult population.

**The Council for Accelerated Programs (CAP)**

The Council for Accelerated Programs (CAP) serves as a nonprofit membership organization for those who lead, taught, or conducted research in accelerated programs in higher education. Originally founded in 2004 by the Lumina Foundation for Education, CAP proffers a message that Accelerated Program learning outcomes were equal to, if not better than, the learning outcomes in traditional 16-week programs. This message was based on research performed by Dr. Raymond Wlodkowski, CAP Founder and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Accelerated Programs at Regis University. CAP is governed by an elected Board of Officers, which rotates yearly, and provides the direction and focus for the organization.

CAP became a Community of Practice with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning in 2018, and Jeannie McCarron, CAP's former Director, now manages this Community and others as CAEL's Director of Member Engagement. The Model for Good Practice is a resource that is still available to CAEL Members, and is housed within CAEL's online community platform, caelCONNECT. CAP has come to serve as the repository for best practices and research findings. It is now comprised of a community of over 200 institutions that come together to collaborate and advance the field of accelerated learning.
The Format of Accelerated Adult Degree Programs

For adult learners, in addition to the traditional delivery model, there are accelerated programs, online only programs, cohort programs, and hybrid programs. The accelerated option that is the focus of this study is defined by how these programs condense academic time. The Commission for Accelerated Programs (2008) defines accelerated degree programs as “program courses that are credit-bearing; program courses that have 32 or fewer contact hours; and program courses that are 8 weeks or less in duration” (p.1). These programs may be either contract programs with organizations external to the college or university, or they may be developed in-house at a particular college or university.

There were 4,298 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States as of the 2017-2018 school year that were recognized as fully accredited degree-granting institutions of higher education (National Center of Education Statistics, 2018), approximately 270 (6.2%) of them offered adult focused degree programs (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2019). In comparison to the 250 colleges and universities that offered accelerated programs in the early 2000s (Wlodowski & Kasworm, 2003), this statistic of 270 reflects modest growth and a steady presence in these types of programs in U.S. higher education.

Accelerated learning programs are often marketed as designed to meet the needs of the adult learner (Commission for Accelerated Programs, 2008). Most colleges offering accelerated degree programs provide courses in 5- to 8-week formats, with students attending classes one night a week for a 4-hour session (Husson & Kennedy, 2003). Students meet course objectives via intensive in-class sessions and out-of-class work. This approach significantly differs from the traditional 40 to 45 contact hours per semester-long course with multiple sessions per week.
Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope (Delimitations)

Due to the condensed and intensive nature of the accelerated adult learner approach, effective curriculum development and instructional practices in and outside of class are key policy and practice concerns. In 2019, the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) reiterated its 2011 quality guidelines that stated degree programs should reflect adult learning theory while also maintaining academic rigor. While their recommendation was nonspecific and contained no true guidance as to how to implement such a guideline, it did demonstrate a commitment to have institutions of higher learning utilize adult learning theory to inform curriculum development and academic instruction.

Practice Concepts and Basic Logic Assumptions:

Underlying the CAP guideline (and this research) is the basic assumption that adult learning theory will help to inform curriculum and instructional development decisions, which in turn will result in better instructional practices that eventually lead to more positive outcomes for adult learners. See Figure 1: Assumed Logic Flow-Tentative Practice Model below.

![Figure 1: Assumed Logic Flow-Tentative Practice Model](image)

While this is a somewhat simplistic view of the process, nonetheless, it does offer a basis from which to begin the process of moving from observations to theory, using inductive logic to
organize the data collected through the case review process so that themes that comprise key concepts and relationships between those concepts can be identified. Specifically, Figure 1 proffers an argument that if we integrate adult learning theory into the curriculum and instructional practices (the intervention), it will result in the development of theoretically sound curriculum and instructional practices (the products/outputs) and have a positive impact on adult learners (the long-term goal) (i.e., “if X is done, Y will follow”) (Fortune & Reid, 1999, p.23). As will be reiterated below in the section on limitations, it is acknowledged that this is an implementation study that focuses on the attainment of the short term goal of theory informed practice and curriculum. As such, this study assumes that the long-term impact of incorporating adult learning theory into practice will positively impact outcomes for adult learners, but it does not seek to explain or test this assumption.

A second assumption that flows from Figure 1 is that policies and programs are defined and implemented within the context of organizations. As such, the degree to which they are fully implemented is subject to several organizational factors that impede or facilitate successful implementation. Figure 2: Practice Technology (Do X to Achieve Y) provides the context and key implementation steps that appear logically to be needed to achieve the incorporation of adult learning theory into curriculum and educational practice. It is assumed, therefore, that the best implementation outcomes will require collaboration and explicit endorsement of adult learner...
theory by both educators and administrators within the institution, that protocols and policies will endorse principles of theory use in educational practice, and that the organization will be supportive.

The importance of this basic implementation model is that it moves us from the theoretical into the actionable and allows us to assess whether our means (i.e., intervention) achieves our desired end (i.e., our short and long-term goals). As noted by Lawson (2004), it is in the development of logic on how to implement interventions that moves us into an “action-oriented” examination of “pragmatic relationships and propositions”—i.e., if you want to achieve Y, under conditions of A, B, C then do X. It is this “technology” model that provides the underlying conceptual framework needed for an implementation evaluation.

Assumptions Related to Adult Learning Theory:

The andragogic model refers to the study of how (and why) adults learn as compared to pedagogy (the study of how children learn) (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). Four categories of adult learning theories were originally central to this study. They included experiential learning theory, self-directed learning theory, collaborative learning theory, and transformational learning theory. A fifth theoretical approach that emerged during the research process used by one of the universities in this study is Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Although the taxonomy is a model that is not necessarily specific to adult learning, it is

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1 For purposes of consistency between work done by Fortune & Reid (1999) and Lawson (2004), the author has chosen to have X represent interventions and Y to represent outcomes. Lawson’s specific quote was “if you want to achieve x, under conditions of a, b, and c, then do y” (p.226).
an approach that is currently being employed by one of the institutions (For-Profit University) studied and does provide theoretical guidance for their adult accelerated programs.

**Experiential Learning.**

In a publication by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (1999), Flint posited that active engagement increases the potential learning and that curriculum needs to incorporate the personal experiences and interests of the adult learner. He argued that experiential learning was most effective when it allowed adults to learn via their experiences in the classroom and in their daily life and work. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) have stated that “learning from experience involves adults connecting what they have learned from current experiences to those in the past as well as to possible future situations” (p. 185). They observed that cognitively it is a more complex process because it compels adult learners to connect their experiences to the concepts they are learning and vice versa.

**Self-Directed Learning.**

Brookfield discussed the common themes of “autonomous thinking and self-directed learning” in accelerated learning (2003, p. 76). Brookfield implied that adults are prone to be self-directed—which can be effective in accelerated programs. Self-directed learning occurs when students are allowed and encouraged to take responsibility for portions of their learning experiences: for instance, allowing them to decide what type of project they would like to do in their course and/or with whom they would like to work on that project.

**Collaborative Learning.**

Collaborative learning refers to students working together to acquire knowledge and complete learning tasks. According to Kasworm (2003), adult learners value the interactions with
their classroom peers and coworkers and use these interactions to master their understanding of material and content.

**Transformational Learning.**

Transformational learning refers to a “paradigm shift or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 162). In other words, transformative learning is where a learner becomes aware of how what they have learned has influenced how they have changed, matured, or further developed as a person.

**Bloom’s Taxonomy.**

Bloom’s Taxonomy is another theoretical practice model that emerged during this research that is being implemented explicitly by one of the institutions in this research study. The basic purpose of Bloom’s Taxonomy is classifying educational objectives based on what thinking behaviors are important to the process of learning (Forehand, 2005). According to Forehand (2005), Bloom’s classification system helps quantify learning, so educators have measurable steps they can follow in order to meet established educational objectives. This model addresses how to measure and quantify learning objectives but does not necessarily specify how individuals learn.

**Limitations and Scope:**

The author recognizes that the scope of this study will not permit a full assessment of the degree to which adult learning theory, current practices in curriculum development, and organizational implementation impact adult student outcomes. As will be shown in the logic model (presented in Chapter 3: Methodology) that lays out the evaluation plan for assessing implementation, the analysis focuses on the short term goal of theory informed curriculum and
instructional production—i.e., integration of adult learning theory into both the process of curriculum development and as a theory-informed instructional practice.

It is also acknowledged that as a qualitative study, generalizations past the four colleges are not likely. However, it can offer a window into the importance of context and how context shapes the actions that educators use in curriculum development.

And as a final note, it is acknowledged that as a campus administrator within adult accelerated degree programs, the author needed to address some inherent biases. While the author is not a faculty member or curriculum designer, she does work closely with individuals who are in those roles. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; it usually involves field work; primarily employs an inductive research strategy whereby the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories; and produces a richly descriptive product) (Merriam 1998). Bias, therefore, is possible. To assist with objectivity, the author utilizes logic modeling as the primary means for interpreting and summarizing data. The author also acknowledges, however, that the logic models that drive the analyses were employed post-data collection. Had they been implemented earlier, they could have been used successfully to achieve more targeted research questions and to assist in thwarting the impact of bias on data collection, particularly as it related to classroom observations. Nonetheless, logic modeling did made explicit the assumptions and factors being considered—and provided the standardization of data needed to complete a comparative analysis of findings. The author’s inherent biases and their impact on the analysis are addressed more explicitly in Chapter 3.
Methodological Approach

As noted previously, this is an implementation study to assess how well four institutions performed in implementing a quality standard established by CAP in 2011 and 2019 that *accelerated adult programs* should incorporate adult learning theory within their curricula and instructional practices. In doing so, the study fulfills three general functions of research: 1) exploration, providing a rich contextual narrative of the decision making processes involved in crafting curriculum for adult learners at each of the institutions; 2) translational, seeking to understand and explain how the principles of adult learning theory were applied by members of the organization and the degree to which the curriculum and instructional development processes incorporated the chosen theory with fidelity; and 3) formative evaluation, using a “theory of change” (Weiss, 1998) approach to visualize the curriculum development process at each of the universities and identify those organizational factors that impede or facilitate effective application of theory when developing curriculum and instructional practices.

Data Collection:

The study employed a full array of qualitative methods for collecting data—including interviews, classroom observation, and document reviews. Specifically, the design included interviews with faculty and academic administrators who are responsible for curriculum development, interviews of classroom and teaching faculty, observations of classroom interactions in class settings, and review of syllabi and other written documentation, such as mission statements, goals, course assignments and projects, curriculum development guidelines, training materials, and faculty development training materials.

The case study involved four colleges and universities. A comprehensive list of accelerated learning programs was found on the Commission for Accelerated Programs (CAP)
website in alphabetical order by state and institution, and the list of accelerated learning program administrators, with contact information, was also made available by the CAP office. Once the campuses were chosen, a request was sent to the administrators of the chosen programs asking them to participate. Once institutions committed, requests were sent to potential faculty and administrators asking for their participation as well.

**Data Organization:**

As noted by Fortune and Reid (1999), the qualitative approach is similar to the quantitative approach in that it begins with a “scientific attitude” and a “formal theoretical framework to guide the research” (p.6). However, the two approaches use theory differently. In quantitative research, theory is utilized in a deductive manner, employing top-down reasoning to explain observable phenomena and develop hypotheses for testing. In contrast, qualitative research uses theory inductively to help in “delimiting the boundaries of the investigation and in making sense of connections among data” but may or may not produce hypotheses (p. 54).

Succinctly stated, qualitative research uses theory to point the researcher in the direction of what is important to investigate and then to provide a structure for organizing data and identifying concepts/themes that emerge through the inductive reasoning process. It does so through a reiterative process of assessing the fit of the theory to the data, making modifications as needed to understand the phenomena being observed.

Like all qualitative research, this research inquiry began with inductive logic as the author began to try and make sense of the collected data. Working from *Figure 2: Practice technologies* presented above, she blended the proposed logic flow with emerging themes of her inductive review of the data to craft a preliminary conceptual framework. This model is presented as *Figure 3: Practice framework* on the next page. The model follows the “hybrid”
guidelines provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (1998, p.42) and reflects both the assumptions contained in Figures 1 and 2 above and themes that arose as a result of interviews and reviews of the documentation.

Figure 3:
*Practice framework*
Data Analysis:

Building on the work of organizational theorists and realist evaluation approaches, the study employs logic models to articulate not only what an accelerated adult learning program is “expected to achieve” in the way of incorporating adult learning theory but also “how it expects to achieve it” (i.e., “theory of change”) (Weiss, 1998, p. 55). Using a logic model template proposed by Friedman (2003) that incorporates “theory of change” (Weiss, 1998) and “backward mapping” processes (Elmore, 1979-1980), the author constructs logic models for each of participating college programs to help identify key differences between the proposed theory of change and what is actually being achieved. Analyses pull from a “comparative logic modeling” process proposed by Langer and associates (2011, p.1628), where logic models allow for two comparisons: a) the degree to which each program/college adheres to their internal policy (i.e., their proposed theory of change); and b) the degree to which the programs differ in how they structure, implement, and oversee curriculum development and instruction practice.

Research Questions

Adult learners participate in higher education at a significant rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and accelerated learning programs are often specifically marketed as being adult-oriented learning opportunities (Commission on Accelerated Programs, 2008). Currently, limited research exists regarding whether accelerated learning programs explicitly or intuitively incorporate adult learning theories or any other learning theories in their curriculum design and/or instructional practices. As a consequence, there is limited research regarding how the institutions of higher education facilitate or impeded efforts to implement practice principles grounded in adult learning theory.

The specific research questions for this study are as follows:
1. What adult learning theories are being employed within each of the colleges for the development of curricula and instructional practice guidelines?

2. How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the practice principles espoused by the individual colleges?

3. How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the organizational policies, mission statement, curriculum development processes, and educational instructional practices?

4. How has the organization supported or impeded the adoption of adult learning theory in the curriculum and instructional practice processes affecting accelerated adult learning programs?

**Operational Definitions**

- *Accelerated learning program courses*: Credit-bearing program courses with 32 or fewer contact hours. Program courses are 8 weeks or less in duration (Commission on Accelerated Program Network, 2008).

- *Active learning*: A strategy for learning whereby students do more in a classroom than simply listen to a lecture. They apply the concepts they’re learning through reflection, participation, critical analysis, and problem solving (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

- *Adult learners*: For the purposes of this research study, adult students are 25 years old and older and have assumed major life responsibilities and commitments, such as work, family, and community activities (Flint & Associates, 1999).

- *Backward Mapping*: A logical sequencing approach that reverses the policy review process away from “expected effects” to contextual factors and “expected actions of
others” (Elmore, 1983, p. 8), in order to assess what resources and conditions are needed to fully implement a given policy (Friedman, 2003).

- **Bloom’s Taxonomy**: A classification system that helps quantify learning so educators have measurable steps they can follow in order to meet established educational objectives (Forehand, 2005).

- **Collaborative learning**: Students are required to work together to accomplish tasks, goals, and learning activities and assignments both within the classroom environment and on out-of-class assignments, projects, papers, reports, and presentations related to the course content and course objectives (Kessels & Poell, 2004).

- **Comparative logic modeling**: A methodology that employs research utilization theory and logic modeling to assess how individual agencies adopt and integrate evidence based practice guidelines (Langer, Gifford, & Chan, 2011).

- **Curriculum development**: The development and specification of course and program objectives, goals, content areas, syllabi, activities, assignments, projects, papers, and other assessments.

- **Experiential learning**: A learning modality in which learners connect what they have learned from current experiences to those in the past and to possible future implications (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

- **Explicit knowledge**: If explicit, knowledge is the direct “know what and know how” (Meyer, 2003). It refers to knowing what you know and intentionally applying that knowledge.

- **Formative evaluation**: An evaluation approach that emphasizes the need for feedback to improve implementation or the final product (Weiss, 1998).
• **Forward mapping:** An approach to logical sequencing that begins with a “statement of intent” and then works “downward through an organization or system to define what must occur at each level, to outline the necessary rules and actions, and to allocate responsibility” for the implementation of that intent (Friedman, 2003, p.15).

• **Instructional practices:** The means by which faculty deliver the course and its objectives, including in-class methodology and activities, assignments, projects, and assessments (such as tests, paper analyses, projects).

• **Logic Modeling:** A graphic “roadmap” that delineates how a program/policy “is expected to work, what activities need to come before others, and how desired outcomes are achieved” (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998, p. 35).

• **Self-directed learning:** refers to allowing and/or requiring adult learners to take responsibility for the direction of their learning tasks and outcomes.

• **Tacit or non-explicit knowledge:** this is the underlying or non-expressed knowledge. One form of tacit knowledge is intuition (Meyer, 2003).

• **Transformational or transformative learning:** Learning that produces dramatic, fundamental changes in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live (Kegan, 2000). Transformational learning occurs when there is a change in the learner that s/he observes and reflects upon with others (such as peer learners and/or faculty members).

**Concluding Comments**

This project will provide knowledge of the organizational support provided (or not provided) for implementing theory informed curriculum development and instructional practices within accelerated programs—a core quality standard as identified by the Commission on Accelerated Programs (2011, 2019). The dissertation extends our understanding and application
of “formative evaluation” methodologies that have been pioneered in the field of education—first by Scriven (1967) and then subsequently by researchers such as Weston and associates (1997). It advances this methodology through the extensive use of logic modeling and a blending of evaluation strategies proposed by Weiss (1998), Friedman (2003), and Langer (2011).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

As noted previously, this dissertation seeks to fulfill three general functions of research: 1) exploration, providing a rich contextual narrative of the decision making and policy processes involved in crafting curriculum for adult learners at each of the four participating institutions; 2) translational, seeking to understand and explain how the principles of adult learning theory were applied and the degree to which the curriculum and instructional development processes at each of the participating universities incorporated their organizational chosen theory with fidelity; and 3) formative evaluation, using a “theory of change” (Weiss, 1998) approach to understanding the structure of the curriculum development process at each of the universities and identifying those organizational factors that appear to impede or facilitate effective application of theory in the development of curriculum and instructional practice. This chapter provides an overview of the research and theory development literature that gives rise to and supports the performance of each of these functional tasks.

For purposes of making sense of the plethora of research on “adult learning” within educational institutions, the author utilizes the three functions identified above as the primary categories for organizing and integrating the multiple genres of research literature that promote and animate this study. The chapter begins with an exploration of how accelerated programs have addressed the needs of adult learners, specifically reviewing the literature for insight into why these programs developed and how they have addressed curriculum development. This is followed by a review of translational work that has been done to clarify what adult learning theory is and the practice principles that are considered critical if there is to be successful
application of the concepts. And finally, the chapter concludes with a brief overview of the formative evaluation literature used to craft the methodological portions of this study.

**Exploration of Curriculum Development in Adult Accelerated Programs**

This section of the literature review seeks to identify the key descriptive elements of adult learners as a population and to explain how accelerated programs developed to meet their unique needs. Emphasis is placed on identifying the differences between non-traditional and traditional students in how they learn—as well on the identification of strategies and practices that are thought to address the educational requirements and demands of the adult learner.

**Response to the Market:**

In 2003, Wlodkowski and Kasworm observed the growth in the number of institutions that were starting to offer accelerated learning programs and the increasing number of adult students enrolled in such programs. Noting the developing market, they argued that higher educational institutions should adapt instructional practices to accommodate the learning needs and demands of this growing population of adult students. As these programs increased in popularity and marketability, there has been a simultaneously increase in the focus on the adult learner (Commission for Accelerated Programs, 2008).

Attributes of adult learners that affect their educational choices are often seen as being opposite to those of younger learners: adult learners tend not to live on campus, not to be involved in campus organizations, and not to be associated social groups tied to the college or university (Bradley & Graham, 2000). In their literature review, Donaldson and Graham (2001) noted the importance of educators recognizing and incorporating the unique experiences, maturity, and ability to self-monitor of adult learners when developing curricula and classroom practices. Colleges often craft their programs to accommodate these characteristics, with
common strategies including the provision of courses in 5- to 8-week formats, with students attending classes one night a week for a single 4-hour session (Husson & Kennedy, 2003). To accommodate content requirements, students often are allowed to meet course objectives via intensive in-class sessions and out-of-class work. This contrasts sharply with the traditional 40 to 45 contact hours per semester-long course for the traditional population.

Noting the popularity of these programs and the need to set parameters on their implementation, Husson and Kennedy (2003) have argued that the following “criteria” are now considered to be fundamental attributes of well-run accelerated educational programs: a) they are “learner-focused, market-sensitive” in their approach; b) they are specifically “designed for adult learners,” with a focus on using “interactive and participatory” instructional strategies (rather than lectures) as a means for engaging the student; c) they exhibit a “passion for quality” that adult learners look for—meaning to remain viable, they recognize the need to achieve academic quality within a condensed/intensive format; d) they focus not only on “high-quality” instruction, but on “superior customer services” as well; e) their leadership is committed to the program and its focus on its mission; g) they are accessible, meaning they do not needlessly limit “credit” acceptance of past academic and work experience because it may not fully meet bureaucratic requirements; h) they offer a “variety of delivery options available at multiple sites” (pp. 53-54). All of these criteria are envisioned as appealing to and sustaining interest of adult learners—as well as serving as the underlying principles driving a practice model premised on adult learning theory.

Curriculum and the Adult Learner:

Kasworm (2003) has noted that adults enter postsecondary education with three distinct attributes: they tend to have greater competency and skill levels, can action plan and are often
knowledgeable contributors to society, and exhibit greater levels of work identity. In similar terms, MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) observed that adult learners are typically already self-supporting, mature, responsible, and lead lives as independent citizens with family and career responsibilities. Kasworm (2003) defined the adult student as one who represents the status of age (typically defined as 25 years of age and older); the status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and the status of responsible and often-competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments. In contrast to the traditional age students whose primary task is envisioned as preparing for adulthood, research tends to indicate that the college experience will be much different for the adult subpopulation—and that to maintain the interest and persistence of the adult learner in completing the program, educators need to mold the academic experience to accommodate those differences (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994).

As posited by Kasworm (2003), adult learners come to an accelerated program specifically because it is an academic model that recognizes and incorporates their competence, provides opportunities for them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, presents an instructional environment linked to their current work efforts, and offers a credential that would attest to and enhance their perceived competence in the workplace. Curriculum development, therefore, that acknowledges these attributes is therefore critical.

In their literature review, Donaldson and Graham (2001) have posited that accelerated programs should be based on adult learning principles and have proffered a guidance framework for doing so. They presented the following guidelines for the development of curricula and instructional practices in accelerated degree programs. Development activities should: a) factor in the experiences and backgrounds of adult learners; b) focus on how to motivate adults who
view the value of education differently than their younger counterparts; c) strategize on how to maximize classroom activities and climate for the adult learner; d) incorporate adult learning and cognition theory; and e) building practice models that stress the need for monitoring of college outcomes. In his benchmark study applying some of these same principles, Flint (1999) argued that adult-learner-focused institutions should approach educational planning by engaging adult learners in an ongoing dialogue designed to assist them with making informed educational planning decisions, with the faculty functioning as managers and facilitators of the learning process and not merely as dispensers of information. In summary, curriculum and instructional delivery at these institutions should, therefore, be designed to incorporate how the adult learns and built to accommodate the attributes they bring to classroom (Flint, 1999).

**Concluding Comments:**

Due to the condensed and intensive nature of the accelerated adult learner approach, effective curriculum development and instructional practices in and outside of class are key policy and practice concerns. In 2019, the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) reiterated its 2011 quality guidelines that stated degree programs should reflect adult learning theory while also maintaining academic rigor. While their recommendation was nonspecific and contained no true guidance as to how to implement such a guideline, it did demonstrate a commitment to utilizing adult learning theory to inform curriculum development and academic instruction.

Addressing the concerns of educators worried about bending educational practices to accommodate the adult learner, Wlodkowski (2003) has noted that learning outcomes for adult learners in accelerated learning programs were indistinguishable from or greater than those demonstrated by younger students in conventional courses. Additionally, Wlodkowski reported
that in prior research, it was found that he and his associates found there was strong persistence
and college success of adult learners in accelerated learning programs (Wlodkowski, Mauldin,
and Gahn 2001). However, he noted that there were areas still in need of further research,
including the impact of access and teaching methodologies on student outcomes in accelerated
learning programs (Wlodkowski 2003).

For all of the research previously reported, none of it specifically focused on assessing
the impact of explicit or implicit incorporation of the adult learning theories into curriculum
development and instructional practices within adult accelerated learning programs. While the
literature indicates there is a need to incorporate adult learning theory in these programs, there
was no research identified that examined the differences between accelerated degree programs
that did endorse adult learning theory and those that did not.

**Application in Practice: Translational Research**

Although translational research has primarily associated with medicine and how to move
from “bench to bedside practice,” there has been increased utilization of the concepts and
principles by educators—generally under the guise of “evidence-based resources for educational
practitioners” seeking to nurture “knowledge mobilization” (Ovenden-Hope & la Velle, 2015, p.
575) and “pedagogical reasoning” (Shulman, 1987 in Ovenden-Hope & la Velle, 2015, p. 576).
Although moving from theory to application is difficult, Ovenden-Hope and la Velle (2015)
argue that knowledge of “research and evidence” is “crucial to effective teaching” (p. 576).
Without it, as noted by Mace and Grichfield (2010), “pure basic science can become detached
from the natural world that it is supposed to explain” and “pure applied work can become
detached from fundamental processes that shape the world it is supposed to improve” (p.293).
Despite the call for such studies, in general, there is a void in translational research on how to apply adult learning theory in relation to curriculum development and crafting of instructional practices. The following discussion, however, uses existing research to glean important points about these theories that could help explain and identify the potential difficulties that programs might experience when trying to apply their principles.

**Experiential Learning Theory:**

Experiential learning theory is one of the central theories associated with adult accelerated learning programs. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), in their 1999 benchmark study reflected that the “research on adults and higher education tells us that adults learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning experience and that the curriculum is most effective when it builds upon the life experiences and interests of the adult learner” (p. 1).

Building on the work of multiple twentieth century scholars such as Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, and others\(^2\), Kolb (1984) stated that “experiential learning theory provides a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior” (p. 21). Observing that learning is a process in which “ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience,” Kolb (1984) noted that a core belief of experiential learning is that adults learn as their thoughts are impacted directly by their new experiences, either challenging or confirming what is already known (p. 26).

\(^2\) See Kolb and Kolb (2012) for a review of scholarship related to Experiential Learning Theory past and present.
Research has shown that this learning theory is relevant and aligned to accelerated learning program principles. One aspect of experiential learning that was recommended by Donaldson and Graham (2002) is that “out-of-class settings are contexts for learning and places where adults construct meaning for what they are learning in the classroom” (p. 10). In their discussion, the authors observed that experiential learning could play an important role in accelerated programs. In their suggested principles for designing accelerated programs, they argued that “instructors should design instructional strategies and techniques, as well as class projects, to connection with and build upon what learners already know” (p. 8). Kasworm (2003) has also mentioned the association, finding that when the adult learners in her study “spoke of classroom learning, they made connections between academic learning and real-world learning” (p. 93).

Using Kolb’s work (1984) as a springboard, Mortimer (2017) found that experiential learning, when applied to higher education, can transform the student-learning experience. Specifically examining the application of experiential learning in the field of auditing and accounting, she concluded that student survey responses suggested that the real-life examples used by the professional auditor enhanced their understanding of the subject. She also found that students were able to understand the material being presented by considering how the concepts applied in real work-life examples (experiences) and assignments. She noted specifically that student participants were able to demonstrate and apply their learning through the drafting of a job description (p. 350)—fostering their ability to understand the experience of being an auditor assigned that task.

Beckem II and Watkins (2012) have recommended that educators must begin moving toward more authentic forms of education, which can be accomplished through experiential
learning. They recognized that while providing authentic “real life” experiences can be time consuming, hard to assess, tough to scale, and expensive, it can be effective (p. 61). Their research looked at using immersive “simulations” to provide those experiences at a reasonable cost. In their article, they discussed a pilot project that had used a class-based course as an “incubator to test new technologies,” finding that this real-life approach provided opportunities for personal interactions and experiential learning in online adult courses (p. 65). Using an Exit Survey to gauge student reactions in both quantitative and qualitative formats, they note that participants valued utilizing experiential learning to enhance their overall learning.

The final example in this review on experiential learning comes from Du-Babcock (2016), who evaluated a longitudinal teaching development project that sought to bridge the gap from classroom-based theory learning to experiential professional learning. Du-Babcock has contended that traditional classroom teaching that relies on theory-based knowledge is inadequate when students are required to apply classroom theories out in the real world of business. In the evaluation of an internship program that involved host organizations and their supervisors that were local, regional, and international companies, the study found that 90% of the host supervisors felt that the student interns were able to deliver quality work at a professional level because of this educational approach.

**Self-Directed Learning Theory:**

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) strongly recommended self-directed learning when educating adult learners, envisioning the role of the learner in planning their own educational experience as important and leading to their commitment to the learning process. Self-directed learning being one of the researchers’ core principles of andragogy (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2005), the rationale for self-directed learning directly relates to the self-
concept of the adult learner. According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005), adults believe they are responsible for their life decisions and want/need to be seen as capable of self-direction in all aspects of their lives (including planning their education). Brookfield’s work in 2003 also supported self-directed, self-paced and autonomous learning for adult learners.

Kvedaraite and associates (2013) contended that experiential learnings transforms the educational paradigm from teaching to learning, focusing on the individual realizing his/her personal initiative as a learner and nurturing their ability to acquire the attitudes and values of “self-development” (p. 74). Incorporating the theory on self-directed learning when looking to implement a new paradigm of self-directed learning, their research sought to analyze the efficacy of learning by doing, collaboration, and experience. In general, their analysis revealed that self-directed approaches increase the ability of the learners to decide what is to be learned and how it should be achieved.

Various activities can be incorporated into self-directed learning, some of which are done by the individual such as writing in a journal or that can encourage or require interactivity with fellow learners be incorporated. The primary concept is one of assuming responsibility for learning. According to Hiemstra (1994) “self-direction is best viewed as a continuum where individual learners can become empowered to take responsibility for decisions related to their learning endeavor” (p.1). In their review of the research and literature, Nistor and Herman (2016) found that self-directed learning is essentially defined by the student taking initiative and directing his own learning. They asserted, however, that teachers should still provide appropriate teaching content, but that it should be adapted to the self-directed learning framework.
Choi and Anderson (2016) considered that when using experiential methods, a shift of a teacher’s role occurs from being a “talking textbook” to a facilitator of student learning (p. 32). They found that when the primary objective of the assignment in the course is to empower students to take ownership of their learning, students reported being challenged by being forced to be self-directed but feeling rewarded. Douglass and Morris (2014) in their study at a large Midwestern University with college juniors and seniors also found that students indicated that a great deal of responsibility for self-directed learning lay at their feet. Students noted that assigned self-learning tasks not only gave them a sense of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and purpose but also increased their motivation to self-direct their own learning.

It was interesting to note, however, that while students in this study were willing to accept the responsibility, they expressed strong beliefs that environmental factors controlled by the faculty and administration can thwart those efforts. Students identified critical faculty-controlled factors of the process, including class structure, curriculum design, and professorial attitudes and traits. These are important parts of the curriculum development processes. These “organizational factors” also proved to be critical in this dissertation, accounting for a lot of the problems in implementation of an adult learning theory practice model.

**Collaborative Learning Theory:**

Almost ubiquitously, literature findings indicate that adult learners value “active, collaborative and applied instructional strategies” (Kasworm, 2003, p.94). Spaid and Duff (2009), in looking at a cohort model, found that “working with the same small group of individuals…provides learning communities that bind adult students together in collaborative relationships that last through graduation and beyond” (p. 104). The collaboration opportunities were valued by the students in this study and appeared to nurture interdependence in a positive
manner. Flint and Frey (2003) also found that cohort groups help to create a sense of community for adult learners. This option promotes learning and also leads to increased retention. CAEL, in their 1999 Benchmarking Study, also found and recommended that the “teaching-learning process” be “personalized, active, collaborative, experiential, and built on their philosophies, and best practices of adult learning” (p. 10).

In his review of research related to collaborative and cooperative learning in higher education, Gapinski (2018) reported a growing body of empirical evidence now demonstrates that collaborative learning activities contribute to positive learning outcomes. As an example, Harney, Hogan, and Quinn (2017) looked at peer-to-peer implementation of collaborative learning in higher education. Their study which examined the effects of facilitator driven versus peer-driven prompts on both individual and team outcomes, indicated that those in the peer-driven condition also reported greater levels of team orientation and scored higher in their use of sophisticated concepts in their assigned task. Reflective of these common findings, this dissertation work found that collaborative learning theory was the most widely used “adult learning” framework by the participating colleges in developing syllabi.

Transformational Learning Theory:

This is a highly complex theory of learning, which the literature tends to indicate is difficult to apply in many settings. Taylor (2008) has observed that “it is important for educators to create opportunities for learners within and outside the classroom to act on new insights in the process of transformative learning” (p. 11). Encouraging and expecting adult learners, both within and outside of the classroom setting, to engage in critical reflection through problem posing and dialogue leads to transformative and/or collaborative learning for those students. In other words, transformative learning involves awareness of one’s own pre-existing assumptions,
beliefs, and values and then changes them into a new perspective on an individual basis and directly affects the student’s life (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Reflecting on the work of Mezirow (1996) that characterized transformative learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience to guide future action” (p. 162), Maiese (2019) proffers a perspective that this shift in interpretation should not be understood in exclusively conceptual terms, nor as a process that is devoid of affect and emotion. She goes on to indicate that the notion of affective framing helps us to see that the “cognitive” and “emotional” aspects of transformative learning are not clearly distinguishable, but rather go hand-in-hand (p. 211). Succinctly stated, she argued instead that cognition and affect are mutually constituting, inseparable aspects of perspective transformation.

Illeris (2015) has defined transformative learning as learning which implies change in the identity of the learner across all three of the dimensions of any learning: the cognitive, the emotional and the social (p. 46). In his article, he explains that transformative learning cannot be taught. He recommends that the approach of” project studies” is in general the most appropriate way of optimizing the possibilities of transformative learning, especially in higher education (p. 47). He argues that experience shows that the possibility of transformative learning is concentrated in connection with problem formulation, internal evaluation during the investigation phase, and the final internal evaluation and post-evaluation. He posits that teachers and supervisors should realize that their role is not to take responsibility for elements of the project, but rather to assist the group in detecting the underlying individual and social sources of disagreements and problems and to help create an atmosphere in which it is permissible and safe to formulate personal standpoints and to express uncertainty and doubt. Accordingly,
transformation involves a deep fundamental change in one’s perspective. They compared that to transformative experience which focuses on smaller shifts in perspective tied to the learning of particular content ideas. Heddy and Pugh (2015) agree about the import of Transformative Learning (TL) and believe that transformative experiences (TE) may be a way to facilitate “micro changes” in students that as they accumulate can lead to TL outcomes (p. 56). Focusing on the micro changes makes the goal of transformative learning potentially manageable and achievable in almost any course in adult learning (depending on course type and content).

Some courses naturally lend themselves to a higher-level transformative learning such as a capstone course or reflective course that incorporates a higher level of self-reflection. Journaling courses also lend themselves to an accumulation of smaller transformative experiences that can be encapsulated in one final reflection piece. In the end, however, transformative learning may not always be a realistic goal in all courses, particularly in an accelerated format.

**Bloom’s Taxonomy:**

Bloom created a learning taxonomy in 1956 that originally delineated three domains to promote higher level learning (not simply rote memorization). Within the taxonomy, Bloom’s Cognitive Domain identified six major categories in the following in sequential order: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Forehand, 2005, p.
3). In 2001, Anderson and Krathwohl revised the original Bloom’s Taxonomy to include the following new terms: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating (pp. 67-68). Moving toward better-defined and more action-oriented terminology, the goal was to encourage the learner to move from lower level thinking to higher level thinking and learning to demonstrate mastery of content in a concept, course or field or discipline.

Mary Pickard (2007) incorporated the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (RBT) as a tool for professionals when they sought to design, teach, and/or assess education for its utility in their work. Pickard advised that when educators plan how they will assess learning, use of the taxonomy can facilitate the selection of learning activities that will increase the efficacy of their instructional practice. This was demonstrated by Lord and Baviskar (2007), who utilized Bloom’s Taxonomy in science courses to shift students’ concentration on terms and definitions to application and analysis. They recommend achieving that by formulating more questions around the mid and upper levels of Bloom’s taxonomy in their examinations, providing examples and guidance for incorporating questions at each level of the taxonomy. It can also be used to inform instructors of student progress. One unique use of the taxonomy has been that its “levels” of progressive learning allow researchers to measure student achievement (McNeill, 2011). Indeed, McNeil has successfully developed a 12-step evaluation model built on concepts from the taxonomy to assess and demonstrate student progress (Keating, 2015; McNeil, 2011).

While the original Bloom’s taxonomy and its revised version are helpful as a tool to assess students’ levels of learning, they do not reflect a learning theory that will guide the students to those higher levels of learning. They simply indicate if the student has arrived there by assessing where the student is in the sequential order of learning. Nonetheless, although not
actually a theory (but rather a practice model per se), Bloom’s work has produced a conceptual hierarchy that has served as guidance and a means for evaluating student progress and outcomes. When coupled with principles of adult education, the taxonomy can foster and strengthen adult learning (Williams, 2017). One of findings from this case study is that its use by the For Profit University as an “adult learner theory” helped to provide the structure needed for application of the adult learning theories discussed above with an accelerated program format. This is discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

**Formative Evaluation**

Program evaluations essentially seek to judge the “quality of a program” and as such, serve two main purposes: a) to appraise “implementation practices in order to identify ways in which to improve upon program delivery, services, and administration;” or b) to assess “program results” and how well goals and objectives were met (McNeil, 2011, p. 24). Historically, evaluation activities have tended to center almost exclusively on program results; indeed, it was not until the 1960s when costly Great Society programs failed to achieve goals related to better health, education, and decreased poverty that the need to focus on accountability and sustainability surfaced (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998). As noted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (1998), it was during this timeframe that we began to see the categorization of program evaluation studies as being *formative* (i.e., focused on process evaluation) or *summative* (i.e., outcomes based evaluations) in nature.³

³ Because this study does not support an evaluation of outcomes, summative evaluation approaches are not discussed. The reader is directed to the section on limitations and scope of the study in Chapter One.)
Evaluators assessing the impact of educational curricula on students were leaders in defining the parameters of process based formative evaluation. The actual term “formative evaluation” was first coined by Scriven in 1967 to describe an analytic approach that focused on improving educational curriculum and instructional design (Weiss, 1998; Weston, Le Maistre, McAlphine, & Bordonardo, 1997). Scriven identified the goals and roles of evaluation (p. 40). He advised that evaluation answers certain types of questions such as how well does this instrument perform (instrument being defined in education as processes, programs, etc.) and what does the instrument do. Scriven also defines using formative evaluation to field-test a process while it is being developed to offer feedback that is used to produce revisions (p. 43). This research looks to apply the methodologies discussed above to adult learning theory in curriculum development and instructional practices in adult accelerated programs in higher education.

**Maturation of Formative Evaluation as a Methodology:**

Although Scriven (1967) originally spoke to the need for formative evaluation in limited terms as a means for providing feedback during the development stage, the methodology has grown and been greatly enriched by organizational and implementation theory, realist evaluation approaches, and technological advances in logic modeling.

**Organization and Implementation Theory.**

Formative evaluation is currently being used in a way that looks very similar to continuous quality improvement (CQI) type activities that can occur over the life of a project (Weiss, 1998). As indicated by education evaluators Weston and colleagues (1997), formative evaluation has evolved into a productive and reiterative process that can provide feedback to any point of the research design, from development through the final assessment of impact. Indeed,
the definitional characteristics of formative evaluation are that it seeks to clarify how the “intervention” is working and to provide the feedback needed to improve it (Weiss, 1998)—not where in the process it is applied.

The study of implementation is at its core a study in organizational behavior, specifically how do individuals inside an organization learn (as well as unlearn)—and equally important, how does the organization learn (as well as unlearn) as an entity comprised of those individuals (Shea & Taylor, 2017). As argued by Shea and Taylor (2017) in their review of work by Argyris and Schon (1978) and Argyris (1989), organizational learning is “most simply described as a dialectic process of inquiry and adaptation that organizational members engage in to resolved discrepancies between intended and actual outcomes to organizations” (p.84). We can, therefore, see the similarity of concepts proposed by Knowles that learning is a continuum where the individual student (pedagogic learning) matures to the adult student (andragogic learning) (Gilstrap, 2013) to the concepts of organizational theorists such as Argyris and Schon (1978) relating to organizational learning where maturation involves moving from single loop learning to double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978). 4 And we can also move theoretically from “formative assessments” in “discussing a student’s ‘maximum performance’” (Yorke, 2003, p. 478) to “formative evaluation” that increases opportunities for organizational learning on “how to effectively translate knowledge into action” (Shea & Taylor, 2017, p. 85; also see Bennett, 2011). As noted by Sinkula (1994), it is the problem solving exchanges between individuals that then leads to the generation of organizational knowledge—which if to be sustained must be “preserved” in its “institutional memory” as norms, routine tasks, and standards (36).

4 Single and double loop learning is discussed in more detail in the next chapter on methodology.
For purposes of this study, the key point to be made is that to accomplish successful implementation of a desired policy/principle, attention needs to be paid to both the individual and organizational factors that influence decision making and action taking. Specifically, implementation is not accomplished simply by faculty members making explicit their choice to use adult learning theory to guide curriculum development; it also requires ongoing organizational support to attain some level of sustainability of individual actions in meeting that standard. In other words, in an agency setting, full implementation by individual practitioners requires both an explicit “theory of action” and the organization’s provision of concrete standard operating procedures that offer definitional clarity on what a “theory looks like and how it might work in a real setting” (Bennett, 2011, p.8). Complying with these two requisites, Figure 3: Practice framework presented in Chapter One sought to sketch out the basic components of such a theory of action and the forms and organizational traits needed for implementation; Figure 4: Theory of change evaluation framework presented in Chapter 3 will identify the contextual and organizational dynamics that clarify how the practice model should work.

In short, it takes both organization and implementation theory to understand how organizational decision making structures impact the adoption by individual practitioners of identified best practices. Organizational theory points to the “agency costs” of having a significant “delegation span” (i.e., distance between executive and front line decision makers regarding agency policies); implementation theory maps out the inefficiencies that occur as a result of reduced “monitoring, communication, and managerial” oversight (i.e., accountability) of a given policy (Dobrajska, Billinger, & Karim, 2015, p. 688). A good example of this phenomenon is this study’s identification of “decentralization” as a core organizational factor impeding successful implementation of the CAP standard. In this study, a centralized decision
making structure of the organization was found to be a critical factor in the organization’s ability to institutionalize theory driven curriculum and classroom activities. It should be noted, however, that the literature suggests that it is unwise to draw hard and fast conclusions that “centralized” decision making is better than “decentralized.” Ouchi (2006) speaks in his research of decentralized school systems to organizational tradeoffs and agency costs, noting that while centralized control can be seen as generating greater stability because it fosters greater accountability in fewer individuals, decentralized control is seen as generating greater innovation potential because it can respond faster to quickly changing environmental conditions.

Other researchers have indicated that to understand and explain impact we need a better understanding of the machinations of policy and how organizations implement policy. The following is a non-exhaustive list of key factors that research has shown to have influence on the policy process: the type of hierarchical structure and its impact on knowledge transfer and accountability (Mihm, Loch, Wilkinson, & Huberman, 2010; Harris & Raviv, 2002); the impact of leadership and organization context under which “employees function” (Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007, p. 234); presence of “knowledge brokers” as a strategy for promote complex policies (Dobbins, Traynor, Workentine, Yousefi-Noorale, & Yost, 2018, p.1 of 15); understanding the organizational goals at each level of policy implementation and the identification of strategies to address concerns of external actors (Ydesen & Andersen, 2020); the role of organizational culture in determining the importance of evidence based theory (Williams, Glisson, Hemmelgarn, & Green, 2017); etc.
The final point to be made here is that while this study has identified key factors impacting implementation, it is beyond the scope of this study to fully explore how organizational structure fully impacts the ability of the institution to adopt and implement a policy that promotes compliance with theory driven standards. Therefore, it is recognized as a limitation of the study that it cannot assess the impact of market choices by “for profit” versus “not for profit” agencies on policy implementation, or the role that internal culture has on the implementation of practice guidelines. The author has included this as a potential area for future research.

Realist Evaluation.

Critical to formative evaluation is the concept of reiterative and cyclical reviews that allow for reflection on and adjustment of interventions—i.e., they render the “black box” of program and policy implementation more transparent (Kazi, 2003). As noted above, the defining characteristics of formative evaluation are that it seeks through reiterative assessments to clarify how the “intervention” is working and to provide the feedback needed to improve it (Weiss, 1998). The importance of this dynamic cyclical review process has been addressed extensively in the literature by evaluation theorists such as Kazi (2003), Friedman (2003), and Weiss (1998)—as well as by organizational and action research theorists such as Argyris and Schon (1996, 1974).

Committed to improving practice through institutionalizing the self-reflection process, the realist evaluation approach promotes a cyclical review process (i.e., realist effectiveness cycle) that is both dialectical and analytical—in other words, it uses a participatory approach to flesh out why actions and/or interventions work or do not work (Kazi, 2003). As noted by Kazi (2003), the goal is to craft “hypotheses” that provide conceptual answers to: a) what the
program’s interventions are intended to do; b) what and how do contexts influence the application of interventions; and c) what environmental factors enable or disable organizational efforts to successfully implement program interventions (p.29).

For this study, the realist methodology reinforces the need for cyclical feedback loops (discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) and greatly increases our appreciation of the impact contextual factors—defined in this study as the conditions under which strategies/interventions are believed to be effective (Kazi, 2003). It also helps to inform the crafting of logic models that can serve to delineate the “initial hypotheses for tentative relevant contexts, mechanisms and outcomes (CMOs) and CMO configurations of how programmes produce change” (Ebenso, et al., 2019, p. 97). And finally, at the individual practice level, it provides insight into how practitioners, within an agency setting, can use “critical reflection” (i.e., self-reflection) to identify incongruities between the “espoused theory” (i.e., proposed reliance on adult learning theory to craft curriculum) and “theory in use” (i.e., the guiding principles that actually used to “drive their actions”) (Savaya & Gardner, 2012, p. 145). As noted by Argyris and Schon (1974), it is this cyclical reiterative comparative process at the organizational and individual levels that increases our ability to sustain learning and effective strategy development. Harnett (2012) argues in her research that teachers often have little awareness of theory while teaching, relying on routinized strategies and curricula that are most often not disciplined by formal learning theory. She posits, however, that learning institutions can provide the organizational support needed to ensure professional development and the opportunities for greater congruence between espoused and in-use theories of action through creation of an open dialogue and provision of safe spaces for self-reflection on one’s practice.
Logic Modeling.

In general, logic modeling utilizes the terminology of program evaluation as proffered by Weiss (1998) (e.g., inputs, program activities, interim outcomes, long-term outcomes) in mapping out what is supposed to happen (i.e., theory of change). Formative evaluation, however, adds complexity to the logic modeling process that requires a more in depth examination of the impact of context on individual practice choices. To address this added complexity, logic modeling incorporates feedback loops to try and capture the cyclical nature of the self-reflective processes whose purpose is to open up the black box of program and policy implementation (Kazi, 2003).

Use of logic models to elucidate contextual factors has also allowed for greater transparency. In their article on applying realist evaluation principles to logic modeling (LM), Ebenso and associates (2019) delineated five ways in which researchers and evaluators use LM. These include: a) assessing the “feasibility” of a project/program prior to implementation; b) clarifying goals and logic problems; c) monitoring implementation efforts; d) identifying “measures” for evaluation; and e) “knowledge building” and “knowledge transfer” (Ebenso, et al., 2019, p.98). As they go on to observe, these LM functions align with the CMO conceptual framework used by realist evaluators—and as a result, render logic modeling as a potential venue through which to conduct realist evaluations that are formative and process based.

There has been limited use of logic modeling as an evaluation methodology for assessing accelerated programs. Wlodkowski (2003) reported on outcomes for adult learners in the accelerated programs and courses he studied but there is limited evidence that other researchers utilized such an approach. Most research has been descriptive of what occurs in the classroom of accelerated courses but not on the actual student outcomes. This study would greatly increase
our understanding of both the utility of logic modeling and the knowledge it would generate about adult learning in an accelerated program.

**Concluding Comments**

Adult learners participate in higher education at a significant rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and accelerated learning programs are often specifically marketed as being adult-oriented learning opportunities (Commission on Accelerated Programs, 2008). Currently, limited research exists regarding whether accelerated learning programs explicitly or intuitively incorporate adult learning theories or any other learning theories in their curriculum design and/or instructional practices.

This chapter has provided an overview of the research and theory development literature that gives rise to and supports the performance of this study. From a descriptive exploratory perspective, the literature review has suggested that accelerated programs are market responses to a demand for alternative “high quality” educational opportunities for adult learners. From a theoretical, translational research perspective, it has reviewed the key learning theories and assessed that the needs of adult learners requires greater collaborative and participatory models of teaching and instruction. And from an analytic perspective, the review has provided the framework for conducting an assessment of whether the participating institutions actually met the standards espoused by the promoters of accelerated programs and adult learning theorists.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This is a case study that evaluates the policies of four colleges that sponsor accelerated adult learner programs and assesses the degree to which they have successfully implemented the 2011 and 2019 CAP quality guideline that the development of curriculum and instructional practices should incorporate adult learning theory. This chapter provides the analytic framework to accomplish that evaluation.

The study’s methodology uses a blend of formative evaluation strategies (Elmore, 1979-1980; Friedman, 2003; Kazi, 2003; Weiss, 1998) and an evaluation logic model proposed by Friedman (2003) that incorporates a backward mapping perspective (Elmore, 1979-1980) to visualize how individual practices and organizational structural factors impact implementation and goal attainment. These logic models allow for two levels of analyses: a) at the individual agency level in which each college/program is evaluated to determine the “fit” of actual practice to their professed policy on curriculum and instructional practice; and b) at a multi-case level in which the author uses a comparative logic modeling process proposed by Langer and associates (2011) to identify and compare differences between the four colleges.

The chapter begins with the research questions and an overview of the study’s case review approach. It then presents an evaluation approach that incorporates logic modeling as an analytical tool for summarizing and interpreting the data collected through interviews, document reviews, and classroom observations.

Research Questions

In approaching the qualitative study, the author sought to “gain a firsthand, holistic understanding of phenomena…by means of a flexible strategy of problem formulation and data collection” (Fortune & Reid, 1999, p. 94). Like other qualitative studies, changes to the research
questions have occurred as the inquiry and analytical process unfolded. (See Fortune & Reid, 1999, p.94.) Although the study originally started out to identify whether practitioners/instructors utilized adult learning theory in their curriculum, the reiterative process of reviewing data revealed a deeper issue with contextual issues and the implementation of policies related curriculum development. Specifically, the inquiry moved in the direction of an implementation study informed by a realist evaluation approach that asked the question: ‘What works, for whom, in what circumstances…and why?’

At the time of analysis and presentation of findings, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What adult learning theories are being employed within each of the colleges for the development of curricula and instructional practice guidelines?

2. How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the practice principles espoused by the individual colleges?

3. How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the organizational policies, mission statement, curriculum development processes, and educational instructional practices?

4. How has the organization supported or impeded the adoption of adult learning theory in the curriculum and instructional practice processes affecting accelerated adult learning programs?

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5 A quote often used in realist evaluation literature from Pawson and Tilley (1997). See Kazi (2003, p. 7) and Salter and Kothari (2014, online).
Research Design

Qualitative research is an appropriate methodology for studying education innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy. Its strengths are that it produces a rich and holistic account, investigates complex social units, and advances a field’s knowledge base (Merriam, 1998). The case study is a type of qualitative research design that can be defined by its special features in that it is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam 1998). In this context, the focus is on curriculum design and instructional practices in adult accelerated degree programs. This specificity of focus creates a good design for practical problems, including questions or situations arising from everyday practice (Merriam 1998). As noted by Merriam (1998), descriptive means that the end product of a case study is a rich, “thick” description of the phenomenon under study; “thick” means the complete, literal description of the entity being investigated. According to Yin (2003), a case study is preferred when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, the investigator has little control over events, and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (a complex social phenomena).

In choosing a case study design, an important factor involves deciding whether to do a single-case study or a multiple-case study. The benefit of multi-case or multi-site case studies is that the interpretation is more compelling when there is more than one site involved (Merriam, 1998). For this research, a multiple site case study design was employed. This allowed for the conduct of a comparative approach in the analysis section described below.

Case Study Sites:

This study took place at four adult accelerated learning sites over the period of March 2011 through February 2012. Four institutions participated in this study: a community college, a non-profit private college, a non-profit university with multiple locations in multiple states and a for-profit university with multiple locations throughout the United States. These colleges were
selected based on institution type from a master list of programs from the Commission on Accelerated Programs’ website (Commission on Accelerated Programs, 2011).

**Community College.**

Midwest Community College is a public community college in Iowa with an accelerated program that operates independently of any academic department. The accelerated program at Midwest Community College occurs at one physical location near the main campus. The primary academic administrator was interviewed. Five instructional faculty were interviewed and three of them were observed in classroom interactions for about 1.5 hours each at the site.

**Non-Profit College.**

Northern College is a private, non-profit four-year college in upstate New York. There are three separate departments within their accelerated learning program division, which primarily operates independently of the other academic departments of the college (except in the case of curricular control and design). This college is a single campus entity, but their accelerated programs, while housed at the main campus, are facilitated at sites throughout the state. Interviews were conducted with two administrators of one of the departments. Three faculty interviews were conducted, and three classroom interactions were observed. Two of the three classroom instructors were also those interviewed.

**Non-Profit with Multi-Campus Sites.**

Non-Profit University is a multi-campus private, non-profit university with a presence in two states in the Midwest and Southwest. Their accelerated programs operate independently within the campus and independently of one another, although there is some attempt to coordinate efforts and approaches. Three administrators were interviewed; no classroom observations were conducted.
For-Profit College.

For Profit University is a private, for-profit multi-campus university with a national presence. This institution was selected as it represents an institution, with many sites across the United States, which has a centralized approach to curriculum design and faculty training. One curriculum designer, one faculty trainer, three administrators and seven faculty members were interviewed. Two classroom observations were conducted.

Informants:

Once the institutions were identified, the academic administrator for each program was asked for willingness for the institution to participate and then asked for a list of potential faculty and curriculum designers (if they had anyone in that role) to invite. Informants were curriculum designers, academic administrators, faculty trainers, and instructional faculty. These participant roles were selected because they have the most direct role in curriculum development. The study utilized a variant of the “snowball” technique (Yin, 2003) in which interviewees were asked to identify other potentially important informants. Those individuals were then invited to participate in the study as well. Interviews were conducted with the curriculum designers, academic administrators (such as directors of academics and academic deans), and faculty. Interviews were conducted either by phone or in person, and all classroom observations occurred in person.

Curriculum Designers.

Curriculum and instructional designers are individuals whose sole purpose is to design and write curriculum that is utilized by the instructional faculty for these accelerated courses and programs or they are faculty who have been contracted to design the curriculum in addition to serving in a separate faculty role as well. They may also (depending on the program and
institution) develop in class and out of class assignments and assessments. These participants were asked questions related to how they design and develop curriculum and curriculum guides for their accelerated courses. Course specific assignments and projects were also reviewed and analyzed.

**Academic Administrators.**

Academic administrators are those directly responsible for supervision of the curriculum designers and the instructional faculty. They typically are directly involved in hiring, supervising, and training the curriculum designers and the faculty. The research related to this category of informants focused on their influence on curriculum development, instructional practices, documentation, development of training materials, and programs for curriculum designers and faculty.

**Faculty.**

Faculty members included those staff who provide instruction in class and outside of class through online course platforms if appropriate. They are responsible for assessment of student results and course outcomes, and the research directly addressed the classroom faculty instructional practices.

**Data Collection:**

**Interviews.**

Once those participants agreed to take part, some interviews were conducted by phone. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Other participants agreed to be interviewed in person when the researcher went to their site to observe instruction directly. Those in-person interviews were also recorded and then transcribed.

**Documents Collected.**
In their role as practitioners, informants were asked to provide examples from three areas: a) written curriculum; b) instructional practices within the classroom; and c) out-of-class assignments and projects. They provided examples from each curricular area covered under the program. Primary documentation included syllabi, mission statements, goal and objective, course assignments and projects, curriculum development guidelines and training materials, and faculty development training materials. All interview sessions, whether in person or by phone, were recorded and transcribed.

**Classroom Observations.**

In addition to interviews, classroom observations were conducted at 3 of the 4 colleges. The researcher joined the class at the beginning so as not to interrupt. She stayed until a break and then exited also to not cause a disturbance. The researcher noted the physical setting/lay out of the classroom and kept tally of how many times each of the learning theories was exhibited in the classroom interactions.

**Evaluation Through a Formative Lens**

As noted previously, the study employs logic models that articulate not only what the accelerated adult learning program is “expected to achieve” (i.e., integration of adult learning theory into curriculum and institutional practices) but also “how it expects to achieve it” (Weiss, 1998, p. 55). Using a blend of formative evaluation strategies (Elmore, 1979-1980; Friedman, 2003; Kazi, 2003; Weiss, 1998) and an evaluation logic model proposed by Friedman (2003) that

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6 Please refer to the interview questionnaires, supplemental probing questions, and document analyses procedures in Appendices B, C, D, E, and F, for more details regarding what information was gathered from each category of informant.
incorporates backward mapping processes (Elmore, 1979-1980), the author explored how individual practice and organizational structural factors facilitate and/or impede effective implementation efforts to integrate adult learning theory into practice.

Formative Evaluation:

Generally, evaluation activities have tended to adopt a “summative” lens that focuses on the assessment of outcomes—i.e., Did we meet our goal and/or deliverables? It was not until the 1960s, when the costly Great Society programs under the Johnson administration failed to achieve goals related to better health, education, and decreased poverty, that the need to focus on accountability and sustainability surfaced (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998). The term “formative evaluation” was first coined by Scriven in 1967 to describe an evaluation approach that focused on improving educational curriculum and instructional design (Weiss, 1998; Weston, Le Maistre, McAlphine, & Bordonardo, 1997). Although Scriven (1967) spoke to the need for formative reviews as a means for providing feedback during the development stage, the methodology is now used in a way that looks similar to continuous quality improvement type activities that can occur over the life of a project. As noted by Weiss (1998),

…program practitioners and managers modify what they do over time. Change may come about because they learn better strategies through practice, or because of demands from clients, loss of a charismatic director, hiring of staff with different skills, changing community sentiments, rising staff morale, or any of a dozen other shifts. The need for “formative” information continues—that is, information fed back to the program on how to improve the program (p.31).

Also working in the field of education and curriculum development, Weston and colleagues (1997) have posited that formative evaluation is a productive and reiterative process
that can provide feedback to any point of the research design, from development through the final assessment of impact. Indeed, the definitional characteristics of formative evaluation are that it seeks to clarify how the “intervention” is working and to provide the feedback needed to improve it (Weiss, 1998)—not where in the process it is applied. It is important to recognize that the importance of this dynamic cyclical review process has been addressed extensively in the literature by evaluation theorists such as Kazi (2003), Friedman (2003), and Weiss (1998)—as well as by organizational and action research theorists such as Argyris and Schon (1996, 1974).

Although there are nuanced differences in how evaluation and organization theorists define certain concepts, this study employs both perspectives as needed to explain practitioner choices and behaviors.

**Cyclical Review:**

As noted by Mulroy and Lauber (2004), logic modeling has great utility in “conceptualizing the chain of events” that graphically serve as a “road map” that defines the “logic flow from a belief structure to related interventions, to outcomes, and then to goal” (p. 577). As they posit, the methodological tool makes concrete the thoughts and ideas on how the intervention should work in practice (i.e., practice model), how it should be implemented (i.e., theory of implementation), and how to evaluate it (i.e., evaluation design plan).

In general, logic modeling utilizes the terminology of program evaluation as proffered by Weiss (1998) (e.g., inputs, program activities, interim outcomes, long-term outcomes) in mapping out what is supposed to happen (i.e., theory of change). Formative evaluation, however, adds complexity to the logic modeling process that requires a more in depth examination of the impact of context on individual practice choices. To address this added complexity, logic modeling incorporates *feedback loops* to try and capture the cyclical nature of
the self-reflective processes whose purpose is to open up the “black box” of program and policy implementation (Kazi, 2003). In the field of realist evaluation, the intent is to institute a process of ongoing cyclical review and self-reflective practices that seek to increase transparency—i.e., “clear box evaluations” (Kazi, 2003, p.7). Studies like this one that rely on a single methodology (i.e., qualitative) and do not fully track outcomes, Kazi (2003) categorizes as “grey box” studies that cannot address causality but do tend to provide a richer understanding of context and mechanisms of change than summative type evaluations (p.7).

From a logic modeling perspective, formative evaluation requires more than a simple “forward mapping” of technologies such as presented in *Figure 2: Practice Technologies* (see Kazi, 2003; Weiss, 1998; Friedman, 2003). While we can use forward mapping approaches as depicted in Figure 2 to capture what should be done to accomplish a goal, formative evaluation requires us to pivot and look back up the policy implementation process using “backward mapping” cyclical review processes to assess why goals are not being fully met (Elmore, 1979-1980, 1983; Friedman, 2003). More succinctly stated, forward mapping in logic modeling represents a deductively thought out process that offers up a proposed roadmap of how to get from point A to B; backward mapping in logic modeling starts at Point B and asks inductively where did things go wrong along the way (Friedman, 2003; Elmore, 1979-1980; also see Fortune & Reid, 1999). The two combined perspectives offer a “theory of change” format that can serve as a meaningful guide for an evaluation of a given policy/program success during implementation (Weiss, 1998).

As noted previously, a cyclical review is captured through the inclusion of “feedback loops” through which organizations can learn and adjust interventions based on knowledge gained from the reflection process. This need to implement policies as intended (i.e., fidelity) is a
common theme with organizational theorists as well. Argyris and Schon (1974) refer to the idealized model of action as an explicit *espoused theory* that is used to “convey what we do, or what we would others to think we do”—which often contrasts with the implicit *theories in use* that “govern actual behavior and tend to be tacit structures” (Smith, 2013, p. 5 of 26). It is through a comparison of these theories (*espoused vs. in use*) that organizational learning occurs.

As noted by Basten and Haamann (2018) in their literature review on organizational learning and the contributions of Argyris and Schon, feedback loops come in two varieties: single loop learning which uses the feedback process to change “strategies and assumptions;” or, double loop learning that occurs if “defect correction requires adaptation of organizational values and norms” (p. 3). (Also see Argyris and Schon, 1996.) In single loop learning, the effectiveness of the *means* for achieving an end is questioned; in double loop learning, *core redefinitions* of the problem statement and strategic means for accomplishing an end is questioned.

The importance of self-reflective practice and single/double loop learning is that it helps to break the cycle of individualized “improvising” behavior that tends to diminish compliance with evidence based standards (O'Hare, 1987, p. 302)—i.e., self-reflective practice allows for the potential for teachers to “make incremental changes and improvements” bringing their practice more in line with theory driven standards (Harnett, 2012, p. 367). Harnett (2012) posits, however, that for the individual practitioner to accomplish this task, the organization must commit to ongoing professional development to ensure practitioners have a safe space in which to self-reflect and make those changes. Furthermore, the agency needs to establish standards that explicitly define and promote best practice, providing a framework that clarifies expectations/accountability and incentivizes both self-reflection and improved adherence to practice guidelines (Savaya & Gardner, 2012). In summary, the literature suggests that practice
guidelines serve as the “necessary” condition that allows for a successful implementation of a given policy, providing the espoused standards against which to examine individual actions/compliance with best practice. However, to ensure implementation of a best practice requires that organizations meet “sufficiency” conditions that compel agency’s leaders to foster and support a culture of self-reflective practice, clarify expectations and hold staff accountable, and formalize feedback loops that encourage both individual and organizational learning. These conditions are reflected in the implementation logic model presented on the next page.

As a final note on feedback loops, it is not that differences in terminology across researchers, evaluators, and theorists contradict one another; indeed, the underlying theoretical concepts taken by these groups are most often complementary. But in program evaluation, we address “compliance” of practice to the formal “theory of change” (Weiss, 1998, p.67); while in organizational behavior, we talk of “congruence” and “fit” of actual practice (i.e., theory in use) to what is thought to be the guiding model and norms (i.e., espoused theory) (Smith, 2013, p.6 of 26). Fundamentally the same concept but addressing different aspects of the analysis. All are used in this study when relevant.

Logic Modeling Template and Analysis

For purposes of this research study, the author has chosen a framework proposed by R. Friedman (2003) to guide the analysis. His “backward mapping” template has been modified to reflect the practice technologies and variables as delineated in Chapter 1, Figure 2: Practice technologies and Figure 3: Practice framework. It is presented below as Figure 4: Theory of change evaluation framework on the next page.
Collaboration & Active Endorsement of Adult Learning Theory as Practice Principles:

The model begins with three primary contextual considerations: a) economic factors, defined as the importance of adult learners to the program and organization; b) organizational factors, defined as the emphasis placed on collaboration and the degree to which the organization holds its members accountable; and c) practice norm factors, defined as the centrality of adult learning theory in the organizational culture. These contextual factors determine the saliency of the issue for the college.

Problem Identification:

In turn, the saliency of the issue will determine if the organization recognizes this as a “problem” in need of action. If contextual factors fail to engender sufficient saliency, the implementation process is truncated.
Figure 4: Theory of change evaluation framework

Economic Context: Importance of Adult Learners to Organization

Organizational Context: Collaboration/Flow of Accountability

Practice Norms & Rules: Centrality of Theory in Practice

Problem Identification: Organizational Awareness

Policy & Protocol Development: Adoption & Integration of Adult Learning Theory

Policy Implementation: Organizational Culture & Support

Interim Outcome: Incorporation of Adult Learning Theory in Curriculum

Long-Term Outcome: Positive Adult Student Outcomes

Feedback Loops: Revision of Problem Statement and/or Underlying Values, Norms, & Assumptions

No Action Taken: Not Recognized as a Problem in Implementation

Feedback Loops: Evaluation/Revision of Protocols/Practice

Future Research

Practice Culture of Those Involved in Curriculum Development:
- Practitioner/Practitioner Type
- Training/Competency Level
- Explicit (vs. Implicit)
- Acknowledgement of Need for Fidelity to Protocol Principles
- Accountability

Process Factors:
- Role of Leadership
- Strength of Fidelity/Compliance Evaluation Efforts
- Administrative Structure (Decentralized vs. Centralized) for Oversight
- Accountability

Modified Version of Friedman (2003)

Figure 2: Overall guiding framework for developing and implementing effective policy
Protocol Development—The Integration and Institutionalization of Adult Learning Theory

Principles:

Formalized organizational policies establish the framework for implementation and the degree to which the practice principles “institutionalize” the adoption of adult learning theory through hardwiring of the principles in documentation, mission statement, etc. Process factors that are considered as key in assuring successful integration and institutionalization include: a) stated endorsement in policy, mission statements, and forms; b) clarity of guidelines relating to adoption of adult learning theory; and c) explicitly stated awareness in written format linking adult learning theory to positive student outcomes.

Implementation—Organizational Commitment and Support:

The degree to which the higher education institution supports adherence to those policies directly impacts whether the short-term goal of the incorporation of adult learning theory in curriculum is achieved. Implementation factors include practice culture and organizational structural variables. Practice cultural variables related to implementation include: a) training and competency levels in adult learning theory; b) practitioner endorsement of adult learning theory, either explicitly or implicitly; c) and self-assessment of whether they feel accountability for the use of adult learning theory in the development of curriculum and instructional practices. Organizational structural variables include: a) the strength of the role of leadership; b) the emphasis placed on fidelity and compliance to standards; c) the administrative structure and how centralized vs. decentralized accountability impacts oversight and compliance.
Short-Term Goal—Incorporation of Adult Learning in Curriculum:

Achievement of this goal will be documented by the inclusion of adult learning theory in curriculum and instructional guidelines/practice.

Long-Term Goal—Increased Positive Adult Student Outcomes:

Although the long-term goal of increasing positive educational outcomes for adult learners is included in the model, it is recognized that the data will not support analysis of this goal.

Feedback Loop:

As noted previously, feedback loops serve as cyclical reviews at each of the core decision steps that comprise a theory of change. As indicated in the model proposed by Friedman (2003), the intent of backwards mapping and feedback loops is two-fold: a) to root out reasons for not meeting the goal and address them; or b) to achieve efficiencies and/or improve the efficacy of the processes put in place to achieve that goal. Succinctly stated, feedback loops provide the means for assessing “the extent to which the policy was implemented as intended” and whether the theory of change is “valid and clearly stated” (p.17). In essence, they drive the evaluation and knowledge generation process.

Use of Logic Model Template for Analysis:

This is a qualitative case study that will use “comparative logic modeling” to evaluate how the four participating colleges incorporated adult learning theory into their curriculum and instructional practices for their accelerated adult learning programs. Comparative logic modeling utilizes a series of logic models to assess the structural soundness of organizational policies across agencies (Langer, Gifford, & Chan, 2011). In this case study, models will be
developed and compared at two levels: a) comparison of each college’s logic flow to the assumed theory of change model proposed in Figure 4 to assess for fit; and b) comparison on each stage of the implementation process across the four colleges to determine congruence between the institutions in the development and implementation of policies related to theory informed curriculum. In keeping with formative evaluation efforts, the intent is to provide insight into the curriculum and instructional practices of the four participating colleges and how to improve those processes.

Case Study Limitations:

A qualitative approach can be from an emic perspective (understanding of phenomenon from an insider, participant’s perspective instead of a researcher’s) or etic perspective (understand phenomenon from an outsider’s perspective) (Merriam 1998). Each has strengths and challenges.

For this research project the approach was emic. The motivation for this research project was driven by the desire of the author to better understand her role as a campus administrator in an adult accelerated program located at a private non-profit college but run by an external organization that provided the academic and admissions support necessary to facilitate the program. The focus of the study arose as a result of the noticed tension between the faculty in the traditional main campus departments and the faculty in the accelerated program. This prompted the author to begin her research into the quality of the academic experiences of the accelerated program. There was a natural gravitation toward the study of quality as a result of the college being a member of the Commission of Accelerated Programs (CAP) and subscribing to the Best Practice Guidelines and standards.
The research launched while the author worked at one of the four institutions in the study. What she had come to realize was that the programs were being taught by faculty who are equally academically qualified as tradition faculty but who often were hired for their industry experience. The author recognizes that her personal commitment to accelerated programs and her research into their practices and successes may reflect an initial inherent bias and belief that she expected all faculty and administrators to have been as knowledgeable and committed to Best Practice Standards based on research as she was.

It is acknowledged that as a campus administrator within adult accelerated degree programs, the author may need to address some inherent biases. While the author is not a faulty member or curriculum designer, she does work closely with individuals who are in those roles. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; it usually involves field work; primarily employs an inductive research strategy whereby the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories; and produces a richly descriptive product (Merriam 1998). Bias, therefore, is possible. To assist with objectivity, the author utilizes logic modeling as the primary means for interpreting and summarizing data.

Other limitations to the case study approach include: time, money, the possibility of finding too much detail to be practical, the skill of the researcher, reliability, validity, and generalizability (Merriam, 1998). According to Yin (2003), the concerns regarding case study research include: lack of rigor (inexperienced or sloppy researcher – biased views may influence the direction of the findings and conclusions), little basis for scientific generalization (can be generalized to theoretical propositions, not to populations), and they may take too long and result in massive, unreadable documents. Once again, the rigor that logic modeling provides for a standardization helps to address these issues.
Chapter Four: Findings

This is a case study that examined four institutions of higher education in New York to assess how well they have done at implementing a quality standard established by the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) in 2011 and 2019 that accelerated adult programs should incorporate adult learning theory within their curricula and instructional practices. To accomplish this task, the author conducted two related but separate analyses. The first analysis consisted of organizational case reviews to determine if the key factorial components delineated in Figure 3: Practice framework were: a) explicitly endorsed and present; b) implicitly present but not formally endorsed; or c) not present at all. In logic terms, this part of the study sought to determine the capacity of the organization to “Do X” (from the equation: Do X in order to achieve Y). As will be shown below in the analysis, only the For Profit University demonstrated sufficient capacity by meeting all factorial requirements delineated in Figure 3: practice framework presented in Chapter One. More specifically, For Profit University was the only participating institution which demonstrated the capacity to “do X” as evidenced in their explicit endorsement of adult learning theory, use of documentation and training to institutionalize adult learning theory in practice, and the provision of sustainable organizational support. For the remaining schools, the author found little evidence of explicit endorsement of adult learning theory and no systemic use of documentation and training to institutionalize adult learning theory in practice or the provision of sustainable organizational support.

Findings for the first analysis are broken down into two parts: a) a narrative case review that provides contextual details; and b) a graphic presentation of findings for each college/university using a modified version of Figure 3: Practice framework that illustrates that
specific organization’s capacity level to integrate adult learning theory in its curriculum development and classroom instructional practices.

The second analysis further explores the concept of implementation, employing realist and formative evaluation methodologies to assess why each college/university succeeded or failed to fully realize the quality standard proposed by the Commission on Accelerated Programs in 2011 and 2019 that adult learning principles be incorporated into practice. The realist methodology adds to our discussion of evaluation the concept of contextual factors—defined in this study as the conditions under which strategies/interventions are believed to be effective (Kazi, 2003). In analytic terms, we seek to understand A, B, C in the equation If you want to achieve Y, under conditions of A, B, C, then do X. Formative evaluation then takes us one step further in its introduction of the dynamics of feedback loops, backward mapping, theory of change, and self-reflection in practice that allow us to examine the interplay between contextual factors, interventions, and outcomes (Friedman, 2003; Kazi, 2003; Weiss, 1998). Findings presented in this section of the chapter are primarily demonstrated through: a) the construction of modified version of Figure 4: Theory of change evaluation framework that incorporates standards that emerged from the case review of the For Profit University (the only institution that had a full implementation plan); and b) a cross-institutional comparative analysis in which findings are presented in table format (see Langer, Gifford, & Chan, 2011). The logic model and table are introduced in at the beginning of the second analysis.

7 For purposes of consistency between work done by Fortune & Reid (1999) and Lawson (2004), the author has chosen to have X represent interventions and Y to represent outcomes. Lawson’s specific quote was “if you want to achieve x, under conditions of a, b, and c, then do y” (p.226).
Analysis One: Case Review Findings

Although most practitioners (be they educators or human service providers) tend to equate practice models to evidence based practices (EBPs), conceptually they serve a much broader purpose. In essence, they operate as the overarching framework within which to conduct the business of education, providing the goals and actions that are believed will “bring about what we want to happen” (Fortune & Reid, 1999, p.23). To refresh memory, a practice model is defined in this study as “the basic principles and approaches that guide an agency’s work. The principles are descriptive enough to suggest the performance required to practice consistently” and to “address organizational issues such as agency leadership, management, supervision and relationships with the community” (McCarthy, 2012, p. 2). Well defined practice models, therefore, are critical to the successful implementation of a program and goal attainment.

The case reviews presented below offer insight into the practice frameworks being used by each of the institutions as they address adult learners in their accelerated adult programs. The case review process sought to answer two primary questions:

- Did the college/university adequately perform the actions underlying the identified actions (technologies) leading to goal attainment (i.e., incorporation of adult theory in practice)?
- What factors are found to be critical—meaning what factors if not present appear to inhibit the organization’s capacity to successfully implement the actions needed to achieve the goal of adult theory integration into practice?
To answer these questions, the case review process utilizes the action/technologies identified in Figure 2: Practice technology (Do X to achieve Y) to evaluate the organizational response. Specifically, actions used to organize findings include: Action #1-Adoption of Adult Learning Theory; Action #2-Integration and Institutionalization of Adult Learning Theory; and Action #3-Organizational Implementation: Resources and Leadership. (To assist the reader, Figure 2 is presented below.) Each case review then ends with a graphic presentation that summarizes information gleaned from the interviews and observations; these models indicate the degree to which these three actions/technologies have been implemented by the organization.

![Figure 2: Practice technology (Do X to achieve Y)](image)

Case Review: Midwest Community College

Midwest Community College’s accelerated program began in 1997 as a joint venture that included Midwest and a neighboring private not-for-profit college. The two institutions entered into the joint program whereby they would both run accelerated courses for adult learners, with a plan that would allow adult learners to complete their first two years at the accelerated program at Midwest and then transfer to the upper level college to finalize their bachelor’s degree. The joint decision was to offer all courses in an accelerated and similar format so that the transition would be seamless for the students.
The accelerated program is housed at its own site that is located off the main campus. The entire program operates independently except for the courses and curriculum, which are overseen by the respective academic departments of Midwest Community College. There is one primary administrator who operates from the off-campus location. The courses that Midwest primarily offers are general education (courses that they know the partner college will accept as transfer credits) and business courses to fulfill an associate degree.

**Action #1: Adoption of Adult Learning Theory as a Practice Principle**

The academic administrators at Midwest Community College indicated that when their program launched, there was a more intentional incorporation of adult learning theory than is the current state. One reported that there is an implicit application of experiential and collaborative learning theories; however, she was not confident that self-directed learning theory is consistently utilized. She also indicated that she believes transformational was being utilized infrequently.

One of the Midwest Community College faculty members interviewed was among the first faculty members to be involved in the launch of the joint venture of accelerated learning programs between Midwest Community College and their partner college. He participated in the initial training and course development and is a full-time faculty member at Midwest Community College. When asked about the acknowledgement of adult learning theories or other learning theories, he did not state explicitly that he incorporated any particular theories. This faculty member did discuss the use of a number of group assignments outside of class and collaborative learning within class. Additionally, he appeared to incorporate experiential learning:
The adults think about work, the experience at work, and then they try to relate it to what we discuss in class. And they find that they are using this concept at work.

This faculty member’s syllabus was very detailed week-by-week, providing a detailed breakdown of all readings, assignments, assessments, and objectives for each class session.

At Midwest Community College, the faculty also exhibited an implicit acknowledgement of adult learning theories best identified through the use of probing questions. One faculty member, for instance, posited that he preferred an interactive classroom with group discussions. In his classes, he either acknowledges or incorporates collaborative learning by assigning group projects. Regarding self-directed learning, this faculty member said: “With the adults, I try to give them free reign. So I tell them if you want to do this based on your workplace, that’s fine.” He stated he does not incorporate transformational learning in most of his classes with the exception of his capstone class. “As a general rule, I don’t think I do that. I do in one of my classes because it’s a capstone and we tend to reflect on more than just the class, but on everything.” This was a theme echoed by other faculty as well.

Another faculty member who was interviewed is a full-time administrator for the accelerated program at Midwest Community College and is also an adjunct faculty member who taught Principles of Management. When asked directly if she acknowledges any adult learning or other learning theories or strategies, she was unsure. Upon further probing, it turned out that she does. For instance, it was found that she relies upon collaborative learning in her class. This faculty member assigns students a group project that they must work on outside of class. She also incorporates experiential learning by allowing them to use their current place of employment as the reference point for their group project: “We become a community of learners.
All of us. Not just the students.” She noted that they also use experiential learning in class discussions and collaborative learning in their in-class team projects.

When one adjunct faculty was asked about the use of any type of learning theories in her class, she indicated that she comes from a feminist pedagogy. Then she elaborated on the way she incorporates adult learning theories without identifying them specifically. According to this faculty member, in the first class they discuss, “What does it mean to establish community and have respect?” She tells the students that she prefers “lots of small group work, lots of circle discussion,” stating she is “much more attuned to the collaborative learning.” Additionally, she requires that they do a group project. She incorporates a great deal of free-writing in her class, and they write a narrative of their class experience growing up. This acknowledges transformational learning.

In another interview, an adjunct faculty member replied when asked about adult learning theories replied that “I think philosophy courses work very well with adult education courses—particularly well, in that philosophy courses are best done as discussion-based courses as opposed to a lecture-based course.” This faculty member does not allow for self-directed learning in his class due to the large number of assigned readings, but he tries to select readings that reflect the interests of the students. When asked about collaborative learning opportunities, he reflected that he had used them in the past but has gotten away from that, preferring that the whole class work as a group: “I try to get the whole class to be a group exercise, and then I feel okay with not having class groups do a whole lot.” He also does not assign any out-of-class group activities.
Summary of Findings.

Findings indicate at the aggregate level Midwest Community College failed to actively and consistently endorse any well-defined adult learning theoretical framework in curriculum development. However, there was some evidence found that suggested the importance of theory was recognized and that experiential, collaborative, and/or transformational theory was being incorporated in syllabi and classroom activities by several educators.

Action #2: Integration and Institutionalization of Adult Learning Theory

When Midwest and the neighboring college entered the joint venture, administrators were very supportive of launching the accelerated program, with those involved committed to implementing the program with fidelity to known best practices related to adult learning. There were training sessions on how to apply adult learning theories and strategies in the classroom. In addition, there were curriculum development workshops on how to develop and conduct “adult-friendly accelerated” programs. In these workshops, faculty learned not only how to adapt the syllabus of their courses to incorporate adult learning theories and strategies but also how to effectively shorten the traditional courses from the normal fifteen/sixteen weeks to the approximate 8 week timeframe of an accelerated program. The administrators of the two institutions described this initiative:

It is about adults and the way they learn. We do look a lot at the fact that we have very experienced people (students) that have a lot of life lessons and knowledge out there that makes it much easier for them to adapt to the new learning. So making those connections is the big thing.

Institutional leaders continue to espouse this commitment. According to the key administrator of the program at Midwest Community College, “We look at making the learning experience
practical and applicable.” As noted in the interviews and described below, however, the original commitment has faded over time.

**Training.**

When the decision was first made to enter into a joint venture between Midwest Community College and a neighboring private not-for-profit college, there were plans to offer accelerated courses at both campuses and to streamline the transfer process of adult learners between the two campuses. According to the academic administrator and one of the founding faculty members, experts were brought in and both faculty and administrators from both campuses traveled to visit an adult accelerated program at Regis University in Denver, Colorado, that had been successfully implemented.

The campus administration at that time was very supportive of launching the accelerated program, and those involved were committed to implementing the program with fidelity to known best practices related to adult learning. There were training sessions on how to apply adult learning theories and strategies in the classroom. In addition, there were curriculum development workshops in which faculty learned not only how to adapt the syllabus of their courses to incorporate adult learning theories and strategies but also how to effectively shorten the traditional courses from the normal fifteen/sixteen weeks to the approximate 8 week timeframe of an accelerated program.

At the time of the interviews, Midwest Community College no longer offered specific faculty training to ensure the faculty members know and apply adult learning theories or other learning theories or strategies. When a new faculty member is hired, the primary academic administrator meets with them to help acclimate them to the accelerated learning environment. Additionally, the program director reviews all student feedback and determines if there is a
faculty member who needs additional support or guidance. This process is fairly informal and does not appear to be based on fidelity to an adult learning theory framework. According to the program director:

I always meet with them beforehand and talk with them about their experience, what the adult student is like and what their experience is with that. I also do an evaluation of their classroom with them and sit down with them after that’s over with and talk about what I’ve seen and give them some ideas of other things they might want to try with that particular group of students.

**Syllabi.**

At Midwest Community College, one of the syllabi reviewed simply acknowledged a group project/presentation whereby the students work in a group to complete a marketing plan and then present that plan to the rest of the class. A second syllabus from Midwest Community College specified the expectation of study groups that are organized in week 1, and that students would work together on in-class group assignments and projects. It stated:

Each week in class, you will be required to work together in groups to solve problems or to discuss issues or questions relating to the text material.

Additionally, within the same syllabus, there was a major assignment that is a group project and final presentation. There is also a week-by-week breakdown of class activities which included a weekly facilitator-led discussion followed by small group discussions or problem-solving. The group projects for this class are presented in the final class.

Another syllabus reviewed described a typical class session as follows:
We will generally have an hour or better of discussion prompted by student responses on the week’s reading, an hour of viewing and/or in-class small group work or exercises, a short lecture, and a half hour for in-class paperwork time.

This approach reflected the use of a collaborative approach to learning via small group work. This same syllabus also set the expectation for reflective response papers: “Here you are free to report on your emotional reactions to the piece and/or to apply the piece to your life,” which is an effort to provide transformational learning opportunities. The final acknowledgment of adult learning theories in this syllabus was in the major group exercise which they work on throughout the course in a small group format, which is another example of a collaborative learning strategy.

A fourth syllabus from Midwest Community College acknowledged adult learning theories or strategies implicitly. For instance, there was an assignment followed by in-class discussion that provided transformational learning opportunities. The students were to “complete a ‘Strengths Finder assessment’ and bring the Strengths Finder report and Action Planning guide to class for discussion.” The students then were allowed to elaborate on what they have learned about themselves and how they are acting on that knowledge. Additionally, throughout the course, students completed experiential exercises. They were asked to submit an outline for personal and professional growth.

The outline for personal and professional growth is a way for you to reflect on the management concepts learned in the class in relation to how they can add value to your personal and professional growth.

Discussions were required to refer to the readings and also work experiences which is a demonstration of experiential learning. Also, “postings must demonstrate reflection on the assigned reading and synthesis of the material with one’s previous knowledge and experience.”
A final example of collaborative learning in this syllabus related to the Approaches to Management Team Activity, which was a team project that groups developed and presented in the last class.

Some faculty, however, specifically indicated that they did not incorporate a group or team project in their class, which was also reflected in their syllabi. Nor was there an acknowledgement of adult learning theories or other learning theories or strategies in their syllabi.

**Classroom Practice Norms.**

In one class at Midwest Community College, the author did observe end-of-class group project presentations. This faculty member indicated that he incorporates a lot of group work and an interactive classroom. For two classrooms, the presentations were delivered in a classroom set up in a traditional format of rows where each student was facing forward, but each group presented as a group. In another class at Midwest Community College, the students were not sitting in rows; rather, they were each seated in front of a computer and had their backs to their classmates and faced their professor sideways. However, this faculty member also indicated that he preferred an interactive classroom with collaborative activities. The one exception to a traditional approach was a single class facilitated by a faculty member who claimed to rely heavily on a collaborative approach; her students were arranged in groups instead of in rows and were able to interact with one another during class time.

**Summary of Findings.**

There was minimal evidence that individual educators used theory to inform their practice. Certainly there was no evidence that the use of adult learning theory was
institutionalized in policy, mission statement, or training materials. Although syllabi did incorporate some collaborative activities, nearly all classes followed traditional practice norms.

**Action #3: Organizational Implementation—Resources and Leadership:**

**Commitment Levels.**

When Midwest Community College and the neighboring college first launched this initiative, there was a strong commitment to using adult learning theory. They brought in trainers to help them develop “adult-friendly accelerated” programs. It is noteworthy that institutional leaders continue to espouse their commitment. According to the key administrator of the program at Midwest Community College, “We look at making the learning experience practical and applicable.” The administrators of the two institutions described this initiative:

> It is about adults and the way they learn. We do look a lot at the fact that we have very experienced people (students) that have a lot of life lessons and knowledge out there that makes it much easier for them to adapt to the new learning. So making those connections is the big thing.

**Decentralization.**

Despite the verbal commitment, however, the interviews examining the organizational practice norms suggest that the initial focus has faded over time. Although the accelerated program was successfully launched, it soon became evident that adherence to theoretical principles would be compromised because individual departments retained authority over the curriculum for their courses. Overtime, the original courses that incorporated adult learning theory have been revised to reflect the expectations and practices used by the individual departments for their traditional courses. According to the program director, there is now little difference between the two types of curricula—with accelerated courses utilizing the
department’s standard syllabus used in traditional courses. The exception to this is for those courses that have not been revised since the development of the original course materials.

One of the academic administrators at Midwest Community College indicated that she does not control or have the authority to modify or revise any of the course curricula within her accelerated program. If she or any other faculty members believe something needs to be revised, they follow the protocol of notifying the academic department to which the course belongs and requesting the change. The types of changes do not typically involve making the course more “adult learner friendly.” For instance, they do not request incorporating more adult learning theories and strategies to the course(s). The administrator interviewed indicated:

We have full-time faculty who write and revise curriculum, and they are located on the main campus. They are primarily in the English and business departments. We do the collection of feedback on the syllabus that they pay faculty to create. We can tweak the assignments a little; we don’t develop any new courses. What we basically do is adapt them from a traditional length to an accelerated.

There is no focus on infusing any adult learning theories or strategies, or other learning theories when developing these new courses at this campus.

**Sustainability and Resources.**

Since the inception of the accelerated program, there has not been a continued focus on the model of adult learning for the Midwest Community College accelerated program. According to the program director at Midwest Community College:

Over the years, that constant attention to adult learning theories and strategies has not been at the forefront and the administration has not had the time or resources to provide
the training and coaching necessary to ensure that all faculty have that same strong adult-focused underpinning.

She is in the best position to make this assessment as she is responsible for faculty training and development. The Midwest Community College program does not have any assigned full-time faculty and it relies heavily on adjunct faculty and the occasional main-campus, full-time faculty member to teach their accelerated courses. Although the program director does teach a course to all first-time accelerated adult learners entering her program, she does not offer a similar course to her faculty. This is a missed opportunity in two ways. First, it would be helpful to address how best to facilitate learning with adult learners in the accelerated classroom. Secondly, this would be a great way to ensure that the expectations of the students as defined and described in this course were also shared with the faculty to hopefully provide for alignment of the two groups. In the course she teaches,

We do stuff on learning—adult learning theories, and orientations to learning, and we have students do the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Typology Index), and just research on how an adult learner is different from a traditional learner.

The students are exposed to these theories and approaches in a formalized and structured way, and the program director incorporates many adult learning theories and strategies for her students.

**Summary of Findings.**

The core factor that appears to be driving the lack of focus on adopting and integrating adult learning theory appears to be the decentralized nature of curriculum development, resulting in individual programs collapsing their traditional curriculum into a shortened timeframe for the accelerated programs. This is despite the active endorsement and commitment by administrators
of adult learning principles when the programs were established. The lack of authority to oversee curriculum development has resulted in a dissipation of commitment by both administrators and program staff; the lack of resources for training or fidelity monitoring has resulted in a lack of sustainability.

**Final Comments—Fit with Adult Learning Practice Framework**

As documented in *Figure 5: Midwest Community College practice framework* on the next page, there appeared to be no *explicit* endorsement of adult learning theory by those with control over curriculum development. Although there was some evidence that faculty were using experiential, collaborative, and transformational practice strategies, it did not appear to be driven by a commitment to adult learning theory. Integration of the adult learning theory into curriculum and instructional practices was also random in nature, with collaborative techniques often included in syllabi and/or classroom activities but not in a systematic fashion that would result in ongoing institutionalization of adult learning practice principles. No policy or training materials were identified that would serve to help institutionalize these principles into practice. And finally, there appeared to be no organizational support that would help to ensure fidelity to adult learning principles. Indeed, a primary factor for this lack of consistent endorsement and application of principles appeared to be driven by the decentralized nature of organizational decision making, a waning commitment to adult learning principles, and a lack of focus and oversight by administrators on program curriculum development processes and content.
Case Review: Non-Profit University

Non Profit University has main campuses in the Midwest and the Southwest regions of the United States. Their accelerated program began in 1987 and was originally housed within its
own department called the School of Adult Education. However in 2009, the adult accelerated program was decentralized, with courses and curriculum being administered through the various academic departments at the university. According to the vice president,

So, what's happened since 2009 is the responsibility for designing accelerated adult curriculum has been given to people who have no knowledge of it, either theoretical or practical. This transformation occurred at both locations—in the Midwest and the Southwest campuses. The academic control went to the academic departments and the operational control went to the center deans at the off-site locations where the adult courses typically are taught.

Now currently, most of the instruction at Non Profit University in their accelerated courses is delivered by adjunct faculty, with the occasional full-time faculty member from one of the traditional programs teaching as well.

**Action #1: Adoption of Adult Learning Theory as a Practice Principle**

Two of the interviewed faculty members in the accelerated adult program were there prior to the reorganization. They referenced specific adult learning theories and theorists and provided examples of how they incorporated those theories into their classes at that time. Specifically, one of the faculty members referred to Kolb’s theory:

I would say that I try to specifically use Kolb’s theory of experience where you would go through a cycle of things to do with that experience. You know, to have an experience, to reflect on it.

She also stated that she relies on collaborative learning in her classrooms, stating: “So, I would really want them to be able to move around, even just picking up the chairs and moving around
so that you're in groups.” She gave the impression that incorporating various approaches (other than lecture) is effective with adult learners.

The remaining Non Profit University faculty member referred to the importance of incorporating experiential learning and collaborative learning into the classroom: “We like for them to collaborate on projects. Every syllabus, for example, has some activities with that kind of approach.” She went on to acknowledgement that self-directed learning was not employed extensively due to the short class time frame. She reported that there were also limited opportunities for the adult learners to utilize transformational learning in their classes due to the same issue.

There was one academic administrator/faculty member of the former school of adult education at Non Profit University who writes the curriculum for one of the departments. She stated that she continues to acknowledge adult learning theories and strategies when designing courses that will be taught in an accelerated format to adult learners.

Summary of Findings.

Faculty and administrators that were interviewed appeared knowledgeable about adult learning theory and acknowledged their intent to incorporate experiential and collaborative learning activities, even providing examples of how they used both experiential and collaborative strategies in engaging adult learner. The decreased focus on self-directed and transformational learning approaches was attributed to the lack of fit of these approaches to the accelerated timeframe used in these programs.
Action #2: Integration and Institutionalization of Adult Learning Theory

Syllabi and Outside Classroom Norms.

Interviewees indicated they often incorporate group projects or assignments that require students to work together outside of class. This collaborative based pedagogy is also reflected in their course syllabi. Interactive/team assignments are included within the syllabi as an important component of course management and for one class, in a week-by-week breakdown that permitted two weeks for group presentations. As noted by one of the center deans at Non Profit University, “all of our classes have a team project that's incorporated into the curriculum.” For example, some syllabi were found to require a group be given a case study to be reviewed and analyzed as a group and then the analysis be shared with the entire class. This choice was proffered as a commitment across the curriculum for addressing collaborative learning.

When queried, however, the academic administrators at Non Profit University indicated that in practice no special attention was paid by faculty to converting these courses from a traditional format to an accelerated format—or to incorporate adult learning theory in either the curriculum or educational practices. Indeed, the traditional faculty of the academic departments simply increased the weekly student workload to cover all of the required material more quickly without consideration of the population they were working with. One of the center deans at Non Profit University explained: “It's the calendar that's different. But in most cases, the learning outcomes are the same, and the textbook is the same. But the calendar is just adjusted.” The vice president of academic operations of Non Profit University indicated that:

What’s happened since 2009 is the responsibility for designing accelerated adult curriculum has been given to people who have no knowledge of it, either theoretical or practical.
Instead of giving specific thought, therefore, to how to revise a course and curriculum to accommodate an accelerated pace for adults, the courses and requirements are simply being compressed. Indeed, the only explicit endorsement noted in a syllabus was an instance where a catalog description of the course was included that reflected experiential learning: “the course is intended to require participants to integrate knowledge gained from school, work and life” (Non Profit University Syllabus).

According to a vice president:

... so what we are seeing now is a kind of a throwback to the mind-set where you, okay, well it's a six week class and here's a semester course, let's just shrink this. Or let's just compress it. So, we're reading eight hundred pages of this book and we've got twenty papers, okay, now we'll have to do, instead of two papers a week, now we'll have to do eight papers a week or whatever. We've lost our sense of the theoretical underpinnings of adult education.

Training.

One of the center deans of Non Profit University explained that the faculty in all of the centers that offer accelerated courses report to the center dean. It is up to each center dean to train and supervise their faculty. To accomplish this, there are two in-service trainings for faculty per year. However, there has not been a focus on adult learning theories or other theories in teaching adult accelerated courses at these in-service sessions. The topics for the agenda are shared across all centers and are usually selected based on areas of interest. The two most recent topics of interest covered were the use of the Blackboard course platform and plagiarism.

In addition to these two in-service trainings, when a new faculty member is hired at Non Profit University, there is often a one-on-one meeting with a center dean. However, there is no
handbook or guide to provide knowledge on adult learning theories or any other type of learning theory. According to this center dean,

…we [center deans] take them from where they are, and if they’re unfamiliar with the adult learning theory, try to hit on that a little bit and talk to them about the differences between teaching youngsters and teaching mature adults.

While the academic administrators at Non Profit University discussed the importance of acknowledging adult learning theories or strategies in their classrooms, they admitted that despite their administrative oversight of the faculty, they do not have any kind of training to teach faculty how to incorporate these theories or strategies in their classrooms. The vice president for academic operations shared that since the dissolution of the adult accelerated program, there has not been an emphasis on ensuring that faculty know and practice adult learning theories or strategies. He states, “as a university, we’ve lost our sense of the theoretical underpinnings of adult education.” A second center dean of Non Profit University shared responses similar to the first center dean. When the author asked her about her time spent observing her faculty in the classrooms, she responded,

I would like them to use some of the adult models that are out there, and that is using the experiences, or life experiences, that these students have into the classroom to create a facilitator type of environment, rather than just traditional lectures.

**Summary of Findings.**

Instructor claims that some adult learner based activities do occur was evidenced by inclusion of such activities in the syllabi. However, the primary focus has appeared to be on taking the traditional curriculum and compacting activities to accommodate a shortened timeframe for the accelerated programs—not only compliance to adult learner principles. There
has been no systematic standardization of how to apply principles found in policy, mission statement, or training materials.

**Action #3: Organizational Implementation—Resources and Leadership**

Historically, the accelerated program administrators have had control over their courses (regardless of academic discipline or department) and were able to infuse adult learning theories and strategies. This ended when the university made a strategic move in 2009 to “mainstream” their adult education and adult learners into their corresponding academic departments. As a result of the decentralization process, Non Profit University deans and administrators posited during their interviews that they currently have very little influence or control over the curriculum of their accelerated courses. One dean reported that her only sphere of influence was within operations (scheduling, room assignments, faculty assignments, and so on) and oversight of the faculty within her accelerated courses. The vice president for academic operations reported no longer having direct involvement or oversight of curriculum design—or even the immediate oversight of instructional faculty. If faculty members have suggestions, they must send them to the academic department for consideration. When a center dean was asked if the curriculum is different in the accelerated courses than the non-accelerated format, she replied “no.” According to this center dean, “the learning outcomes are exactly the same. It’s the calendar that’s different.”

**Final Comments—Fit with Adult Learning Practice Framework**

Although originally there was focus adult learning concepts and theory in developing curricula prior to the reorganization in 2009, the decentralization process has resulted in the demise of oversight authority by administrators of the curriculum development process. With control in the hands of program instructors who adhered to “traditional” methodologies and the
program’s reliance on adjunct faculty to teach accelerated courses, there were no sustainable efforts being taken to ensure that adult learning theory is being applied. These findings are reflected in Figure 6: *Non-Profit University practice framework* below.
Case Review: Northern College

Northern College is a private, not-for-profit college that began its adult accelerated program in 2001. It offers three accelerated programs: social work, criminal justice, and organizational management. All three of the accelerated programs offer their courses at various off-site locations throughout upstate New York. The faculty who teach in the accelerated programs consist of some full-time faculty but with a primary reliance on adjunct faculty.

The program operates independently from other departments at the university with three separate academic degree programs overseen by three academic administrators who report to one central accelerated program administrator (vice president). The Northern College program operates as an extension of the main campus at various satellite locations throughout New York State. According to one of their program directors,

When this program started, it was started with feet dragging. The college basically said we cannot make enough money on campus to sustain this small little college that's lake-bound, and you don't have really room to build out, and we don't really have any money to build out. So, a bunch of adult programs started.

Action #1: Adoption of Adult Learning Theory as a Practice Principle

Originally, the accelerated programs at Northern College did not appear to be based necessarily on a program specific to adult learners. Rather, the creation of these programs apparently grew out of a response to the market that incorporated some principles of adult learning theory in some of the programs. While not explicitly in endorsing adult learning theory, faculty members appear to have a natural affinity toward employing adult learning strategies in their educational practice. This phenomenon appears to be the result of the college’s grouping of
students in cohorts that progress together through a set sequence of classes—thereby creating an environment that lends itself to group cohesion and collaboration.

It is interesting to note that the two program directors who were interviewed indicated a reliance on certain adult learning theories or approaches once the theories were explained to them. Neither indicated an explicit acknowledgement of adult learning or other learning theories or approaches initially. This trend was noted in faculty interviews as well. Once prompted, one faculty member immediately noted a difference between adult learners and traditional-aged learners, which led to a discussion of one of the theories. She stated:

There’s a difference between adult learners and our traditional students. They come in with a lot of life experience, and maturity that you can tap into to enhance their learning.

I help them actually enhance learning of the entire cohort by helping them to share their life experiences.

This faculty member also stated she incorporates collaborative learning in her classes. With regard to transformational learning, she indicated that this type of approach is embedded throughout the social work curriculum, noting instructors frequently ask: “How are you developing professionally? How have you changed as far as your preconceived notions about diversity and other questions like that?” During the interview, she also indicated she offers opportunities for limited self-direction in group projects. The social work program director also indicated a commitment to transformational learning throughout the curriculum as well as experiential and collaborative learning but was somewhat hesitant to endorse the self-directed approach due to the short timeframe of the courses. However, he did acknowledge that students seem to want self-direction. For example, he stated: “They don't want to be controlled. They want a partner. In their head, they're going to a professional workshop at school from work.”

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claimed to turn his classroom into more of a “workshop” than a traditional lecture style
classroom. However, he would not elaborate on his statement or provide examples. He did,
however, reference other learning theories or strategies throughout his interview. For instance, he
stated, “so, I think we do talk about that you've got different kinds of learning styles. Some are
more visual, and some are more oratory, and some kind of need to be hands-on.”

Within the criminal justice program at Northern College, the faculty did not immediately
indicate any overt acknowledgement of a specific adult learning theory or strategies. Upon
further probing, however, one of the faculty members did acknowledge and endorse experiential
learning and strategies in his classroom practice. He stated: “That’s the prescriptive format. The
students don’t have a lot of input and ideas. Only because you’re mission-driven, you’re trying to
get them to a goal.” Another Northern College faculty member who was interviewed about the
use of a collaborative approach indicated that he uses various approaches. However, he argued
that because of the class “cohort” progression structure, he saw collaborative as an approach that
could be capitalized on consistently and routinely.

Not all faculty endorsed the need for adult learning models. Two faculty members stated
directly that they do not incorporate collaborative learning, and neither gave any indication that
they acknowledged or allowed for self-directed learning. Another faculty member at Northern
College when asked about using a collaborative approach indicated:

In the criminal justice program at the bachelor’s level, I don’t use a collaborative
approach. What we find is that we have topics that are so intense that in twenty hours you
have to give them outside of class experiences that . . . there’s no value unless they come
back and report to the class and so forth.
Despite the lack of awareness and explicit acknowledgement of adult learning theory, however, Northern College does tend to incorporate collaborative learning throughout their entire program—primarily a result of how they have structured the progression of classes. As mentioned earlier, their adult enrolled students are placed in cohorts, whereby a set group of students take every course together in a fixed sequence of classes. This type of lock-step degree program naturally gives rise to collaborative type learning, fostering group identity and cohesion.

**Summary of Findings.**

Although there was no explicit endorsement (or even knowledge) of adult learning theory, faculty members appeared to appreciate the differences between adult and traditional learners—and to intuitively use adult theory concepts in their teaching. This is particularly true for the collaborative learning approach, which appeared to be the result of the instructors’ inherent appreciation for the experienced adult learner and the grouping of students in cohorts that progress together through the sequence of classes. Individual faculty incorporated other adult learning concepts, but the primary focus across all accelerated programs was collaborative learning.

**Action #2: Integration and Institutionalization of Adult Learning Theory:**

**Syllabi.**

Despite the lack of verbal endorsement of any given adult learning theory, the syllabi in the *social work division* at Northern College did acknowledge adult learners and the use of collaborative and experiential learning. For instance, for all course guidelines, the following statement is included:
As adult learners engaged in an accelerated learning process, you are expected to ask questions, share experiences, and actively participate as an integral cohort member in each class.

Additionally, in one of the syllabi, there was an essay assignment whereby the student’s essay should demonstrate “your sincere reflection regarding the impact the material had on both your personal and professional beliefs and values,” thereby indicating an acknowledgement of transformational learning. In contrast, however, the faculty in the criminal justice program at Northern College indicated in their interviews that they do not incorporate collaborative projects, and their syllabi proved to support that claim. In fact, there was no reference to any adult learning theory found within the syllabi.

Classroom.

One faculty member at Northern College incorporated a fair amount of experiential learning in his class discussions and interaction. He started the class doing lecture but, then incorporated a Question and Answer period as well as a role play. Other than for the role play, his students sat in rows facing forward. Another faculty member also had his students arranged in rows with limited interaction. His class session was also lecture driven with the use of PowerPoint. Finally, the third faculty member observed at Northern College who provided some of the strongest responses regarding incorporating adult learning theories and strategies within her class also had her students sitting in rows as in a traditional classroom. She did utilize an interactive approach through questioning and allowing students to respond and interact with one another, but not in a coordinated way, as the atmosphere tends not to be as conducive when they are sitting in rows. These observations were snapshots in time and may not be indicative of the entire course delivery format or methodology.
Training.

At Northern College, the program directors are responsible for and lead faculty training. However, there is no standardized reference documentation or training materials that would routinize or institutionalize the process. One of the program directors interviewed indicated that faculty training is coordinated by the administrative staff of the accelerated program. The faculty are required to attend two training workshops per year, and the agenda is created by the administrators with input from the program directors. These workshops are provided on the main campus and then the program directors also deliver them regionally, since many of their sites are quite a distance from the main campus.

There is no concerted effort to incorporate adult learning theories or any learning theory within these workshops consistently or specifically. The most recent training, however, did include a general review of and training on andragogy as defined and described by Knowles and colleagues. Additional training outside these workshops is the responsibility of program directors, who tend to view the mandatory two training workshops per year as sufficient for faculty who teach accelerated program adult learners. Furthermore, neither program director interviewed indicated that they observed or mentored their faculty one-on-one. They relayed feelings of trust in their faculty, many of whom they claim have been teaching for them for a while.

It is noteworthy, however, that the social work program director at the program level did appear quite attentive to what was transpiring in his department’s classrooms. He referenced, in particular, the role of experiential learning with the adult learners in his program—but also mentioned transformational and collaborative learning. Although he did not put strong emphasis on collaborative learning, he stated he knew it was happening. This is partly based on his stated
awareness that progress of students through the learning process as cohort groups—which he posited as naturally lending itself to group work. The other area of adult learning that emerged as important to the social work program was transformational learning. According to the program director, “there is a lot of reflection in terms of your personal values, your belief systems.” This reflection component is built into courses throughout the curriculum sequence. However, it is not used ubiquitously across the program nor was it evidenced when observing classrooms.

The exception to this trend in using adult learning strategies was the criminal justice program. In this program, the faculty reported they do not incorporate collaborative projects. A review of the syllabi verified this claim. However, discrepancies to this were noted. Specifically, the criminal justice program director argued that he currently relies heavily on one of his faculty members to write and revise curriculum and he felt certain that this faculty member acknowledges adult learning theories or strategies in his curriculum development—stating he felt certain because the faculty member had a background in adult learning theory. According to the program director,

This faculty member is getting his doctorate in adult education. There’s no doubt in my mind that he takes that into consideration when he revises the syllabus.

When asked what he meant by that, he replied:

This faculty member has a deep understanding of andragogy and the specifics of adult education methodologies and uses that knowledge as he updates the curriculum. For example, adults learn by interacting with the curriculum and linking it to their own experiences. Additionally, they need to be able to make the connection that what they are learning is something that will be useful to them in the very near future. These are all considerations when the curriculum is updated.
Despite this claim and despite the reference to and acknowledgement of the importance of adult learning theories by this faculty member who does curriculum development, his responses did not support his claim of adult learning theory inclusion. When asked about how he frames curriculum development for the criminal justice program at Northern College, he answered:

What you have to do is have a more prescriptive format that really takes away a lot of the academic freedom that traditionalists see in a traditional college where the individual professor will make up their own curriculum.

During the interview with this particular faculty member, he did not provide responses to the questions that provided evidence or supported the notion that he has a deep understanding of andragogy and the specifics of adult education methodologies, or that he uses that knowledge as he updates the curriculum. In fact, an example of one of his responses was:

When you design a curriculum, you have to design it from a couple of different perspectives; one, it has to be very prescriptive. You have to have a prescriptive format the other end because you’re dealing with adults and you have to look at a lot of the adult education theory, certainly from Malcolm Knowles. So you take the adult education theory and mix it into that and then from an accelerated perspective you’re trying to jam in the magic number of forty-five contact hours into twenty or twenty-four hours. So it’s like, take it from a very practical perspective. That’s the prescriptive format. The students don’t have a lot of input and ideas. Only because you’re mission-driven, you’re trying to get them to a goal with finishing their master’s thesis.

This faculty member referenced one of the key theorists in the field of adult learning (Knowles), but did not acknowledge his contributions to the field nor did he indicate he incorporates any of
his theory or strategy into his curriculum development. The work of Knowles is referenced verbally but, from what could be gathered from the interview, observations, and syllabus, it is not being put into practice. Additionally, his course design and development did not allow for adults to participate in self-directed learning or transformational learning. He used a very pragmatic approach that produced a final product in a short time-span. According to this faculty member, “It’s lecture, it’s independent research, independent study. It is some group work. I use that whole range, but I don’t use that whole range in every class.”

**Summary of Findings.**

There was a strong affiliation with the concepts of collaborative learning, reflecting more the structuring of student groups into “cohorts” than in explicit knowledge or integration of adult learning concepts. There was an appreciation by some instructors of the adult learner and a willingness to incorporate adult learning needs into both the syllabi and classroom experience. However, curriculum focus remains primarily on the compacting of traditional subject matter into a shorter timeframe to accommodate accelerated programs.

**Action #3: Organizational Implementation—Resources and Leadership**

The academic oversight for the programs resides with each of the three program directors. Two of them do not have complete control of their own curriculum, but one (criminal justice) does. The two programs that have “shared oversight” of their curriculum are social work and organizational management. These two programs started at the main campus, so they had a cadre of faculty in place and strong academic oversight at their point of initiation. The team that was interviewed indicated that the accelerated organizational management department is more flexible and adaptive to curricular changes than the accelerated social work department due to
the tight constraints placed on the social work department by the main campus department faculty and administrators.

The social work program director at Northern College also reported that their curriculum is owned and controlled by the main campus academic department (social work). This is one of the long-standing and stronger academic programs at the college. According to this program director, “historically, there was a traditional campus-based social work division. Those faculty members developed all of the curriculum.” Again, if courses are to be revised, changed, or written, it is up to the main campus traditional academic program faculty to monitor and own that process.

Social work faculty, therefore, have very limited influence on curriculum development due to the original structure of the social work department and the strong personalities involved in the establishment of the program. According to the social work program director:

Our division pretty much went by the rule that you had to take the traditional curriculum and have it be exactly the same. You had to figure out a way to accelerate it, but it pretty much had to be the same. There wasn't a lot of academic freedom. The adjuncts were all kind of trained in this one syllabus. You know, follow this step, follow that step, follow this step, do this, this is the test, this is the paper. So, there was really no academic freedom or variation that could be done.

Despite the centralization of the social work curriculum, the focus remained on the traditional format, with the weekly student workload simply adjusted to appear “accelerated.” According to one of the program directors:

There was really no thought when the program transitioned over about “how do you tailor this for adult learners?” So, I think in the initial ideation of the curriculum in the
transition, not much thought was given to that. The thought was to protect the traditional syllabi, and transplant them in the accelerated program, and train faculty and adjuncts to teach the classes in exactly, you know, pretty much the same format.

And finally, the administrator at Northern College’s criminal justice department revealed, however, that unlike social work he does control his curriculum. According to this program director, “curriculum is owned by me.”

**Summary of Findings.**

Despite the widespread use of collaborative strategies and their incorporation into syllabi and the natural affinity to adult learning practice culture in two of the three programs, no sustainable organizational supports were identified that would encourage the sustained use of adult learner principles in a systematic way. The administration of adult learning programs and control over curriculum was decentralized for one program (criminal justice) and centralized for the remaining two (organization management and social work). However, none of the programs actively endorse adult learning theory or a practice culture based on its principles.

**Final Comments—Fit with Adult Learning Practice Framework**

The defining characteristic of Northern College that appears to have given rise to the use of adult learning strategies is its reliance on cohort enrollment groups that facilitate group unity and group learning through collaborative exercises. In the case of the social work program, there has also been the added benefit that collaborative and transformative concepts are “embedded” within the belief systems underlying the practice of social work. Each of these contextual factors tends to encourage collaborative activities and the sharing of experiences that underlie experiential and transformational learning.
Because of the spontaneous nature of the use of the adult learning concepts and strategies, however, there is an unplanned nature to their use. This makes fidelity to an adult learning practice model difficult to achieve or assess. And despite the integration of these learning concepts into syllabi and instructional practices, the lack of organizational supports that acknowledge and establish practice expectations tends to diminish the sustainability of this espoused preference for adult learning principles. See Figure 7: *Northern College practice framework* for a visualization of the current factors impacting the adoption of an adult learning
practice model.
Case Review: For Profit University

At the time of the data collection, For Profit University was a private for-profit institution that operated multiple locations throughout the United States with a centralized academic and operational support system. The entire university was managed with a layered approach to administration in which there was tight control of curriculum at the home office but local administrative retained oversight of academic and classroom practices at the campus level.

In the 1990s, For Profit University began to offer their courses and degree programs in an accelerated format. According to the For Profit University Blended Learning guidebook (2009), their courses were offered in a standard on-site accelerated format until the mid-1990s. In the mid-90s, they began to utilize electronic “course shells” to augment on-site learning and they standardized the courses to a timeframe of eight weeks. In 2000, the decision was made to incorporate a “blended” approach with some courses that allowed for thirty to seventy-nine percent of the content to be delivered in an online course shell, so class time could then be dedicated to “reinforcement of materials and hands-on activities” (For Profit University Blended Training Excellence Program Workbook, Module 1, 2009, pp. 7-9). The instructional faculty of For Profit University is a combination of full-time and adjunct faculty, with adjunct faculty making up a higher proportion than full-time faculty (quote from one of the faculty who is also a champion blended trainer).

Action #1: Adoption of Adult Learning Theory as a Practice Principle

There is a strong emphasis within For Profit University on utilizing Bloom’s Taxonomy to meet course objectives. Bloom’s Taxonomy is a learning model that measures learning along six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Forehand 2005). When a course is shared with the faculty, it includes terminal course objectives, lecture
notes, assignments, quizzes, exams, and a week-by-week breakdown of course material to be covered, as well as which terminal course objectives are to be met. Faculty members do have the freedom to supplement what is provided in the course shell, but, at the minimum, they must cover what is in the course shell.

The first question asked of both curriculum designers representing two of the colleges of the For Profit University was: “Is there any emphasis placed on any type of learning theories or strategies when faculty or other experts are brought on to design or redesign a course?” Both indicated that there is not a specific framework for that, but For Profit does utilize Bloom’s Taxonomy. One of the two shared that the courses are designed such that in the first two weeks the course is “instructor-centered,” but there is an aggressive approach to move toward student- or learner-centered and then student- or self-directed learning. The other designer did not indicate that there is an emphasis on self-directed learning within her college. However, according to one faculty member, adult learners appreciate also knowing how what they are learning applies to their real lives and jobs. Some of the faculty members indicated that if the learner senses they are doing busy work and they cannot make the connection, they sometimes tune out or get frustrated.

When the author asked the curriculum designers about collaborative learning, one of them indicated that collaborative learning is inherent to the course objectives and the courses she designs and reviews. She stated that there are “collaborative activities and all kinds of suggestions for group work, discussions, and active learning” contained in the syllabi. The other designer also noted that collaborative learning is in the curriculum guide. When asked about experiential learning in the courses they are responsible for, both indicated that experiential learning is also intrinsic to their courses. For instance, one of them said that “capitalizing on their
life and work experiences is built into the suggested classroom activities.” The other designer posited that:

The best way to motivate a student is to give them the opportunity to tell you about their experience or to bring their experience from home, work, life, or family and use these as a basis for us to teach them what they need to learn.

Both curriculum designers shared an appreciation for the utilization of experiential learning with adult learners.

The last question asked was related to transformational learning. One of the two curriculum designers said:

There are classes that have journaling exercises and that have reflective pieces in them . . . I believe standardized in every course there is a discussion around which objective did you learn the most from and how are you going to use what you learned in this class going forward?

The other designer indicated that in the science courses with labs,

At the end of the lab, the students reflect about how the lab went, what went wrong, who was able to succeed and get a result and who couldn’t and why. They share this experience and learn from each other.”

These same themes were noted among the faculty. One of the For Profit University faculty indicated that “there’s three modalities of learning—visual, tactile, and oral. I try to plan activities that will deal with all modalities.” Further, she related that she relies heavily on group work (collaborative learning approach). Two major group projects that are not dictated by the shell include a talk show where each group presents on a major theorist (psychology class), and the second project is that each group produces a commercial. She allows them flexibility to
decide how they will tackle these two projects (self-directed learning) as well. Additionally, when asked about the role of life and work experiences in the classroom, she reported:

I always try to cover what I feel is the most important and then we tie that into their lives. All learning is association, and if they can’t associate with their own lives or some of their own theories, then it won’t mean anything.

It should be noted, however, that while her class did incorporate some reflection activities, the exercises did not seem to capture the transformational learning strategy via classroom instruction or activities where they would reflect specifically on their own growth, development, and change (transformation) that took place during or as a result of the course.

A second For Profit University faculty member reported that he adds assignments to his course as well. He stated, “I add different hands-on assignments that I have them do. I actually have them do real work for real clients in many cases, so they get that practical experience.” This approach provides opportunities for his students so that they can truly bring together life experiences with classroom learning. He also reported on relying heavily on group work and minimally on lecture. This faculty member also offers access to hundreds of videos which students can view to enhance their learning. Many students choose to do so, which indicates a form of self-directed learning.

The third faculty member interviewed at For Profit University indicated that he also relies on the use of collaborative learning in his class. This faculty member argued that the students learn more when they collaborate and work in groups. He stated he also tries to incorporate real-life experiences in his classroom to illustrate concepts. Similar to the other two For Profit faculty members, this faculty member does not incorporate a transformational learning strategy in his
classes. He does, however, provide for self-directed learning in his class, which is very technical and does not lend itself easily to that type of learning strategy. He explained:

Now what they bring to the class or to the project that has to be dictated a little bit is to show that they are using the tools that we have that I taught them. But as far as their creativity and their ability to design, however they want to or to pick even what the subject matter is, it’s totally up to them.

Summary of Findings.

Curriculum designers strongly endorse Bloom’s Taxonomy, which inherently leads to reliance on collaborative type learning and practitioner employment of other adult learner strategies and “active” learning to accomplish the 6 levels. There is no attention, however, paid to assuring fidelity in the classroom to adult learning theory specifically.

Action #2: Integration and Institutionalization of Adult Learning Theory

All five colleges utilize a curriculum guide, which is the key tool used for curriculum design and development. Core elements include a strategy statement and the course terminal objectives. In addition, they also include teaching plans as well as a sample syllabus, texts and references, sample evaluation items and teaching suggestions (which is where additional suggestions are provided regarding how to facilitate the actual class). This curriculum guide is a template utilized by all five colleges of For Profit University in designing and developing their courses and their curriculum for each course.

Policy and Guidance.

For Profit University was the only institution of those studied that provides any type of faculty training guide. There are two—one of which is a newer version, but both were presented as training materials in currently used Blended Training Excellence Program Workbook (2009)
and the Blended Learning Guidebook (2010). In these documents, there are references to adult learning and other learning theories and strategies. For instance, there is mention of the unique educational needs of adults. One specifically listed is “recognition of experience and work-based learning already obtained.” (For Profit University, 2010, p. 12). This is an example of a reference to experiential learning.

According to one of the curriculum designers interviewed from For Profit University, “Curriculum guides (2004) are at the heart of our existence.” These guides drive course development and revisions and provide the templates from which the weekly course terminal objectives and teaching plans and activities are derived. If a course is being updated, the curriculum designer will “make sure the terminal course objectives are relevant, current, specific and well-written.”

Both curriculum designers interviewed expressed that they often hire or bring together experts from within the For Profit University faculty ranks or, from outside of the university, if they are not subject matter experts in that course. Their role then is to review the final curriculum guide to ensure that it meets all of the components, but they leave it to the subject matter experts to provide the specific content. Once the content is updated, a course developer incorporates the content of the guide into the course shell, which is then made available electronically to all faculty teaching that course at the time that they are teaching it.

In the review of the curriculum guide (2004), there were references to adult learning theories or strategies in the manual as well as in some sample course curricula. There was also guidance that encourages utilization of adult learning theory learning and strategies as well as a reliance upon Bloom’s Taxonomy and active learning. According to the curriculum guide, the sample courses were:
…a means of establishing a standardized curriculum while providing faculty the flexibility to adopt teaching strategies that best respond to their specific content, to the needs of their students, and to their teaching preferences (p. 1) . . . The curriculum guide also serves as a framework for the development of teaching plans by faculty at each location (p. 1).

An additional component of the curriculum guide was a strategy statement, which included a set of teaching suggestions that strengthen active learning and increase the student involvement needed to ensure higher levels of performance called for in the terminal objectives. Examples included projects, exercises, library research, writing assignments, small group activities, and problem-solving cases (Curriculum Guide, p. 5). Some of these include examples of certain adult learning theories and strategies such as a collaborative learning approach (p. 12) and experiential learning theory (p. 11). Another reference is found in a section of the Blended Training Excellence Program Workbook regarding Exemplary Practices in Adult Learning:

The institution uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills” (For Profit, 2010, p.13)).

This entry indicates an incorporation of experiential learning theory and strategy. Additionally, the institution “employs a teaching-learning process that includes a high degree of interaction among learners, and between learners and faculty” (For Profit 2010, p.13). This choice is an acknowledgement of the use of collaborative learning.

**Templates.**

At For Profit University, the curriculum is written at the home office (remotely) and identical copies are delivered via electronic format to all faculty members teaching the same
course. The use of “eCollege” as the course delivery platform for faculty and students allows tremendous curricular control by the national centralized academic departments, academic administrators, and curricular designers of all courses in each college. Instructional faculty are able to add personal notes, assignments, and information to the course shell, but the assignments, terminal course objectives, and weekly discussion topics are predetermined. All campus faculty are required to abide by and follow the course shell as designed and delivered; revisions and local alterations are not allowed.

**Syllabi.**

The For Profit University course shells come pre-loaded, so there are limited potential week-by-week adaptations; however, two of the faculty members indicated that they add course materials and assignments to the course shell in order to enhance student learning and outcomes. For the For Profit University syllabi reviewed, there were no collaborative or group projects or assignments specified directly within the course shells. However, these are incorporated in the faculty members’ teaching suggestions. In the instructor’s online course shell, there are “teaching suggestions” that are not required but are presented as options for the faculty member. There are required discussion threads that sometimes capitalized on experiential learning and could be interpreted as collaborative learning opportunities. As mentioned previously, some of the faculty members added group projects and assignments, even though they are not listed in the standard shell. Also mentioned previously, these strategies were incorporated in the teaching suggestions for the course (Curriculum Guide, p. 6).

As faculty members teach these courses, they have access to the shell after the course is over. If they teach the same course again and it does not change from session to session, they have access to the shell whenever they want it, which allows them time to do an additional
review of that course to determine if they want to add anything to it. According to one of the curriculum designers, “faculty are encouraged to supplement the materials provided by the curriculum team, and those who teach repeatedly often do that.”

Training.

The training “course” for the faculty consists of an online component where the faculty must participate in “threaded discussions” and explore the rich content. Then they do a half-day on-site, hands-on training on how to incorporate all of this new knowledge in their own courses. According to the faculty trainer that was interviewed, the training relies heavily on understanding and utilizing Bloom’s Taxonomy. In addition, he indicated that the faculty are encouraged to acknowledge experiential learning in their classes and to incorporate collaborative learning opportunities in their classrooms. He also reported that the faculty also practice this in the training. For example, during the training faculty are asked to respond to prompts using application to real life/real classroom scenarios. Additionally, throughout the training the faculty are asked to work in pairs and or groups to complete assignments and projects of the training modules. When asked about transformational learning opportunities, the faculty trainer stated that some may occur in terminal or capstone courses, but they are not emphasized in the faculty training. Additionally, regarding self-direction opportunities for students, he noted that the courses and the shells within which they are delivered are “very prescriptive and it’s very process-driven.” This method does not allow for much self-direction by the students.

Training documents call for the use “of a variety of teaching styles that recognize that students have different learning styles” and the need for “active learning” (For Profit University, 2009, Module 2 p. 5). The document comprehensively discusses what active learning is (a classroom technique of engaging students to participate during class instead of being passive
learners in a lecture only class (For Profit University, 2009, Module 2 p. 5) and the benefits of
students utilizing active learning in the classroom. The section goes on to provide further
instruction regarding more specific application of active learning, as well as how to develop a
successful learning activity, along with various examples of active learning types of activities
(module 2, p. 15). Some active learning activities incorporate collaborative learning as students
are expected to work in pairs or groups to complete a task or assignment. Additionally, students
are also sometimes asked to provide examples of how they would apply the concept they are
learning in class to their work environment, which demonstrates experiential learning (p. 15).
The training modules indicate a “cycle that should include speaking, writing and group work in
the onsite class as well as interacting, writing and group work in an online environment” (p. 7).
There is also a reference to the benefit of teamwork and collaboration; these are examples of
applying collaborative learning in the training materials.

**In-Classroom Norms.**

Despite explicit endorsement of adult learning theories, most classroom observations
demonstrated a limited application of these theories. For example, when the faculty at For Profit
University were asked if they acknowledge any adult learning theories or other learning theories,
their first reaction was to identify different learning styles and their appreciation that they need to
be aware of those different styles when conducting class.

Most of the faculty that the author observed had their classrooms arranged in rows
whereby all students are facing forward with their backs to the students behind them.
Additionally, for the time periods that I observed, most of the faculty delivered a standard lecture
or had open discussion where the faculty member is at the front of the room and students are
acknowledged if they have a comment to share. In many of these cases, students did react to one
another’s comments and were encouraged to do so. One faculty member who had her class “group up” in small groups indicated that she incorporates group projects and circle discussions in her class (collaborative). In her class, the author observed small group discussions and problem-solving.

At For Profit University, the primary academic administrator (the dean of academic affairs) indicated that the main way the faculty are encouraged to utilize adult learning theories, as well as any other learning theories or strategies, is through the required faculty training course. In addition to the For Profit specific faculty training, however, the dean of academic affairs discussed his further influence on what faculty are doing within the classrooms. The deans conduct regular observations to ensure that the training provided is carried out. He then referenced the differences in learning styles and the importance of faculty being aware of those and catering to all of them in a given class.

When probed with additional questions regarding specific adult learning theories and strategies, however, the dean shared many examples of those types of learning occurring in the classrooms. For instance, when asked about experiential learning and whether For Profit faculty incorporated that in their instructional practices, his response was “We do—especially in two areas. One would be in the discussion threads and the other would be in group projects.”

Additionally, when asked further about collaborative learning, the dean of academic affairs indicated,

We encourage break-out group activities and that happens pretty much every class . . . naturally the reduced class time, most classes meeting just once a week, encourages self-reliance and motivation and perseverance that you associate with adult students.
The two areas that were not as clearly defined or described was self-directed learning and transformational learning. The dean of academic affair’s response was more about course outcomes than self-directed or transformational learning.

The For Profit University observation form captures behaviors and interactions in the following categories: interaction, presentation, homework review, classroom management, vitality, student participation, professionalism, practical linkages, and rigor. There is a space provided for open comments on strengths, opportunities for improvement, and an action plan. There are no specific categories that reference any particular learning theory or strategy, although some of them certainly could capture those theories or strategies such as interaction (experiential or active learning), student participation (collaboration or experiential), and/or practical linkages (experiential).

Summary of Findings.

There is strong evidence of organization support of the incorporation of adult learning principles, with policies, reference guides, and training to sustain a focus on adult learning. Solidification of the ideals is done through the crafting of “course shells” that serve as curriculum templates. Faculty often amend these course shells to engage adult learners in collaborative learning activities. Although this study’s observation of classrooms revealed mostly “traditional” methodologies, syllabi indicate a heavy reliance on collaborative and experiential learning.

Action #3: Organizational Implementation—Resources and Leadership

Centralized Control.

Curriculum design and development, as well as instructional faculty training, are developed, maintained, and disseminated from the For Profit University home office in Chicago.
In 2009, For Profit University piloted a “master shell” that is provided to all faculty members teaching a given course throughout all For Profit University locations. That approach is now in place for almost all courses taught within For Profit University and the goal is to reach one hundred percent of courses taught using “master shells” (For Profit University 2010).

Due to the utilization of online course shells, which are maintained and controlled by a team at the home office, For Profit University maintains academic control over their accelerated courses and programs via an internal control mechanism. Faculty members have a limited ability to modify their course shells and are discouraged from doing so. The local campuses have oversight of local implementation of the national training and ensuring faculty compliance with the “course shells” as delivered by the home office academic team. Each campus also has local supervision of instructional faculty.

For Profit University has curriculum designers who are assigned to one of the five academic colleges of the university. Occasionally, instructional faculty are contracted to assist with course development or revisions, but all of that work then goes to the For Profit curriculum development team for final approval before it is shared with all faculty teaching that particular course. Because courses are taught by hundreds of faculty all throughout For Profit University, according to one of the For Profit curriculum designers, “the challenge with curriculum development comes with dealing with feedback. We have to live with the fact that we’re not going to make everyone happy.” Although faculty members are encouraged to provide feedback at the end of each course, it is likely impossible to incorporate changes that will address and satisfy all of the issues raised, as some of them may be in opposition or contradiction to one another. One of the curriculum designers indicated that the course shell is only made available to
instructors approximately two weeks before the course begins, limiting the amount of time for revising and editing the shell.

This curriculum designer supervises curriculum for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as delivered to all of the multiple locations with their various faculty. The feedback from all of those faculty members can sometimes be contradictory in nature, so it may not be possible to satisfy all faculty. According to this curriculum designer,

Once the curriculum designer starts talking about the piece where people are working on the eCollege shell, then you’re talking about a whole team of people. While the process may be changing (according to this curriculum designer), there currently is an instructional designer, a project manager, the developer, and the program dean present at weekly meetings. That’s a very rigorous schedule for redeveloping a course that takes place over seven weeks. There’s a lot to think about when you redevelop a course. There’s the academic piece. There are some things right now that are given and some we don’t have control over. There are the textbooks and making sure that when that course is done the student will have the experience that we’re promising through the course description and those terminal course objectives.

According to this curriculum designer:

When it comes to faculty input and feedback: sometimes they don’t always know that they can make minor changes or how to do that, so we deal with a lot of feedback that would actually be preventable through additional education and blended learning and communication. Faculty members submit “tickets” (electronic notifications) through the feedback system known as “Right Now” if they find a mistake or if they don’t like something. Up to this point, that feedback had been handled by the program deans. Now,
if there is actually a mistake, we need to find people to go into the active master shell and fix that mistake. And with the volume of courses that I have responsibility for right now, that’s really challenging.

Also, this curriculum designer stated, “then there are issues with just people think there are too many essays or that they don’t like the book or the chapters aren’t aligned properly with the overall course objectives and everybody out there teaches a course his or her own way.”

Based on the data collected, clearly it is difficult to accommodate all changes suggested, meaning a course never incorporates all feedback; inevitably, some faculty lose the opportunity to influence the course content or context if their suggestions do not make it into the final shell.

Commitment and Sustainability of Practice Culture.

As noted previously, one of the curriculum designers interviewed from For Profit University stated that “Curriculum guides are at the heart of our existence.” They not only guide course development, they keep fresh the objectives, teaching plans, and activities that in turn sustain the practice principles underlying the program. Both curriculum designers interviewed expressed that they often hire or bring together experts from within the For Profit University faculty ranks or, from outside of the university, if they are not subject matter experts in that course. Their role then is to review the final curriculum guide to ensure that it meets all of the components, but they leave it to the subject matter experts to provide the specific content. Once the content is updated, a course developer incorporates the content of the guide into the course shell, which is then made available electronically to all faculty teaching that course at the time that they are teaching it.

When interviewed, faculty reflected upon the importance of keeping things structured since they have limited classroom time with their adult learners. The shorter time makes it
critical for them to really focus on key concepts, materials, and assignments. Additionally, the faculty have limited class time to review all of the material covered in the course. They discuss the importance of allowing and expecting adult learners to learn a certain amount of the material on their own. For instance, one faculty member at For Profit University told me:

I only have seven weeks of instruction. What I try to do is I cover what I feel is the most important in class, and then I use the discussion thread to pick up the things that are less important but that need to be addressed, and then just hope that they read the chapters, and then pick up the rest of it. But I do always try to cover what I feel is the most important and then we try to tie that into their lives.

Resources.

For Profit University trains a few faculty members at each campus to be champion trainers of all faculty at that campus. The champion trainers attend training at the home office, where they do a deep dive into the training program, which they then deliver to all newly hired faculty. In addition, resources are allocated for the conduct of shell audits by academic administrators to ensure compliance and quality.

Summary of Findings.

This is an organization that provides extensive resources and support in adhering to the concepts of adult learning. It is a highly centralized approach to curriculum development—one that is reliant on standardization through the provision of “course shells.” Curriculum guidelines stress adult learning and how to engage adult learners. Leadership is committed to the adult learner and maintaining focus on achieving the levels of learning identified in Bloom’s Taxonomy.
Final Comments—Fit with Adult Learning Practice Framework

This is an organization that fully endorsed adult learning theory concepts via the integration of the Bloom’s taxonomy model. See Figure 8: *For-profit University practice framework.*
Analytic Part Two: Comparison of Implementation Efforts

This section of Chapter 4 seeks to accomplish two objectives: first, to render the implementation processes for each organization more transparent; and second, to offer reflective feedback on the implementation process itself and how individual organizations performed in their attempts to meet the Commission on Accelerated Program’s quality standard.

So given the general acceptance of the CAP quality standard to incorporate adult learning theory, two questions arise. The first is, Why is transparency important? The answer is relatively straightforward: while we can use forward mapping approaches as depicted in Figure 2: Practice technology (Do X to achieve Y) to capture what should be done to accomplish a goal, we still need to look back up the policy implementation process if we wish to assess why goals are not being fully met (Elmore, 1979-1980, 1983; Friedman, 2003). To do so requires some level of transparency. While “clear box” transparency is preferable, at minimum we must have “grey box” transparency if we are to understand the internal machinations that result in implementation problems (Kazi, 2003, p.7).

The second question is, Why is reflective feedback important? In this case, the answer is also straightforward. It is through evaluative reflection that organizations learn and adjust interventions to better implement strategies and achieve the stated goal. In Chapter One, Friedman’s logic model was modified to reflect the transformation of Figure 3: Practice framework into an implementation model that allowed for the provision of feedback loops. Now the template theory of change model (Figure 4) is being further refined to incorporate the standards and knowledge that emerged as a result of conducting the four institutional case reviews discussed above. See Figure 9: Standards for implementation of a practice model based on adult learning principles on the next page.
Figure 9:
Standards for implementation of a practice model based on adult learning principles

Contextual Factors
- **Economic Context:** The organization acknowledges the role the adult learner plays in the institution’s financial viability & expends resources to assure their needs are met.
- **Organizational Context:** Support and oversight of curriculum development is clearly delineated in organizational practices.
- **Practice Norms & Rules:** There is stated knowledge of and willingness to apply adult learning theory principles.

Clear-Box/Grey-Box Implementation Process
1. **Problem Identification:** Organization formally acknowledges importance of adult learners & need for specialized adult learner curriculum.
2. **Policy Formation:** Policy statements & forms standardize practice principles & define compliance expectations.
3. **Policy Implementation:** Implementation of adult learning strategies is implemented with fidelity to Practice Model.

Systemic Change Feedback
- Feedback on standardization & integration
- Feedback on Implementation

Outcome Factors
- **Short-Term Outcome:** Demonstrated ability to integrate adult learning principles in curriculum
- **Long-Term Goal:** Positive Adult Student Outcomes (not included in study)

Factors related to Implementation of Practice Standards:
- **Training:**
  - Fidelity to practice model is an implementation requirement
  - Resources provided for implementation & training

Factors related to Organizational Oversight of Fidelity:
- **Clear endorsement of principles by leadership**
- **Strength of Fidelity/Compliance Evaluation Efforts**
- **Administrative authority over implementation of practice principles & training clearly defined**
- **Practice is monitored via fidelity checks (e.g., observation, audits, etc.)**

Factors related to Formation Activities:
- Theory is memorialized & operationalized in:
  - Policy & Mission Statements
  - Forras
  - Guidelines include: a) Acknowledgement of adult learning theory; b) Curriculum standards and expectations
  - There is explicit linking of adult learning principles as a needed factor to achieve positive Student outcomes.
Implementation Evaluation Findings

As indicated below in Table 1: Comparison of Implementation Efforts, only one institution—For Profit University—achieved successful implementation of an adult learning theory based practice model. Midwest Community College, Northern College, and Non-profit University did not. Key findings included:

- The importance of meeting all contextual conditions appears to have been a critical factor in being able to successfully implement a practice model premised on adult learning principles. In reviewing the four participating institutional findings, it was only the For Profit University that met all three contextual conditions. This suggests that all three are important factors when conducting problem identification activities. While all institutions met the third condition of member knowledge of and willingness to use adult learning principles at least implicitly, it did not appear that meeting this one condition (either fully or partially) was sufficient to support full implementation of the practice model.

- Ensuing from the first finding, failure to explicitly identify adult learning theory informed curriculum as an organizational need, essentially obviated any necessity for the organization to conduct planning activities and/or develop implementation strategies. As a result, three universities (Midwest, Northern, and Non-Profit) failed to conduct policy formation activities that would lead to implementation of a theory based curriculum. Even more importantly, curriculum development and instructional practices appeared to become transactional in nature—meaning fidelity to the principles of adult learning become dependent on individual competency levels and practice wisdom (i.e., theory in use) and/or program content demands, not on theory or best practice standards. With
truncation at the problem identification stage, metaphorically the implementation process goes “black” and the ability to conduct a formative evaluation is curtailed. This left only the For Profit University eligible for further evaluation.

- Although Bloom’s taxonomy is not theory per se, the approach at For Profit served the organization well because it represented a learning model that employed experiential, collaborative, transformational, and self-directed learning strategies as a “means” toward achieving the taxonomy’s six levels of learning, i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

- For Profit represents an organization that fully endorses adult learning theory concepts and has purposively integrated them into their policies, training materials, practice norms, and syllabi. This appeared to be the result of the endorsement of Bloom’s Taxonomy that encapsulates the adult learning concepts and provides a roadmap for the school to follow in its implementation. Course shells (template curricula) that incorporate experiential and collaborative activities were used to standardize classroom activities and expectations. There occurred planned auditing that encouraged sustainability and fidelity.

For detail related to evaluation findings for each of the implementation steps, please see

Table 1: Comparison of implementation efforts below.
### Table 1: Comparison of Implementation Efforts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards for Implementation of Practice Model based on Adult Learning Principles</th>
<th>Organizational Performance and Opportunities for Improvement—Aggregate Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contextual Factors</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Although accelerated learning programs are often specifically marketed as being adult-oriented learning opportunities (Commission on Accelerated Programs, 2008), none of the organizations offered sufficient evidence to support the claim that they fully understood the extent to which adult learners played a financial role in their budget. Accelerated programs, however, were noted by some interviewees as being an important marketing strategy at Northern College. At least in the beginning, it appears that there was a connection made by program developers to adult learning theory; however, subsequent comments tended to suggest that the focus for Northern became one of marketing of accelerated programs based on its provision of a <em>shortened timeframe for degree completion</em>—not specifically its focus on the adult learner. Only For Profit University appears to have dedicated resources that address curriculum development needs geared toward the adult learner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The organization acknowledges the role the adult learner plays in the financial viability of the institution &amp; expends resources to assure their needs are met.</td>
<td>2. Only For Profit University provided evidence of formal oversight capabilities and a structured process for curriculum and classroom practice monitoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The organization formally supports and conducts oversight activities related to curriculum development and the meeting of organizational standards related to adult learning principles</td>
<td>3. Members from all four participating institutions indicated they had knowledge of and used adult learning theory. However, it was only explicitly endorsed by two: Non Profit University and For Profit University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Members of the organization state knowledge of and a willingness to apply adult learning theory principles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary Comment:**

In reviewing findings from the four participating institutions, only the For Profit University met all three contextual conditions that supported full implementation. While all institutions met the third condition of faculty/administrator member knowledge of and willingness to use adult learning principles, this appears to have been insufficient to support full implementation of the practice model.
### Problem Identification

| The organization formally acknowledges the importance of the adult learner and need for a specialized adult learner curriculum. | Only the For Profit University *formally* identifies a need for addressing the learning styles of the adult learning within their policies and mission statement. |

**Summary Comment:**
Failure to explicitly identify “curriculum development” as an organizational “need” that should be addressed, essentially obviated any need by the organization to conduct planning activities and/or develop implementation strategies. Activities from this point on for the remaining colleges/universities (Midwest, Northern, and Non-Profit), therefore, become transactional in nature—meaning they are dependent on individual competency levels and practice wisdom (i.e., theory in use), *not* on an espoused practice model. Furthermore, without an implementation plan, there was nothing against which to evaluate for fidelity to the espoused practice model implied by CAP’s standard.

### Policy Formation

| 1. Theory is memorialized & operationalized in:  
   a. Policy & Mission Statements  
   b. Forms  
  2. Guidelines include:  
   a. Acknowledgement of adult learning theory;  
   b. Curriculum standards and expectations  
  3. There is explicit linking of adult learning principles as a needed factor to achieve positive student outcomes. | 1. For Profit University formally endorses Bloom’s Taxonomy and its commitment to adult learning in its policy.  
2. Resources are provided to faculty on how to conduct accelerated courses and maintain fidelity to the requirements of the Bloom’s Taxonomy model. This includes the provision of training materials and training opportunities. Use of standardized templates and forms that operationalize and institute the use of adult learning principles are being used across all 5 campuses.  
3. Bloom’s Taxonomy is based on a conceptual framework that links type of instruction to the 6 levels of learning (see below in Summary Comment) and student outcomes. |

**Summary Comment:**
Although a taxonomy and not theory per se, the approach fundamentally represents a learning model that envisions experiential, collaborative, transformational, and self-directed learning strategies as a “means” toward achieving the taxonomy’s 6 levels of learning, i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. As such, it serves as a framework for the delivery of adult learning strategies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factors related to Implementation of Practice Standards:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Training:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Fidelity to practice model is an implementation requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Resources provided for implementation &amp; training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Accountability:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Mandated use of standardized implementation templates or adult learning principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Assigned accountability for conducting and/or performance of training activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factors related to Organizational Oversight of Fidelity:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clear endorsement of principles by leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strength of Fidelity/Compliance Evaluation Efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Administrative authority over implementation of practice principles &amp; training clearly defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practice is monitored via fidelity checks (e.g., observation, audits, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Factors related to Implementation of Practice Standards:**

1. Training:

The training “course” for faculty at For Profit consists of an online component where the faculty must participate in “threaded discussions” and explore the rich content. Then they do a half-day on-site, hands-on training on how to incorporate all of this new knowledge in their own courses. According to the faculty trainer that was interviewed, the training relies heavily on understanding and utilizing Bloom’s Taxonomy. This is reinforced by a curriculum guide, which served as the key tool used for curriculum design and development. Core elements of the curriculum guided include a strategy statement and course terminal objectives. In addition, they also include teaching plans as well as a sample syllabus, texts and references, sample evaluation items and teaching suggestions (which is where additional suggestions are provided regarding how to facilitate the actual class). This curriculum guide is a template utilized by all five colleges of For Profit University in designing and developing their courses and their curriculum for each course. Although modifications can be made to the course curriculum and syllabus, changes are discouraged and must be approved. Faculty are encouraged to provide feedback post course completion.

2. Accountability:

At For Profit University, the curriculum is written at the home office (remotely) and identical copies are delivered via electronic format to all faculty members teaching the same course. The use of “eCollege” as the course delivery platform for faculty and students allows tremendous curricular control by the national centralized academic departments, academic administrators, and curricular designers of all courses in each college. All campus faculty are required to abide by and follow the
course shell as designed and delivered; revisions and local alterations are not allowed.

The For Profit University course shells come pre-loaded, so there are limited potential week-by-week adaptations; however, two of the faculty members indicated that they add course materials and assignments to the course shell in order to enhance student learning and outcomes. For the For Profit University syllabi reviewed, there were no collaborative or group projects or assignments specified directly within the course shells. However, these are incorporated in the faculty members’ teaching suggestions.

Factors related to Organizational Oversight of Fidelity:
Curriculum design and development, as well as instructional faculty training, are developed, maintained, and disseminated from the For Profit University home office in Chicago. In 2009, For Profit University piloted a “master shell” that is provided to all faculty members teaching a given course throughout all For Profit University locations. That approach is now in place for almost all courses taught within For Profit University and the goal is to reach one hundred percent of courses taught using “master shells” (For Profit University 2010).

At For Profit University, the primary academic administrator (the dean of academic affairs) indicated that the main way the faculty are encouraged to utilize adult learning theories, as well as any other learning theories or strategies, is through the required faculty training course that establishes compliance expectations. In addition to the For Profit specific faculty training, however, the dean of academic affairs discussed his further influence on what faculty are doing within the classrooms. The deans conduct regular observations to ensure that the training provided is carried out. He then referenced the differences in learning styles and the importance of faculty being aware of those and catering to all of them in a given class.
Policy Feedback Loops

**Feedback on Standards & Integration Short-term Goal:**

This is an organization that fully endorses adult learning theory concepts and has purposively integrated them into their policies, training materials, practice norms, and syllabi. This appears to be the result of the endorsement of Bloom’s Taxonomy that encapsulates the adult learning concepts and provides a roadmap for the school to follow in its implementation. Course shells (template curricula) that incorporate experiential and collaborative activities are used to standardize classroom activities and expectations. There is planned auditing that encourages sustainability and fidelity.

**Feedback on Fidelity and Implementation:**

- Despite explicit endorsement of adult learning theories, most classroom observations demonstrated a limited application of these theories. For example, when the faculty members at For Profit University were asked if they acknowledge any adult learning theories or other learning theories, their first reaction was to identify different learning styles and their appreciation that they need to be aware of those different styles when conducting class. Competency levels and fidelity, therefore, remain ongoing issues.
- The For Profit University observation form captures behaviors and interactions in the following categories: interaction, presentation, homework review, classroom management, vitality, student participation, professionalism, practical linkages, and rigor. There is a space provided for open comments on strengths, opportunities for improvement, and an action plan. There are no specific categories that reference any particular learning theory or strategy, although some of them certainly could capture those theories or strategies such as interaction (experiential or active learning), student participation (collaboration or experiential), and/or practical linkages (experiential).
Summary and Conclusion

This chapter sought to identify the key variables giving rise to successful versus unsuccessful implementation of a practice model grounded in adult learning theory. Utilizing the practice models proposed in Chapter 1, the author used a qualitative review process to identify the factors that were present or not-present for each of the participating institutions and programs. The information attained through the individual case reviews and summary findings then were used to craft an implementation model. While this chapter focused on identifying relevant factors, the next chapter will use the knowledge gained from the analysis to answer the four research questions that drove the study.

In the first part of this chapter, Figure 3: Practice framework served as a theoretical model that essentially operationalized what evidence would be used to document the school’s attainment of three core technologies that were argued to be elemental to the successful implementation of the CAP 2011 and 2019 quality standard. In essence, the practice framework represents the “espoused” model against which to measure congruency of the university/college being evaluated for fit. Case reviews and the formative evaluation of the four schools advanced our understanding of the pivotal actions needed for full implementation of an adult learning based practice model.

1. The collaboration and explicit adoption by administrators, faculty, and curriculum developers of adult learning theory (experiential, self-directed, collaborative, transformational, and/or Bloom’s taxonomy) in their practice model.

2. The integration and institutionalization of the underlying theory and its principles in documentation (syllabi, policy, mission statement, and training materials) and/or practice culture (classroom and out-of-classroom norms and assignments).
3. The provision of adequate organizational support and oversight to ensure effective implementation of adult learning concepts and guidelines (leadership commitment, centralized control, sufficiency of oversight resources, and/or honoring of adult learning principles in the overall culture).

As was demonstrated in the implementation evaluation only one of the participating institutions (For Profit University) met these standards and was successful in integrating adult learning theory in their course curricula and classroom instruction. In other words, it was the only educational agency explicitly defining espoused standards. The remaining three institutions—Midwest, Non-Profit, and Northern—failed to successful implement a policy endorsing adult learning theory. Indeed, their organizational inability to effectively collaborate and gain consensus on the fundamental need for adult learning theory thwarted their ability to even construct a coherent conceptual framework (i.e., practice model) that incorporated best practice standards as proposed by CAP in 2011.

As demonstrated in the implementation evaluation above, only one of the participating institutions (For Profit University) sufficiently met implementation standards and was successful in integrating adult learning theory in their course curricula and classroom instruction. The remaining three institutions—Midwest, Non-Profit, and Northern—failed to successfully implement a policy endorsing adult learning theory. Indeed, the defining characteristic of these organizations was their inability to effectively collaborate and gain consensus on the fundamental need for an adult learning theory based model. As noted in the model advanced by Friedman (2003) and this study, this resulted in the immediate truncation of implementation processes at the problem identification stage. However, For Profit University was shown to be an exemplar on how to achieve successful implementation.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Limitations

This study took place at four adult accelerated learning sites over the period of March 2011 through February 2012. Four institutions participated in this study: a community college (Midwest Community College), a non-profit private college with a few sites in the same state (Northern College), a non-profit university with multiple locations in multiple states (Non Profit University), and a for-profit university (For Profit University) with multiple locations throughout the United States. These colleges were selected based on institutional type from a master list of programs from the Commission on Accelerated Programs’ website (Commission on Accelerated Programs, 2011).

Currently, limited research exists regarding whether accelerated learning programs explicitly or intuitively incorporate adult learning theories or any other learning theories in their curriculum design and/or instructional practices. As a consequence, there is little understanding in how the institutions of higher education facilitate or impede efforts to implement practice principles grounded in adult learning theory. This study seeks to address this lack of knowledge.

The specific research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What adult learning theories are being employed within each of the colleges for the development of curricula and instructional practice guidelines?

2. How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the practice principles espoused by the individual colleges?

3. How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the organizational policies, mission statement, curriculum development processes, and educational instructional practices?
4. How has the organization supported or impeded the adoption of adult learning theory in the curriculum and instructional practice processes affecting accelerated adult learning programs?

The following discussion centers on these questions, utilizing the case reviews and the implementation evaluated presented in Chapter Four to identify commonalities and differences between the four colleges/universities.

**What adult learning theories are being employed within each of the colleges for the development of curricula and instructional practice guidelines?**

**Summary Finding 1.**

*With the sole exception of the For Profit University which explicitly states its commitment to adult learning theory in its guidance and training materials, the incorporation of adult or other learning theories in curriculum design and instructional practices in adult accelerated degree programs was primarily implicit and manifested indirectly through group course assignments.* In general, adult learning theory was not mentioned in an interview until the author probed for knowledge of these theories. This tends to indicate that while there is generalized knowledge about adult learning theory, it is not a core practice consideration in three of the four participating institutions. The exception to this was For Profit University which openly endorsed Bloom’s Taxonomy and the underlying adult learner principles that serve as the means for attaining the Taxonomy’s six levels of learning.

**Summary Finding 2.**

*Although there was some endorsement of adult learning theory, there is only minimal evidence that it was used to inform the curriculum development process. Staff generally had knowledge of the theories, but its use was generalized and filtered through individualized*
perceptions that often failed to differentiate between traditional versus non-traditional learning needs. Even in the case of For Profit University, the use of the Bloom’s Taxonomy was not specific to the “adult learner” but rather to the learning process itself—irrespective of the age of the learner.

There was some differentiation, however, between curriculum designers and faculty. The curriculum designers made the most references to incorporation of experiential learning theory regarding their curriculum design approach. Indeed, four of the five curricular designers made multiple unsolicited references to experiential learning theory—although this endorsement failed to result in the adoption of experiential learning theory or its important role when working with adult learners. In contrast, the adult learning theory referenced most often by faculty at all four participating institutions and by all but one faculty member at Northern College was collaborative. The number of examples of collaborative actions and approaches was significantly higher than for any of the other theories.

The remaining theories, transformational and self-directed learning, were not utilized to the same degree as collaborative or experiential. Transformational learning theory was the third most frequently referenced, with all four institutions’ respondents referencing it. Interestingly, this learning theory was most explicitly connected to certain types of courses such as the research and capstone courses. Considering that these types of courses are intended to be more reflective of the overall experience of the program and learning about a given field, this makes sense. Self-directed learning theory was referenced by For Profit University, Non-Profit University, and Midwest Community College. Interviewees indicated the issue of time constraints as the most important factor for not allowing their adult learners to be self-directed.
Interestingly, Bloom’s taxonomy was not referenced in any of the curriculum designer interviews. Considering that this taxonomy can guide all levels of learning activities and measure outcomes, and that For-Profit University references it so heavily in their faculty training and guides, it was odd not to be referenced by either of their curriculum designers. However, For Profit University was the only institution that explicitly endorsed any adult learning strategy and documented its goal to implement a theory informed curriculum.

How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the practice principles espoused by the individual colleges?

Summary Finding 3.

*Application of adult learning theory is not driven by “instrumental utilization” in which theory and research is seen as a defining guide to decision making, but rather, by “conceptual utilization” which reflects the individual practitioner’s blended use of personal beliefs with known theoretical principles when making decisions (see Fortune and Reid, 1999, p. 17).* For example, the adult learning theory or strategy that appeared to be utilized in practice by many of the respondents at all four institutions was that of experiential learning—i.e., applying new knowledge to prior experience and knowledge gained. However, none of the faculty initially indicated they used experiential learning concepts, and it was only through the questioning of what occurs in their classrooms that this utilization theme emerged. Intuitively, faculty recognized that adult learners bring solid life experiences that can help in the interpretation of the material being covered in a particular course. Also, they saw this as a means for engaging adult learners and using their prior knowledge gained through their life experience and work to generate practical examples to substantiate what they are learning in the classroom. Faculty used
the adult learner’s ability to correctly provide and apply these real-life examples as evidence that
the individual understood and could apply the newly learned concepts.

The one exception to this phenomenon is For Profit University, where Bloom’s Taxonomy is being used to ensure instrumental utilization and the meeting of terminal course objectives – i.e., it explicitly defined for practitioners the espoused practice standards for crafting curriculum and classroom activities grounded in adult learning theory. Bloom’s Taxonomy is a learning model that measures learning along six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Forehand 2005). When a course is shared with the faculty, it includes terminal course objectives, lecture notes, assignments, quizzes, exams, and a week-by-week breakdown of course material to be covered, as well as which terminal course objectives are to be met. Faculty members do have the freedom to supplement what is provided in the course shell, but, at the minimum, they must cover what is in the course shell.

The first question asked of both curriculum designers representing two of the five colleges of For Profit University was “is there any emphasis placed on any type of learning theories or strategies when faculty or other experts are brought on to design or redesign a course?” Both indicated that there is not a specific framework for that, but For Profit relies heavily on Bloom’s Taxonomy and a practitioner approach. One of the two shared that courses were designed such that in the first two weeks the course is “instructor-centered” but there is an aggressive approach to move toward student- or learner-centered and then student- or self-directed learning. As such, the guidelines provided through Bloom’s Taxonomy and their incorporation into their curriculum guidelines assures that application of concepts and curriculum development is applied with fidelity.
Summary Finding 4.

Adult learning theory was not seen as prescriptive guide on how to construct the learning experience, but rather as an existing competency that adult learners brought to the classroom that could be used to facilitate a shortened timeframe for course completion. As such, curriculum and instructional practices became transactional in nature—dependent upon the competency of the individual practitioner and/or organization focus. In many of the interviews, the focus was not on the application of adult learner concepts to the learning experience but rather on achieving the same content knowledge objectives used for traditional students. In other words, the adult learner was seen as bringing the life and work experiences to the learning process that allowed for an accelerated timeframe or created a need to keep them engaged through discussion.

Evidence for this claim was gleaned from the discussions with interviewees about the need for explicit incorporation of adult learner strategies in their instructional practices. When interviewed regarding practices in the classrooms, academic administrators tended not to express direct acknowledgement of adult learning theories or strategies. However, many of them discussed the importance of active learning in their classes so as not to have their adult learners become frustrated or bored. While several mentioned the importance of an active classroom (meaning a classroom management technique of engaged learners and not passive lectures), most of the academic administrators interviewed did not have formal training programs to instruct faculty on how to practice active learning or how to incorporate or acknowledge adult learning theories. Again, once the probing questions were utilized, the academic administrators acknowledged that they should be more intentional in their implementation. Despite this verbal acknowledgement, nearly all interviewees returned to the overarching concern about content and the need to adhere to a stringent timeline.
The exception, once again, was For Profit University that sought openly to engage the adult learner and to utilize their knowledge and experience in the classroom. When the author asked both curriculum designers at For Profit University about collaborative learning, one of them indicated that collaborative learning is inherent in the course objectives. She observed that “there were collaborative activities and all kinds of suggestions for group work, discussions, and active learning.” The other designer simply indicated that collaborative learning is in the curriculum guide. When asked about experiential learning in the courses they are responsible for, both indicated that experiential learning was built into their courses as well. For instance, one of them said that “capitalizing on their life and work experiences is built into the suggested classroom activities.” The other designer indicated that “the best way to motivate a student is to give them the opportunity to tell you about their experience or to bring their experience from home, work, life, or family and use these as a basis for us to teach them what they need to learn.” They also posited that assignments were crafted to capitalize on prior experience and learning.

One of the two curriculum designers said:

There are classes that have journaling exercises and that have reflective pieces in them . . . I believe standardized in every course there is a discussion around which objective did you learn the most from and how are you going to use what you learned in this class going forward?

The other designer indicated that in the science courses with labs:

At the end of the lab, the students reflect about how the lab went, what went wrong, who was able to succeed and get a result and who couldn’t and why. They share this experience and learn from each other.
How and to what degree is adult learning theory reflected in the organizational policies, mission statement, curriculum development processes, and educational instructional practices?

**Summary Finding 5.**

*The inclusion of adult learning theory and strategies in policies, training materials, and templates served to solidify the commitment to adult learning and sustain cultural practice norms that endorsed theoretical principles. Failure to document and standardize into organizational practice materials and norms permitted the initial commitment to adult learning principles to wane and dissipate.* The only institution included in this study that had any type of guide or template for curriculum design was For Profit University. At For Profit University, the curriculum for courses was regularly revised but still adhered to guidelines well delineated in two guides crafted in 2009 and 2010. As such, implementation continued to incorporate adult learning and other learning theories and models across time. Although there was some implicit adoption of adult learning principles, the remaining colleges or universities tended to gravitate toward using the same methodologies they used for traditional students when developing both curriculum and instructional practices. As such, the focus became one of adhering to traditional curriculum development but within a shortened timeframe—which as a result, meant they saw the task as condensing program specific content to meet that accelerated timeframe. This tended to preempt adult learning practice concerns.

**Summary Finding 6.**

*Often adult learning principles found their way into syllabi and sometimes instructional practices, but it appeared to be more the result of focus on engagement strategies than a*
commitment to adult learning theory. All higher education schools incorporated collaborative and/or experimental type learning activities into their syllabi. And most of the faculty interviewed incorporated collaborative learning activities in their classrooms. Some also integrated collaborative learning in their out-of-class assignments, although not all of them did so. According to those faculty at some of these institutions that did not incorporate collaborative learning, this choice was intentional. For instance, one of the criminal justice faculty at Northern College argued there was not enough time to allow for collaborative class projects and assignments. Most faculty, however, spoke about many different types of collaborative exercises taking place within their classes. Some of it was very structured and intentional. For example, one of the center deans at Non Profit University reported that “all of our classes have a team project that's incorporated into the curriculum.” As the dean noted, this choice signaled a commitment across the areas of study. For instance, sometimes a group was given a case study to be reviewed and analyzed as a group and then the analysis would be shared with the entire class.

Regardless of all the interview responses related to adult learning, most classroom observations demonstrated a limited application of these theories. Most of the faculty that were observed had their classrooms arranged in traditional rows whereby all students were facing forward with their backs to the students behind them. Additionally, for the time periods that were observed, most of the faculty delivered a standard lecture or had open discussion where the faculty member stood at the front of the room and students were acknowledged if they have a comment to share. In many of these cases, students did react to one another’s comments and were encouraged to do so. One faculty member who had her class “group up” in small groups indicated that she incorporates group projects and circle discussions in her class (collaborative). In her class, the author observed small group discussions and problem-solving.
As noted previously, only For Profit achieved a level of consistency in the integration of adult learner strategies. As noted previously, this was achieved primarily because of the crafting of “course shells” that served as curriculum templates and tended to standardize practice. Although this author’s observation of classroom revealed mostly “traditional” methodologies, syllabi indicated a heavy reliance on collaborative and experiential learning.

**How has the organization supported or impeded the adoption of adult learning theory in the curriculum and instructional practice processes affecting accelerated adult learning programs?**

**Summary Finding 7.**

There were two contextual factors identified as important to maintain a curriculum development process that was compliant with adult learning theory: first, the commitment of leadership to the non-traditional model of education; and second, the retention of centralized control over the curriculum process. Both factors were needed in order to achieve sustainability of organizational support efforts.

At For Profit University, in addition to references to adult learning theories within the curriculum guides and by the curricular designers, there was also utilization of other learning theories. Based on feedback from two of the five curriculum developers, the primary goal was to increase active learning, which indirectly incorporates collaborative and experiential learning and a practitioner based approach to curriculum development. Most relied on the Bloom’s Taxonomy in their course and curriculum design and revision efforts. This was the only higher education institution in the study that espoused a practice culture that embraced adult learning principles, had a committed leadership to the program, expended sufficient resources to ensure
ongoing training, and a centralized oversight structure to ensure these ideals were implemented with fidelity.

At the remaining institutions, even if there was an initial commitment to adult learning (e.g., Midwest Community College), the devolvement of curricular development and course revision responsibilities to the individual academic departments to which the course belongs resulted in a dissipation in commitment levels and a failure to fully implement. At Non Profit University, there was a change in 2009 transferring all responsibility of course revisions and curriculum development to the corresponding academic department rather than the School of Adult Education. At Midwest Community College, curriculum development and course revisions were assigned to the academic department to which the course belongs. At Northern College, some of the curriculum development and course revisions were handled by the accelerated department while others were managed by the main campus academic departments. Ultimately, there did not appear to be an incorporation of adult learning theories and strategies.

**Limitations**

**Research Design Limitations:**

Of note regarding limitations of this study was the small number of institutions included and the limited sampling technique. An effort was made to include different types of institutions that provide adult accelerated degree programs (multi-campus for-profit university, multi-campus not-for-profit university, a private college, and a community college) but, the overall number of four out of close to 300 and only one of each type is a limitation on the ability to generalize any of the findings. This significantly impaired the author’s ability to assess key factors such as the agency’s decision making structure and the type of institution (i.e., For Profit vs. Non-Profit).
Additionally, of the four institutions included, the number of participants who participated in the study was also limited both in number and scope of responsibility via their role at the institution. Only five individuals with responsibility for curriculum design were interviewed from the four institutions and only twenty-one faculty and administrators were interviewed regarding instructional practices in their adult accelerated degree programs. While the input from the administrators was interesting, their knowledge of classroom technique was limited. This significantly impaired the study’s ability to identify cultural characteristics that might have impeded or facilitated implementation.

A third and important limitation of this study’s design was the lack of inclusion of students (adult learners) and failure to solicit their input and feedback regarding how the curricular design and instructional practices impact them and if they prefer one type versus another. Their exclusion also did not permit the full testing of the theoretical model related to the long-term outcomes for students in the accelerated programs.

And finally, it is once again acknowledged that as a campus administrator within adult accelerated degree programs, the author had some inherent biases. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; it usually involves field work; primarily employs an inductive research strategy whereby the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories; and produces a richly descriptive product) (Merriam 1998). To assist with objectivity, the author utilized logic modeling as the primary means for interpreting and summarizing data. This helped to standardize the assumptions and factors that were considered in the analyses.
Theoretical Limitations:

There were three primary theoretical limitations to the study that were revealed by the implementation study. First, findings tend to suggest that Figure 1: Assumed Logic Flow—Tentative Practice Model rested on a faulty assumption that if conditions are met and the organization implements a curriculum protocol that explicitly endorses adult learning theory, positive student outcomes will be achieved. The implementation evaluation, however, clarified that it is not the explicit endorsement of adult learning theory that leads to good practice development, but rather the opposite, it is the presence of good practice modeling by the organization that drives the call for theory driven interventions. In other words, the success of the For Profit institution lay not in its explicit use of adult learning technologies—but rather, in its explicit endorsement of Bloom’s Taxonomy that provided the conceptual practice framework that a) linked teaching technologies (i.e., adult learning strategies) to improved student outcomes (i.e., achieved levels of learning); and b) provided the organization mechanisms to support compliance and accountability to the underlying espoused theory of change.

Second, the study clearly indicated the need to have a more sophisticated understanding of how educational institutions implement policy related to curriculum development. For example, it was not the lack of an explicit endorsement of adult learning theory that led to the failure to fully implement an adult learning theory practice model by the Midwest, Northern, and Non-Profit universities. Rather, it was the lack of organizational focus, oversight structure to ensure accountability, and the proclivity toward “non-reflective/non-reflexive” practice culture that failed to identify the need for theory driven interventions. As noted in Table 1: Feedback Loop Results, failure to meet adequacy requirements related to financial resources and
organizational structural supports thwarted efforts to improve curriculum development activities or to even recognize the lack of theory driven curricula as a problem.

And finally, the evaluation portion of this study points to the ongoing debate and tension between theory and practice. As noted in Chapter 1, practitioners often lapse into the use of technologies that are grounded partially in theory and best practice, but often are reflective of their “professional and personal experience” (Fortune & Reid, 1999, p.21). These theories in use often reflect a lack of fidelity to an espoused theory and the loss of proven utility. Therefore, although explicitly endorsing adult learning theory is a condition that supports accurate problem identification and implementation planning, it is the fidelity to the given espoused theory (i.e., practice model) that ensures the meeting of program standards and objectives.

**Implications for Practice**

The study results imply that higher education institutions should consider incorporation of practice models based in adult learning theory in curricular design and instructional practices in a more explicit fashion if they would like to excel in educating and engaging adult learners. Administrators of adult accelerated degree programs could provide more training and professional development with regard to knowing and understanding adult learning theories and how to incorporate those into their classroom instruction as well as assignments and activities. In consideration of how many faculty are hired for their industry experience instead of classroom expertise, providing them with resources and training to enhance their teaching and learning approaches could enhance the overall learning outcomes, experience, persistence and graduation of adult learners.

On a similar note, providing training guides to supplement the training would allow faculty to refer to the resource as they need. Providing a similar resource such as a curriculum
development guide to the faculty and curricular designers who design and develop these adult accelerated courses could also lead to an enhanced learning experience of these adult learners. This guide could also provide the appropriate framework to allow and encourage incorporation of adult learning theories to streamline the learning and introduce more effective means to reach the learning outcomes. This curriculum development guide could also remove the issue of simply altering the course calendar and remove the concerns about time constraints frequently cited by faculty teaching these adult accelerated courses.

**Future Research**

This study offers a platform from which to not only correct for research design issues, but also to build on the knowledge gained from the case reviews and implementation evaluation to initiate further research. Of particular interest would be:

- The impact that “type of institution” (i.e., For Profit vs. Non-Profit) on the implementation of standards related to the use of theory driven curriculum;
- Use of the cross-institution/formative evaluation methodology to identify exemplar practices that could be used to formalize a realistic practice model based on adult learning for testing and replication;
- The role of organizational culture in fostering theory based educational strategies and self-reflective practice;
- The impact of managerial oversight (type of hierarchical structure: centralized versus decentralized) on the ability to implement policies endorsing theory based educational strategies;
- Exploration of why institutions shifted from an initial influence of and reliance on adult learning theories to a more decentralized practitioner based approach;
• Conduct of quantitative analyses related to the impact of successful vs. non-successful implementation of an adult learning practice model on the long-term outcomes for adult learners in accelerated programs;
• Examination of the conditions leading to transactional use of theory and what higher educational institutions would need to do to become more efficient in using theory to guide instructional practices; and
• Inclusion of students in the analyses to allow for the retrospective or follow-up assessment of long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

This case study examined four institutions of higher education in New York to assess how well they have done at implementing a quality standard established by the Commission on Accelerated Programs (CAP) in 2011 and 2019 that accelerated adult programs should incorporate adult learning theory within their curricula and instructional practices. Advancing formative evaluation methods, this analysis demonstrated that if this standard is to be met, successful implementation must incorporate a practice model grounded in adult learning theory and a supportive organizational framework as well. Succinctly stated, practice wisdom and competency of individuals in teaching adults is necessary but not sufficient for successful implementation. Sufficiency will require organizational change and commitment.
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