

Chapter 12

Alverno Accelerate: A Paradigm–Changing Program for Professional and Personal Success

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ABSTRACT

With 50 years of experience in outcome-based, assessment-driven education, Alverno faculty understand the value of student-centered learning as the cornerstone of curriculum design and pedagogical practice. On the scaffold of the authors' experiences as senior faculty in Alverno's curriculum, this chapter explores how pedagogical and pragmatic considerations helped the Alverno Accelerate design team create a program that carefully considers its participants and puts the learner at the center of learning. Alverno Accelerate lets go of many of the canon principles of higher education, welcomes unbundled credits and work/life experiences, and collaborates with adult learners on their individual journeys to their bachelor's degree.

MEET ERIKA

When Erika left higher education years ago, she was frustrated. She felt as if she'd "wasted [her] education" (White, 2020). Too much of what she was doing in the classroom did not meet her educational needs and too much of what she was doing outside of the classroom "didn't count." Yet, while she was juggling the needs of four children attending three different schools that all went virtual during the Covid-19 pandemic, Erika began to toy with the idea of returning to college to complete her bachelor's degree. More than ever, Erika needed a degree program that would fit her life as a single parent and an experienced learner. Erika had already been a student in three different universities where she earned a total

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of 78 credits. She needed a program that would both value and accept those credits and be flexible and accountable to her as a learner. Erika enrolled in **Alverno Accelerate**, a program that would do just that.

The Alverno Accelerate design team¹ had Erika and students like her in mind when we first explored what it would mean to create a degree program that honored the way adult learners, as Erika puts it, “think and interact” with the world, and that validated their past professional and personal experiences. Building on Alverno College’s fifty years of experience in outcomes-based, assessment driven education, the design team understood the value of student-centered learning as the cornerstone of curriculum design and pedagogical practice (Loacker & Rogers, 2005; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000). Our team was intent to apply our Alverno experiences with outcomes to create a program that encompasses diversity, inclusion, individuation, and affordability; welcomes unbundled credits and work/life experiences; and collaborates with adult learners on their individual journeys to their bachelor’s degree.

BACKGROUND

Alverno Accelerate launched in 2020 and is an innovative, fully online program. The curriculum is built around five program outcomes that reflect the fundamentals of liberal arts education and the skills that graduates need to be successful in the twenty-first century workforce. Incorporating concepts and frameworks from various disciplines, including the arts, humanities, psychology, business, communication, and science, students earn a bachelor’s degree in leadership. While the program is designed so that students can complete their degree in three years, Alverno Accelerate learners are encouraged to move through the program at their own pace. Learners are placed in the program based on their prior experiences and accumulated credits. They complete learning activities individually and asynchronously with faculty providing developmental feedback that students use along with their own self-assessment to deepen their understanding of themselves as learners, professionals, and leaders. Their demonstration of outcomes becomes increasingly individualized as they progress through the program. Students understand the relevancy of what they are learning by applying it in real life situations at their workplace, in their communities, and with family and friends. In one of her initial self-assessments for the program’s orientation, Erika wrote that:

[Alverno] Accelerate gives me hope that what I will be learning will be valuable to me as a person and to the way I think and interact with my world. When I was considering returning to school and joining a more traditional program, I was left feeling . . . like finishing my degree was basically just a big gesture of ‘going through the motions’ . . . this program is really going to add value to me as a person and the way I function in my life and the world. (White, 2020)

From the start of Alverno Accelerate’s design process, the faculty team set out to counter the all too visible and disturbing defects in American higher education. The American educational system was formed in the late 18th century as a foundation for the guiding principles of democracy: to educate a select few individuals, mostly white middle- and upper-class males, in the ideas of a free society and prepare them for participation in civic life (Shapiro, 2009; Stevens & Kirst, 2015). Since then, higher education has shifted from its purpose and has become narrowly career-focused, content-heavy, and financially out of reach for many. Higher education has tried to adapt to a changing student population, but its structures and methodologies have remained fixed in antiquated and racist structures (hooks, 1994;

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