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A Case Study: The Evaluation of the Graduate Middle School Education Program at a Southeastern University

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A Case Study: The Evaluation of the Graduate Middle School Education Program at a
Southeastern University

By
Abbigail Armstrong

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2010

Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Abbigail Armstrong under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Dedication

For my father, the late Captain Jefferson, my teacher, my hero, my biggest fan!

Abstract

A Case Study: The Evaluation of the Middle School Education Program at a Southeastern University. Armstrong, Abbigail, 2009: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Graduate Middle Level Programs/Media Selection/Internet/Databases/Teacher Education

This dissertation was designed to determine reasons graduate students do not complete requirements for a Master's in Middle Level Education degree at the southeastern university. Since the program's initial on-campus cohort (2000) the graduation rate has decreased from 80% to 62.96% with the fourth on-campus cohort (2005). The current cohort currently has five students enrolled which will yield a 29% graduation rate depending on student choice. Program faculty is concerned about the increasing difference between the number of applicants and number of those completing the program.

The researcher conducted a program evaluation, using Guba and Lincoln's four phases of responsive evaluation, to determine the quality of the program as well as to receive feedback from former graduates (completers) and applicants (non-completers) of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. A survey, focus groups and one-on-one interviews were used to collect data. Participants were given multiple opportunities to participate in all three data collection methods and were encouraged to be honest and share any thoughts about the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

The data revealed that the most favorable outcomes of completing a Master's in Middle Level Education degree were receiving a pay raise, gaining knowledge about middle level curriculum and students, and career advancement. Overall more than 80% of participants of the study agreed the goals of the program were met. The data analysis also revealed barriers to the Master's in Middle Level Education program such as limited provisions of financial assistance and inconvenient or inconsistent course offerings.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Evidence exists from the late 1800s that students in middle grades are very different from elementary and secondary students. G. Stanley Hall published *Adolescence* in 1904 and was one of the earliest scholars to show the world that adolescents needed special attention, thus teachers would need specialized training (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005). Because of a recognized need for a place for adolescents, junior high schools began to form. Junior high schools began with adolescents' needs in mind but soon became more like high schools with practices such as departmentalization and rigid scheduling. One of the downfalls of junior high schools was the preparation of teachers to teach at this level (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947). "The middle school model is grounded in a belief that teaching students ages 11-14 is inherently different from teaching students in elementary grades or high school" (Huss, 2007, p. 1). Often middle-grades teachers have had elementary or secondary preparation (Cooney, 2000; Southern Regional Education Board, 1998). The consensus among middle level educators was that "teachers of young adolescents need specialized professional preparation to be highly successful" (National Middle School Association, 2006, n. p.). Preparation for elementary and secondary teaching was not adequate for teachers who taught 11-14 year-old students. Middle level educators needed to know their content as well as their students (Huss; Southern Regional Education Board, 2003; Frome, Lasater, & Cooney, 2005).

In the target state, middle level certification was not a requirement for teacher licensure for professionals wishing to teach in Grades 5-8 or 6-8. The target state's educators and politicians have recognized the inadequacies of curriculum and school structure for adolescence for many years (Virtue, 2007). As the target state "attempted to implement middle level certification in the late 1970s, the policy was never fully

implemented and the endorsement that replaced it was, in effect, nullified by the grade span overlaps between the elementary and secondary certificates” (Virtue, p. 5). In 1999, the target state’s governor created the Middle Grades Task Force “to address all areas impacting the middle grades” (Governor’s Middle Grades Task Force Report, 2001, p. 1). The task force made several recommendations which were specific to colleges and universities. The Task Force recommended:

1. Colleges of education, the State Department of Education, Leadership Academy, and the Principal’s Institute as a continuing part of training of middle-grades teachers and administrators, including preparation in critical middle grades organizational principles and practices responsive to the academic and developmental needs of early adolescents.

2. Colleges of education accelerate development of quality programs for training and retaining teachers.

3. Target state’s department of education and the Commission on Higher Education provide assistance and resources to help colleges develop and sustain middle-grades teacher training programs effective in preparing teachers for contemporary classrooms (Governor’s Middle Grades Task Force, pp. 5-7).

In response to the focus on middle level education, the southeastern university’s college of arts and sciences and college of education faculty designed a Master of Education (Master’s) in Middle Level Education program in compliance with these recommendations.

The southeastern university is a medium-sized university with a population of approximately 6,500 students located in Rock Hill, target state. The southeastern university is a liberal arts college consisting of colleges in arts and sciences, education,

business administration and visual and performing arts (About Winthrop, 2008, ¶2). The Master's in Middle Level Education Department is housed in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in a college of education and was "intended to serve middle school teachers in the piedmont region of the Carolinas with an emphasis on teachers within the immediate southeastern university area (Blackburn, 2004, n. p.). The Master's in Middle Level Education program is "a cohort-based" model and was designed to "provide foundational material in young adolescent pedagogy and subject matter content for licensed teachers in middle grades" (Masters of Education in Middle Level Education, 2008, ¶1).

The Master's in Middle Level Education degree was not designed for initial teacher licensure. Rather, it was designed for currently certified teachers to gain advanced knowledge and experience in their field. It was also designed to meet needs such as those mentioned in the Governor's Middle Grades Task Force Report. The Master's in Middle Level Education program trains teachers to understand and use the main organizational structures of middle school, developmentally responsive practices for young adolescents, and to be effective in contemporary classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

The first cohort of students in the Master's in Middle Level Education program began in fall 2000. At the end of the coursework, 80% of the students had completed the program. The second cohort beginning in 2002 had a 68.75% completion rate. The third cohort (2003) resulted in an 88% completion rate. Included in the cohorts is one in an adjacent state's school district (2004) in which 70% of the applicants finished the program. The next group, Cohort 4, began in 2005 and resulted in a 62.96% completion rate. Of the 17 applicants for Cohort 5, which began fall 2008, six currently remain and

five are enrolled in the Master's in Middle Level Education program. The anticipated graduation rate for Cohort 5 is 47.06%, depending on student choice as of December 2010. See Table 1.

Program faculty was concerned about the increasing difference between the number of applicants and number of those completing the program. This was not true for other programs in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Other programs such as the Master's in Curriculum and Instruction and Education Leadership had students with higher completion rates.

Table 1

Master's in Middle Level Education Cohorts

| | Applicants | Completers | Non-completers | Percentage |
|--|------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| Cohort 1 (2000) | 10 | 8 | 2 | 80 |
| Cohort 2 (2002) | 16 | 11 | 5 | 68.75 |
| Cohort 3 (2003) | 17 | 15 | 2 | 88 |
| NC School District Cohort (2004) | 20 | 14 | 6 | 70 |
| Cohort 4 (2005) | 27 | 17 | 10 | 62.96 |
| Cohort 5 (2008)- current cohort, no completers | 17 | 8 enrolled | -- | 47.06 |

The low percentage of completers alarmed the university and program administrators. The researcher was asked by the program coordinator to determine why enrolled students failed to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Purpose of the Study

The number of Master's degrees in education awarded nationally in 1986-1987 was 74,045 and increased to 101,242 by 1994-1995 (as cited in Blackwell & Diez, 1998). According to the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), "at the national-level, graduate enrollment has been consistently growing for at least two decades" (Council of Graduate Schools, 2006, p. 3). Despite the national trend of growth, the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university has declined in enrollment.

Even though research has shown an increase in enrollment in master's programs, the master's degree has lost its prestige due to lack of quality (Blackwell & Diez, 1998). According to Blackwell and Diez, two reasons existed for lack of quality in Master's programs. First, master's programs had become completion of course work and lacked practical application and meaning. Blackwell and Diez also asserted that often students decided to enroll in a different type of advanced program promoted by their school, college, or department of education. Programs such as National Board Certification "offer a way for teachers to use data from their own practice and from the work of their students to demonstrate the impact of their teaching on student achievement" (Isenberg, 2003, p. 13). In a study by Dawkins and Penick (1999) regarding teacher preference for advanced degrees, the researchers found that the most prevalent barriers teachers listed for pursuing a master's degree were time (to devote to the degree), money and family responsibilities, test anxiety, inability to complete assignments, and the manner in which courses are offered such as spring and fall only courses which may delay graduation.

The barriers may be found in the lower percentage of completers of the Master's in Middle Level Education at a southeastern university. Using Dawkins and Penick's (1999) list of prevalent barriers, the researcher determined if any of these reasons existed

in the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university.

The purpose of this study was to examine the quality of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university. A responsive evaluation was used to conduct the study to determine program quality (Stake, 2004). Stake described how the use of this evaluation would assist in discovering stakeholder concerns (Stake). The researcher used an original survey that was piloted and also focus groups and interviews to collect data from past and present program participants. Participants were asked to respond to factors that affect enrollment and completion rates. The researcher studied the effects of outcomes on retention and completion in the program.

The survey was used to collect data from all participants (completers and non-completers) who enrolled in the last five cohorts in the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university. Information from the survey assisted the researcher in developing questions for the focus groups as a first step in triangulating and verifying responses and to distinguish emerging themes. Focus groups were used with completers and non-completers to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the program. Focus groups also gave the participants the opportunity to cite other reasons for non-completion. Individual interviews with completers and non-completers were conducted to verify themes from focus groups and gave participants an opportunity to cite other reasons they wanted to express. See Table 2.

Table 2

Crosswalk of Evaluation Data Collection

| Research Questions | Data Collection Instrument(s) | Evidence | Themes Indicated in Question |
|--|-------------------------------|---|---|
| 1. A southeastern university provided resources | Survey | Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis | Financial aid opportunities Course offerings (online) |
| 2. Master's in Middle Level Education goals and objectives | Survey | Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis | Leadership Middle level philosophy Adolescent development Responsive middle school |
| 3. Master's in Middle Level Education outcomes | Survey | Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis | Career advancement Salary increase Leadership opportunities |
| 4. Barriers to completing the Master's in Middle Level Education program | Survey | Survey Data Focus Group/ Interview Analysis | Financial aid Personal reasons Teacher certification reasons Program satisfaction |

The information gathered from the program evaluation was used to make informed decisions about needed changes for the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university. Deans of 481 American colleges and universities were surveyed in 2008 regarding top issues students face in colleges and universities. Of the 167 useable surveys, 90% of the deans cited financial aid as the top pressing issue for their students (CGS, 2008). Of the barriers listed by Dawkins and Penick (1999), time constraints, money, and family reasons were the top three.

Information from the study provided data for the southeastern university program faculty which will be used to make programmatic changes as needed. In addition, the data will become part of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education

(NCATE) report for the southeastern university. Because of the decreasing number of graduates of the program, the Dean of the College of education, the Curriculum and Instruction department chair, program faculty, and department faculty have discussed the economic implications of continuing a program with a history of low completion rates. Program faculty at the southeastern university wanted data-driven information in order to determine factors impacting retention, and to inform decisions about needed programmatic changes.

Limitations

The researcher based her data analysis on information collected from one college of education housed in one university with a small sample of students from the southeastern university. The results of the study are representative of a very small population.

The researcher is a former graduate of the Master's in Middle Level Education program and is currently a part of the program faculty of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. Due to the researcher's status, participants may have been less likely to participate in focus groups and one-on-one interviews due to the lack of anonymity. Because the researcher is connected with the Master's in Middle Level Education program, her research could be viewed as biased.

Participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis. There were no rewards or punishments for participants. Because participation in the study was voluntary and there were no incentives, participant numbers were low. Also because a number of the participants knew the researcher, they may have been likely to answer in a way that the researcher would perceive as favorable.

Delimitations

A number of participants for the study, with the exception of the eight who are currently enrolled, were not easily accessible. The researcher was able to obtain completer contact information for 68 of the 73 completers. The researcher made the decision to exclude the five completers who could not be contacted. Contact information for non-completers was unavailable, limited or incorrect. The researcher was only able to contact 12 of the 35 non-completers. The non-completers were the most challenging to locate since they had not enrolled in a middle level program class. There was no way to track them via program records or alumni relations. The researcher made the decision to exclude the 23 non-completers who could not be contacted.

This responsive evaluation was designed to determine answers to questions in the minds of the southeastern educational personnel. The following research questions were designed to determine the status of the current program.

Research Questions

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the southeastern university?
2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education at the southeastern university fulfill its program goals and objectives?
3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?
4. What are the barriers to an effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?

Significance

Although program feedback had been gathered from graduates of the Master's in

Middle Level Education program, no recent data had been collected from those who did not complete the program. The researcher will use program outcomes and barriers to inform faculty of the components of the program that students valued and the ones that were considered disadvantages. The researcher used outcomes to inform faculty of the positive aspects of the program. Reviewing specific student responses in regard to personal factors, monetary factors, and certification factors provided additional information to decision makers regarding the program at the southeastern university. Because the southeastern university had not conducted a program evaluation to determine reasons for the significant increase in non-completers, this body of research assisted with future decisions regarding program status.

Definitions

The terms that will be used for the study are defined as follows:

Applicants. All persons who have applied for admission to the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Barriers. All factors preventing applicants from completed the program such as personal, monetary and teacher licensure reasons.

Completers. All applicants who completed the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Contextual components. The design of the Master's in Middle Level Education program, including the relationship between the program standards, National Board Certification standards, and the southeastern university Conceptual Framework.

Goals, objectives and original plan. Mission, goals and purpose of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university including target audience and benefits.

Middle school. A school in between elementary and high school, housed separately and, ideally, in a building designed for its purpose, and covering usually three of the middle school years, beginning with Grade 5 or 6 (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 370).

Monetary reasons. Factors related to personal life such as lack of financial aid or scholarships, job loss, financial hardship.

Non-completers. All applicants who were accepted into the Master's in Middle Level Education program but did not complete the program.

Outcomes. Benefits or gains of completing a Master's in Middle Level Education.

Personal reasons. Factors related to personal life such as the birth of a child, relocation, status change, chose another graduate program.

Program coordinator. Program faculty member assigned coordination duties, including but not limited to, scheduling, student recruitment, and program evaluation (Blackburn, personal communication, January 27, 2009).

Program faculty. All faculty who teach in the required middle level core (Blackburn, personal communication, January 27, 2009).

Resources. Scholarships, graduate assistantships, incentives related to receiving a degree.

Teacher licensure reasons. Factors such as career certification requirements.

Transecence. The period in human development that begins in late childhood prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 371).

Young adolescents. Youth between the ages of 10-15 (NMSA, 2003, p. 43).

Summary

Teachers and educators who work with young adolescent students need

specialized training (NMSA, 2006). In response to middle level education trends, the southeastern university created a Master's in Middle Level Education program. Even though the Master's in Middle Level Education degree was not designed for initial certification, it has provided certified teachers an opportunity to gain advanced knowledge in their field. The number of graduates of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university began to decline and program faculty were concerned. The program coordinator requested a program evaluation. Evaluating the program allowed professors and administrators at the southeastern university in the college of education to discern future needs. The researcher provided current research-based data to assist with their program decision(s).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Middle Level Education History

The call for middle level education occurred as early as 1905 with the publication of *Adolescence* by G. Stanley Hall (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005). In the early 1900s Hall studied over 4000 adolescents in order to create a set of recommendations related to the special attention needed for the age group (Lounsbury & Vars). In *Adolescence* (1904), Hall made six recommendations for adolescents:

1. Differentiated curricula for students with different futures, that is, an efficient curriculum, including an education for girls that emphasized preparation for marriage and motherhood.
2. The development of manhood through close supervision of the body, emphasizing exercise and team sports and minimizing draining academic study.
3. An education that drew upon and utilized the expression of (boy-stage) emotions through emphases on loyalty, patriotism, and service.
4. A curricula sequence informed by recapitulation theory or cultural epochs (i.e., study of the focused upon “great scenes”: sacred and profane myths and history, from folklore and fairy tales of reformation and nationalization. Stories of great men would be used throughout to draw boys into the tales and to build on their natural interest).
5. A school program that kept boys as boys and discouraged precocity or assuming sexual adult roles at a young age.
6. An administration gaze schooled to watch youthful bodies (as cited in G. Stanley Hall, 2009, n.p.).

This publication was one of the earliest attempts to show the world that adolescents needed special attention, thus teachers would need specialized training. After

the release of *Adolescence*, similar statements about the uniqueness of adolescents and accommodating their needs began to appear in other literature (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). Because of a recognized need for a place for adolescents, over the next decade (1905-1918), junior high schools began to form.

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education produced the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. The principles laid out the focus for students in Grades 6-12 specifically noting that during the junior high school phase the focus should be on the student's well-being as well as emphasis and introduction to core subjects and related arts and vocational studies (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005). The aims of secondary education were (a) health, (b) command of fundamental processes, (c) worthy home membership, (d) vocation, (e) worthy use of leisure, and (f) ethical character (National Education Association of the United States, 1921. n.p.). The term adolescence was not used but the focus resembled those that would later be published about adolescent needs in documents such as *This We Believe* and *Turning Points*.

Two books with the same name, *The Junior High School*, were published by Thomas H. Briggs and Leonard V. Koos, leading advocates for the junior high school in the 1920s (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005). Their purpose was to define the failing junior high school structure because in the 1920s the focus was on improving junior high schools.

Junior high schools were initially built on the principles of what adolescents needed, but by the 1930s operated as mini-high schools. They were departmentalized which hurt innovative instruction and left little room for adolescent needs, such as flexible scheduling (Wiles & Bondi, 2001, p. 9). A comprehensive 8-year study was launched in 1934 by the Progressive Education Association. The results were published

approximately a decade later but received little attention because America was involved in World War II. Ideas that grew out of the study such as collaborative teaching and democratic settings are similar to key middle level principles used in 2009. In 1946, junior high schools, separate from the high school, were a normal practice but were under much scrutiny (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947). As a call to the reorganization of junior high schools, Gruhn and Douglass published *The Modern Junior High*, which included sets of principles supporting junior highs and outlining the special needs of adolescents. The principles focused on what needed to happen in junior high reorganization to be better prepared to serve its age group. One principle in particular focused on the need for an organization that would accommodate the following adolescent needs:

1. The need for economy of time in the program of elementary and secondary education.
2. The need for closer articulation between the elementary and the secondary school.
3. The need for an educational organization and program which is suited to the nature of adolescents.
4. The need for better retention of pupils, especially in Grades 6 to 9.
5. The need for earlier differentiation of instruction in terms of the needs, interests, and capacities of individual pupils (Gruhn & Douglass, 1947, p. 47).

Gruhn and Douglass (1947) also noted the need for specialized training for teachers working with adolescents. “In the early junior high schools there were few teachers specially trained for junior high work” (Gruhn & Douglass, p. 423). At this point teachers were either trained to teach in an elementary school or in a secondary school (Gruhn & Douglass).

In the 1960s, the *Growth of Adolescence* was published and continued to support the argument that adolescents have special needs (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005). J. M. Tanner, the author, came to the conclusion that adolescents began the process of significant changes in Grades 6-8 rather than 7-9 as cited in earlier research (Lounsbury & Vars, p. 4). Tanner's research gave "clear biological basis for middle school and also recognized the social-emotional concerns of young adolescents" (Lounsbury & Vars, p. 4). In 1963, Bill Alexander addressed the Tenth Annual Conference of School Administrators at Cornell University calling for a "new school in the middle" (Alexander, 1963, n. p.). The recommendation was curriculum-based, supported by research such as Coleman's study of the *Adolescent Society* and built on the strengths of the junior high school structure (Alexander). Inherent in the recommendations is the need for specialized teacher preparation for those who work with young adolescents. Alexander addressed specialized teacher preparation in his tentative model for a middle school noting, "It would also facilitate the reorganization of teacher education sorely needed to provide teachers competent for the middle school; since existing patterns of neither elementary nor secondary teacher training would suffice, a new pattern would have to be developed" (Alexander, n. p.).

Alexander (1963) also outlined in his speech characteristics a junior high should have in order to meet the needs of young adolescents and new characteristics that should be added for a middle school. Junior high functions that lend themselves to a middle school are:

1. To be a transitional institution between elementary and high school.
2. To have a program of its own especially adopted for the needs of preadolescent and early adolescent pupils.

3. To provide exploratory experiences.
4. To provide continued general education.

Other characteristics sought but not evident in the junior high school were individualization of instruction, flexible curriculum, and an emphasis on values.

The speech provided a foundation for the middle school movement. Alexander (1963) was able to outline how a school especially for adolescents should function but he also emphasized the importance of the training of individuals who would be teaching and working with adolescents. In order for teachers to meet these recommendations, special training would be required. Alexander also stated that a middle school model for teachers should include 5 to 6 years of college training, 3 or more years of successful teaching experience before permanent licensure, and a major in a student's field through a Master's degree.

For the next decade the number of middle schools continued to grow with little focus on middle level teacher preparation. Most teachers in middle schools were either elementary or secondary certified and were not prepared to handle the content or were unable to handle the needs of an adolescent. In 1970, a group of educators and administrators formed the Midwest National Middle School Association which later became the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in 1973. The goal of this organization was to support middle level education (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005). Such an organization was necessary because its members would have the experience required to take a stand on middle level educator preparation. At the 1979 NMSA annual conference, the board was petitioned to release a statement on middle level teacher preparation. This was the new organization's first attempt to take a position on middle level teacher certification. The initial draft was accepted and published in 1981 and published again in

1986 with changes and additions. The revised edition, *Professional Certification and Preparation for the Middle Level*, was published in 1991 (Lounsbury & Vars, p. 7). The publication laid out in detail what teachers need in order to be prepared to teach middle level students.

In 1982, NMSA released its first position statement about the needs of adolescents, titled *This We Believe*. This statement consisted of key points detailing the needs of young adolescents, called the “essential elements of a true middle school” (NMSA, 1982, p. 10). Among the 10 characteristics listed was the need for knowledgeable educators who were committed to working with adolescents.

1. Educators knowledgeable about and committed to transescents (adolescents)
2. A balanced curriculum based on transescent needs.
3. A range of organizational arrangements.
4. Varied instructional strategies.
5. A full exploratory program.
6. Comprehensive advising and counseling.
7. Continuous progress for students.
8. Evaluation procedures compatible with nature of transescents.
9. Cooperative planning.
10. Positive school climate (NMSA, p. 10).

The document became a resource for those wishing to create an environment conducive to educating young adolescents.

Prompted by changes in technology and science and the state of education in the United States, the Carnegie Corporation of New York established the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (Carnegie Council) in 1986. Their first action was the

establishment of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents. The Task Force examined research and spoke with individuals knowledgeable of this group such as teachers and youth leaders. They also examined “promising new approaches to fostering the education and healthy development of young adolescents” (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 13). In 1989, they produced *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, a report describing principles for success of young adolescents:

1. Large middle grade schools are divided into smaller communities for learning.
2. Middle grade schools transmit a core of common knowledge to all students.
3. Middle grade schools are organized to ensure success for all students.
4. Teachers and principals have the major responsibility and power to transform middle grade schools.
5. Teachers for the middle grades are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents.
6. Schools promote good health; the education and health of young adolescents are inextricably linked.
7. Families are allied with school staff through mutual respect, trust and communication.
8. Schools and communities are partners in education young adolescents.

Similar to *This We Believe*, the principles of *Turning Points* placed an emphasis on the need for teachers who were prepared to teach and work with adolescents.

In 1991, NMSA became a constituent of the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) to improve middle level educator preparation. NMSA created a set of guidelines, approved by NCATE in order for teacher preparation institutions to ensure the appropriate training for future educators based on NMSA

teacher preparation standards (Tibbles, Dickinson, & McEwin, 1991). The guidelines included standards for initial teacher licensure (basic teacher education), Master's, specialist and doctoral programs. Tibbles et al. stated, "the Master's degree program should enhance the general expertise of middle level educators by ensuring a deeper more comprehensive understanding of early adolescent learners and schooling that is responsive to students' developmental nature and needs" (p. 13). The guidelines for the graduate education program should include:

1. Major theories and research findings concerning early adolescent development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and moral.
2. The history, philosophy, and future development of middle level education.
3. Curriculum theories and research focusing on middle level education.
4. Pedagogy appropriate for early adolescent learners.
5. Advanced study in one or more teaching fields.
6. A culminating examination, project, or thesis that links theory and practice.

The guidelines approved by NCATE served as a blueprint for institutions to follow as they created middle level education programs (Tibbles et al., 1991).

In the early 1990s, adolescents were still being taught primarily by teachers trained in other areas due to the lack of middle level education preparation programs (McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995). In 1995, NMSA revised *This We Believe* and published *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Schools*. The earlier principles were retained and even though these principles were broader, they reiterated the need for special preparation needed for middle level educators. "Educators need specific preparation before they enter middle level classrooms and continuous professional development as they pursue their careers" (NMSA, 1995, p. 14).

Two years later the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (National Forum) was initiated. The purpose of the National Forum was to “promote the academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents” (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005, p. 10) and to identify exemplary middle schools using the following criteria: (a) academic excellence; (b) developmental responsiveness; (c) social equity; and (d) organizational structure. The National Forum also supported the need for specialized training for middle grades educators (National Forum, 2002). The organization stated that due to the many challenges that adolescents face, “high quality teacher preparation is a must” (National Forum, n. p.). The middle grades forum recommends that pre-service teachers be adequately trained in the three following areas “in order to ensure that middle-grades teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach their students well” (National Forum, n. p.).

1. Academic excellence: Middle-grades teachers must have a deep understanding of both the subjects they teach and how to help young adolescents learn the concepts and skills of demanding criteria.

2. Developmental responsiveness: Middle-grades teachers must have a solid understanding of early adolescence, as well as skills and dispositions to work with young adolescents’ unique developmental challenges.

3. Equity and cultural diversity: Middle-grades teachers must have a wide repertoire of skills, mixed with a sustained sense of hope, support, and expectations for achievement, to enhance learning and development for the most racially and ethnically diverse school population in our nation’s history (National Forum, n. p.).

In 2000, the Carnegie Corporation revisited and expanded *Turning Points* publishing *Turning Points 2000*. The purpose of the revised publication was to “help

bridge the gap between current unacceptable levels of intellectual development and a future in which every middle grades student meets or exceeds high academic standards and other key indicators of a successful school experience” (Carnegie Council, 2000, p. 10). In order to meet this requirement, teachers must be specifically trained to work with young adolescents. The recommendations in *Turning Points 2000* reflected what the Carnegie Corporation learned since the original eight principles were released in 1989. The belief that middle schools should be staffed with expert teachers (experts in teaching adolescents) was retained but also included that teachers need ongoing training (Carnegie Council, p. 23).

In 2003, NMSA again revised, *This We Believe*, publishing *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. The principles included were built on the original principles but with clarification on training educators. Not only must successful middle schools include educators who value and are committed to working with adolescents, but the school itself must be committed to the program (NMSA, 2003).

Target State Middle Level History

Middle schools have existed in the target state since the 1960s and “by 1969 the state board adopted a formal definition of middle schools” (as cited in Virtue, 2007, p. 4). In 1970, the target state printed a set of guidelines for middle schools. In the late 1970s steps were taken to implement middle level certification, but this attempt resulted only in an endorsement in the four core content areas (Virtue). “On March 8, 1974, the target state’s Board of Education adopted standards for middle schools, which included special qualifications for teachers that were to be fully implemented by July 1, 1977” (as cited in Virtue, p. 4). With the introduction of *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, the target state turned its focus back on middle schools. The state began

using the 6th-8th grade configuration for middle schools, but failed to implement key concepts such as interdisciplinary teaming, curriculum planning and advisory programs (Virtue).

The Middle Grades Task Force was formed in 1999 by the state's governor with the purpose of conducting a needs assessment of the condition of the state's middle schools and to make recommendations to state leaders. To have middle level certification in the target state was one of the Task Force's recommendations approved by the target state's Board of Education in 2000 and was ratified by the General Assembly in 2001 (Virtue, 2007). In 2005, the certification grade span officially became Grades 5-8 to eliminate overlap in elementary and secondary schools (Virtue). Currently, teachers in the target state have two options for middle level teacher preparation, middle level certification and add-on certification or The Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE).

The ratification of middle level education certification was a call to action for colleges and universities across the state.

Master's in Middle Level Education at a Southeastern University

The original intent of the Master's in Middle Level Education program was to provide an advanced study option for teachers in current middle schools, who had not received specialized preparation in middle level learners. The teachers were certified, either elementary or secondary, and the original target state teacher certification law included a grandfather clause, allowing teachers to receive middle level certification based on experience. A need for training existed and many teachers wanted an option for an advanced degree in their teaching field.

To guide the Master's in Middle Level Education program design, faculty used

current middle level teacher preparation literature from organizations such as the NMSA (Blackburn, Vare, & Costner, 2004) to make collaborative decisions about course design (see Appendix A). Faculty designed the program based on four key elements:

1. Collaborative design—use of a collaborative effort between the College of education, College of Visual and Performing Arts and professional development schools to accomplish three goals: provide professional development on current middle level practices for partnership faculty, foster ownership of a program, and support program design with scholarly research-based sources and “practitioner expertise.”

2. Standards based alignment—program designed to show alignment of the university’s Advanced Conceptual Framework, NMSA standards, NCATE guidelines and National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Core Propositions.

3. Focus on teacher leadership—designed to build teachers as leaders by fostering an environment for personal vision building, inquiry, mastery and collaboration.

4. Ongoing redesign—continuous evaluation of the program (Blackburn et al., 2004).

Summary

In over a century many changes have occurred in middle level education. From the early 1900s the main focus in education was elementary and secondary educators. Based on the works published in *Adolescence* by G. Stanley Hall (<http://education.staeuniversity.com/pages/2026/Hall-G-Stanley-1844-1924.html>) and *The Modern Junior High* by Gruhn and Douglass (1947), the message that students in the middle grades needed special attention was apparent. Junior high schools were designed to remedy this problem but after many decades of problems, proponents of junior high school also realized that the needs of adolescents were not being met. Although middle

schools began to form, there was a lapse of time before there was focus on the need for professionals in the schools to receive special training for students with such unique needs. William “Bill” Alexander, in his plan for a “school in the middle,” created the foundation for how a true middle school should function (Alexander, 1963, n. p.). He included in his plan the need for teachers to be specialized in their subject matter as well as working with adolescents. Since his original call, organizations such as the National Middle School Association, National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades and individuals such as John Lounsbury and Ken McEwin (Lounsbury & Vars, 2005) have been advocates for middle grades education and proponents of special training for teachers of middle grades education.

School systems, colleges and universities in the target state responded to the focus on middle level education by creating graduate level programs and professional development in order for teachers to be more knowledgeable of young adolescents. The Governor’s Task Force, created in 1999 was formed in response to national trends to make recommendations for all involved with middle level education. The southeastern university’s faculty created a program in line with the Governor’s Task Force recommendations as well as recommended principles of middle level educators.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university experienced a steady decline in enrollment and graduate faculty was concerned about the future of the program. Therefore, the program coordinator requested that a program evaluation be conducted. The purpose of this study was to examine the quality of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university. In order to make informed decisions about programmatic changes, faculty and the administration wanted and needed data-driven information. This responsive evaluation was conducted per the request of the program coordinator.

At the southeastern university, the Master's in Middle Level Education candidates were divided into cohorts. The first cohort began in the fall of 2000 and since then, four other cohorts have completed the program. The fourth cohort known as the adjacent state school district (ASSD) cohort was an off-campus cohort. The fifth on-campus cohort began in the fall of 2008. During cohorts one through four (ASSD cohort included), the completion rate decreased from 80% to 62.96%. Program faculty and administration (dean of college of education, chair of curriculum and instruction department, and dean of graduate studies) expressed concern about the increasing difference between the number of applicants and number of those completing the program. Program leaders have expressed concern and want data-driven information in order to determine factors impacting retention and to inform decisions about needed programmatic changes.

This study assessed resources provided, goals and objectives met, outcomes, and barriers of a Master's in Middle Level Education Degree at the southeastern university as perceived by graduates and non-completers of the program. Participants of the study were

questioned about outcomes of the program and reasons they had for completing or not completing the program.

Participants

The participants for this study came from three counties in the university's state and two counties in an adjacent state. The participants included all applicants of the Master's in Middle Level Education program who completed the program as well as applicants who did not complete the program. Seventy-three applicants completed (completers) the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education program and thirty-five applicants did not complete (non-completers) the program.

Master's of Education in Middle Level Education Program Description

The Master's in Middle Level Education program is a graduate program housed in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the college of education. The program is "a cohort-based" model and is designed to "provide foundational material in young adolescent pedagogy and subject matter content for licensed teachers in middle grades" (Masters of Education in Middle Level Education, 2008, p. 1).

The program consists of a total of 36-39 hours, 9 hours in the professional core, 15 hours of middle level education core courses, and 12-15 hours of a disciplinary focus: language arts, math, science, and social studies (see Appendix A). The Master's in Middle Level Education degree was not designed for initial teacher licensure. Rather, it was designed for currently certified teachers to gain advanced knowledge and experience in their field.

Research Questions

The researcher conducted an evaluation using a responsive model. Because of the emergent nature of responsive evaluations (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) questions may

change during the course of the study. The researcher used the following questions to guide the study:

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the southeastern university?
2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education at the southeastern university fulfill its program goals and objectives?
3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?
4. What are the barriers to an effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used for data collection. Pragmatists usually favor a mixed-methods design so they will not have to commit to one type of research, qualitative or quantitative (Creswell, 2003). A mixed-methods approach includes “closed and open ended questions, both emerging and predetermined approaches, and both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis” (Creswell, p. 19).

The design of the study was primarily qualitative in nature because the results were based on themes instead of statistics unlike quantitative studies whose results are normally statistical (Patten, 2007). However a survey, a more quantitative research method, was used to collect data; therefore, the study was implemented following a quantitative-qualitative strategy.

Quantitative research results in numeric data that allows the researcher to make a generalization of the whole population (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative research is also less biased. Qualitative research can be useful if a topic is new or has never been studied

before with a particular group (as cited in Fink & Kosecoff, 1998). A program evaluation had never been initiated for the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university.

The researcher conducted a program evaluation in order to determine reasons graduate students did not complete requirements for a Master's in Middle Level Education degree at a southeastern university. Interviews with completers were used to inform the study regarding their reasons for completing the program. Questions for completers enhanced questions for non-completers. Evaluation research is pre-experimental and Patten (2007) recommended that a quasi-experimental design be used.

Evaluation research is different from traditional research “which seeks to develop theory and scientific knowledge” (Nestor, 2001, p. 85). Rather, evaluation research “seeks an immediate practical use of its findings” and provides immediate knowledge for decision making (Nestor, p. 86). Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006) stated, “evaluation research is the systematic process of collecting and analyzing data about the quality, effectiveness, merit, or value of programs, products, or practices” and focuses on decision making (p. 7). The program faculty, who were the primary stakeholders, were concerned about the quality of the Master's in Middle Level Education program and needed to make a decision about the future of the program. The researcher's intent was to find the cause or causes for the decrease in the completion rate of the Master's in Middle Level Education applicants. Once the evaluation is complete, the results will be used to make decisions about the future of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. The results will also be used to provide data to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) related to the rationale for any program changes.

The researcher used a responsive model to evaluate the Master's in Middle Level

Education program at the southeastern university. According to Stake (2004), “to become acquainted with a program’s problems, responsiveness usually calls for observing its activities, interviewing those who have some role or stake in the program, and examining relevant documents” (p. 90). A responsive evaluation allowed the researcher to become acquainted with program problems and begin the process of helping the program coordinator and program faculty acquire a solution. The responsive program evaluation assisted the researcher in discovering responses concerning program quality (Stake). Responsive evaluation describes program quality and is responsive to the concerns of stakeholders (Gall et al., 1996; Stake); therefore, it is an appropriate framework for evaluating the Master’s of Education in Middle Level Education. Responsive models “take as their point of focus not objectives, decisions, effects, or similar organizers but the claims, concerns, and issues put forth by members of a variety of stakeholding audiences....who are in some sense involved with the evaluation” (Guba & Lincoln, 1987, p. 208). Four phases of responsive evaluation as cited by Guba and Lincoln (1989) were soliciting concerns, discussing the concerns with all stakeholders, data collection on unresolved claims, and negotiation of unsettled claims once data has been collected (see Appendix B).

Mixed Methods. This study applied the sequential model of data analysis. Data were analyzed as collected from the survey. Answers were analyzed and emergent themes were identified from data collected from focus groups and one-one-one interviews. Responsive evaluation permitted the inclusion of data from multiple sources and the collection of data through multiple means, resulting in both quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, the data analysis sequentially followed the phases outlined in the evaluation. The issues and concerns were initially elicited from the southeastern

university's college of education teaching staff and administration and from students through surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews. In sections one and three of the survey, results were calculated by number of responses to each part of the question and reported using descriptive statistics. The analysis of quantitative data in questions 8-22 on the survey were provided through frequencies and percentages. The first six items in section three of the survey were forced choice. Such analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data allowed the researcher to confirm and corroborate the findings.

Methods for Data Collection

Data Gathering Process. The data gathering process began in August 2008 with a faculty meeting at the southeastern university. Table 3 reflects the sequence of events and explanations.

Table 3

Data Collection Timeline

| Phase | Description | Activity | Timeline |
|-----------|--|---|---|
| Phase I | Stakeholders are identified and are solicited for those claims, concerns, and issues that they may wish to introduce. | Faculty met to discuss concerns | August 2008 |
| Phase II | The claims, concerns, and issues raised by each stakeholder group are introduced to all other groups for comment, refutation, agreement, or whatever reaction may please them. | Faculty meetings continued Program evaluation requested | September 2008- January 2009 |
| Phase III | Those claims, concerns, and issues that have not been resolved become the advance organizers for information collection by the evaluator. The gathered information may be quantitative or qualitative. | Survey instrument piloted and prepared Researcher began data collection Surveys were completed via internet Focus groups and one-on-one interviews were facilitated Data transcribed by outside evaluator Themes tabulated by researcher | September 2009- November 2009 |
| Phase IV | Negotiation to reach consensus among stakeholders takes place under guidance of the evaluator using information that has been collected. | Summary of survey sent to participants Member checking Data collection concluded Report prepared and shared with stakeholders (program faculty and administration) | November 2009- December 2009 December 2009- January 2010 |

Phase I. During this phase, all stakeholders were identified and asked to discuss their concerns. The College of Education Master's in Middle Level Education program faculty and administration initially met on August 19, 2008, to discuss the graduate program changes. All stakeholders were concerned about the small number of program enrollees and the decreasing graduation rate. Faculty met again on September 26, 2008,

to discuss programmatic changes as related to NCATE.

Phase II. During this phase, each stakeholder concern was introduced to other stakeholders for comments. The southeastern university faculty met on October 10, 2008, November 7, 2008, and January 22, 2009 and the Master's in Middle Level Education program was discussed and all stakeholders discussed their concerns. Program faculty suggested that recruitment and retention efforts be a major goal for the faculty. Administration suggested the Master's in Middle Level Education become a specialization area as a part of the Master's in Curriculum and Instruction program. The program coordinator requested a program evaluation be done so that decisions about the program would be data-driven.

Phase III. The issues that had not been resolved, such as what needs to happen with the Master's in Middle Level Education program to increase enrollment and graduates, became the guidelines by which the researcher collected her research. The issue of the future of the Master's in Middle Level Education was still uncertain and had not been resolved. The researcher began data collection during this phase. The researcher sent a letter to all prospective participants describing her intent for the study. Upon response from the participants, the survey link was emailed. Once the surveys had been collected, the researcher facilitated focus groups and recorded the session for accuracy. Once the focus groups concluded, the researcher scheduled one-one-one interviews with a sample of participants who did and did not complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Phase IV. During this phase, results from data collection were shared. A summary report of survey findings was sent to all participants who wished to see it. They specified on the survey that a copy of the report be sent to them for review. A full report of the

findings including survey data, focus group and interview feedback was compiled along with recommendations and shared with program faculty and administration. Once the data had been collected and analyzed, it was shared with primary stakeholders.

A quantitative-qualitative mixed methods approach was used for data collection. Traditionally the types of data used in qualitative studies include interviews, observations, focus groups, and some type of document collection (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). “Qualitative methods are often used in evaluations because they tell the program’s story by capturing and communicating the participants’ stories” (Patton, p. 10). Surveys, typically quantitative data collection tools, were also used (Creswell, 2003). The researcher collected data for this study using an original survey, focus groups, and interviews, respectively. Surveys were completed by all applicants, completers and non-completers, who applied for admission into the Master’s in Middle Level Education program from 2000-2008. Focus groups also included all applicants. Individual interviews included a sample of completers and non-completers.

Instrumentation

Survey. A survey is a method of collecting information directly from people about their ideas, feelings, health, plans beliefs, and social, educational, and financial background” (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998, p. 1). A survey can be administered in the form of a questionnaire to be filled out on paper or electronically or as an interview (Fink & Kosecoff). All survey questions should be pilot tested (Fink & Kosecoff). A questionnaire can be composed of open and closed (forced) ended questions (Fink & Kosecoff). A quasi-experimental survey design was used. The quasi-experimental design is used when groups are not chosen at random. The sample used for the survey was a criterion sampling. Criterion sampling is commonly used when studying educational

programs (Gall et al., 1996). When using this type of sampling, the researcher may choose two different groups to study. In the case of this study, the groups were completers and non-completers of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university. Criterion sampling can also yield helpful information about the program in question (Gall et al.).

The survey used for this study was an original survey written by the researcher. It was piloted after the proposal defense by a group of middle level education and other education experts representing various universities across the United States. Once the applicants of the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education degree were identified and located (see Appendix C), the researcher contacted each participant via email with an initial letter informing him or her of the program evaluation and methodology (see Appendix D). The researcher made adjustments to the survey based on pilot feedback and sent a survey invitation letter to each applicant (see Appendix E). Participants were asked to sign a survey consent form indicating they understood how the survey would be used and agreeing to participate (see Appendix F). The survey was completed by all applicants, completers and non-completers, of the Master's in Middle Level Education program; therefore, the survey was broken into three sections consisting of following categories:

1. A multiple choice section so participants could indicate initial feedback about the Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university the program, including some open-ended questions so participants can elaborate on their responses.

2. A forced response section so participants could indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, are not sure, disagree or strongly disagree with a statement.

3. A second multiple choice section so participants could indicate further

feedback about the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university, including some open-ended questions so participants can elaborate on their responses.

The survey consisted of 31 items, 27 of which are forced or closed-ended items. Two questions were open-ended and called for participants to give detailed explanations. Fifteen of the closed-ended questions required a response based on a 5-point Likert scale. Two questions were for information purposes only (see Appendix G). The participants' answers to the survey questions lead to new themes for the researcher to consider in creating questions for the focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

The survey was adapted to an online format using <http://www.freeonlinesurveys.com> and the link was sent to the participants via email as a part of the survey invitation letter. In order to provide confidentiality while allowing for a protocol to ensure participation, each participant was provided a coded number taken from a list of random numbers. A faculty member at the southeastern university retained the master list of names with codes so the researcher would not be able to identify individual survey results.

The participants were given three opportunities to fill out the survey after the proposal approval. Initially, they were given 1 week to complete the survey, beginning September 28. At the end of the week the outside faculty member sent a follow-up email (written by the researcher) to any participant who had not completed the survey (see Appendix H). The participants were given 1 week to complete the survey after the reminder email was sent on October 5. A second reminder notice was sent to the participants via email if participants had not completed the survey on October 9. After the second notice, the participants were given another week to respond to the survey. On

October 16, the outside faculty member sent an email to all participants who did not respond or did not complete the survey during the first three attempts. All reminder emails included the link to the survey. The final week of survey data collection began on October 19 and the outside faculty member sent a reminder email to any participant who had not completed the survey. Less than 50% of the participants completed the survey by October 19, so the researcher extended the survey completion time beyond October 19-23. Any participant without computer access was offered a paper copy of the survey to be mailed to a designated address. A postage-paid envelope was included with the survey so that the survey would be returned to the researcher at no cost to the participant. These participants were held to the same time constraints as those completing the survey online.

Focus groups. Focus groups are special types of interviews done with a group instead of an individual. Focus groups can provide additional data, especially when the facilitator explains that the aim of the focus groups is to “encourage people to talk to each other rather than address themselves to the research” (Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups are suitable when you want to know why a person has a certain point of view (Greenbaum, 2000). There are many advantages to facilitating focus groups as a tool for data collection. Focus groups can further reinforce survey data by “providing evidence of how the respondents typically talk about a topic” (Morgan, 1988, p. 34), giving a better picture of what the respondents truly think, which will help the researcher develop themes from the data. Focus groups also provide for a safe environment for participants to share their opinions which will allow the researcher to gain information on why the participants feel the way they do about a certain topic (Greenbaum).

There are also limitations to using focus groups as data collection tools. It is more difficult to make generalizations since individual comments are related. It is also likely

that a particular member of the group may dominate the discussion, restricting conversation by less expressive group members. The feedback collected through focus groups is qualitative and may be hard to interpret and summarize. There is much interaction during focus groups and participants' answers may be altered by the presence of the interviewer causing a bias with the feedback collected (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Focus groups were held to collect data from all applicants of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university after the survey was completed by all participants. Focus groups were held for three days: October 22, October 26, and November 2. Completers and non-completers meet on October 22 and 26. Non-completers were scheduled to meet on November 2 but none were able to attend. Completers were given a choice of 2 days to accommodate the number of participants. Each applicant was invited to participate in a focus group to provide additional feedback on the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education degree. The focus group invitation was sent during the last week of survey data collection on October 16 (see Appendixes I and J). Participants completed a consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the focus group discussion (see Appendix K).

The participants were given 3 days to respond. Participants who did not respond by end of that week were contacted a second time by the researcher via email (see Appendix L). For those who did not respond, the final attempt was a follow-up phone call or email. To maximize attendance, the researcher held the focus group interviews in a non-threatening environment in a local middle school near the university in the target state and one in the adjacent state. The process was consistent for both focus groups including cut-off dates for responses. Focus group questions were emerging and based on

data collected from the surveys. The researcher included a list of anticipated questions as a part of the study (see Appendixes M and N). The focus group sessions were audio recorded, transcribed and coded by the researcher's designee.

Interviews. Qualitative interviews are done to gather opinions and facts of individuals and to gain an insight of their experiences, not to test theory or a hypothesis (Oishi, 2003; Seidman, 1998). Interviews give the researcher information from the perspective of the participant, which is something that cannot be observed (Patton, 2002). "Program evaluation interviews, for example, aim to capture the perspectives of program participants, staff, and others associated with the program" (Patton, p. 341). An advantage of individual one-on-one interviews is the researcher is able to see how a participant reacts to questions and is able to clarify any misconceptions about interview questions. This is likely to increase responses to questions because the interviewer is able to guide the participants in answering questions when necessary (Oishi). There are limitations to doing one-on-one techniques such as the following:

1. Individual interviews lack the group dynamics contained in focus groups.
2. Researchers believe that with one-on-one interviews, even if the facilitator gets adequate information, that information may not have the validity of information obtained from focus groups.
3. There is less interaction in one-on-one interviews compared to focus groups.
4. It is difficult to keep a consistent level of engagement when facilitating multiple one-on-one interviews.
5. Participants of one-on-one interviews may be less willing to discuss sensitive topics in detail (Greenbaum, 2000).

For these reasons and to triangulate findings, the researcher used a survey, focus

group sessions as well as one-on-one interviews. According to Creswell (2003) and Patten (2007), triangulation is a method of ensuring validity in a qualitative study by using more than one piece of data. This particular type of triangulation is called data triangulation (Patten). Triangulation also helps limit biases that may result from using only one type of data collection (Gall et al., 1996).

Interviews were conducted to strengthen the validity of the study. One-on-one interviews were conducted with a sample of completers and non-completers based on the number of participants for the survey and focus groups. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, via telephone or internet based on the flexibility of the participant. One-on-one interviews began once the focus groups were completed, the week of November 2. Participants were randomly chosen from the completers and non-completers groups. The chosen participants were sent an interview invitation letter on November 2 requesting participation in a one-on-one interview (see Appendix O). The participants completed a consent form agreeing to participate in an individual interview session (see Appendix P). To increase responses, participants were sent a follow-up email (see Appendix Q). The researcher gave the participants 3 to 4 days before following up if there was no response. The interviews were held from November 3-November 16. The interview questions were emerging and based on data collected from surveys and focus group interviews (see Appendixes R and S). Interviews were transcribed by the researcher's designee, a southeastern university office assistant.

At the conclusion of the study, participants were sent a debriefing statement describing the method for which they could receive a copy of the study results (see Appendix T).

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted an evaluation using a responsive model. Because of the emergent nature of responsive evaluations (Gall et al., 1996), questions may change during the course of the study. The researcher used the following questions to guide the study:

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the southeastern university?
2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university fulfill its goals and objectives?
3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?
4. What are the barriers to effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?

Surveys. Sections I and II of the survey were reported using descriptive statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were reported to show reasons for involvement in the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university. The frequencies and percentages were compared between completers and non-completers and were used in the development of focus group questions. This information was also compared to other data collection methods to ensure triangulation of the data.

Focus Group. The focus group dialogue was transcribed by a southeastern university office assistant. The transcribed notes were manually reviewed by the researcher to establish the emergent themes. Through multiple readings of the transcripts, the researcher generated a set of assertions based on emerging themes, patterns, and

categories. Themes were adjusted, revised, or eliminated throughout the research based on the findings from other phases. The themes were entered into the SPSS software to evidence the emergence of issues and concerns gathered from the focus group discussions. To analyze the transcriptions and notes from the focus groups and interviews, the researcher used three phases of qualitative analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction; data display; and conclusion drawing and verification. See Table 4.

Themes that had at least 10% of participants agreeing were deemed sufficient to become a theme for this study. The themes that emerged from the focus group discussions were used to create questions for the one-on-one interviews.

Interviews. To ensure reliability, the researcher employed the strategy of member checking. Creswell (2003) believed that member checking can help determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by allowing the participants to review their own interview transcript to ensure their statements accurately portrayed their issues and concerns. The transcriptions were analyzed for themes and commonalities between the participants. Close attention was paid to the recommendations participants had regarding the Master's in Middle Level Education program. Recommendations made by those interviewees were listed and cross referenced between other interviewees.

To analyze the transcriptions and notes from the focus groups and interviews, the researcher used three phases of qualitative analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction; data display; and conclusion drawing and verification. See Table 4.

Table 4

Focus Group and Interview Data Analysis

| Phase | Description | Role of the Researcher |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Data reduction | The process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appears in written-up field notes or transcriptions. This is a continuous process throughout the length of the project. | Begin thinking about research questions, types of data collection to be used and how data collection will occur. The researcher will code the data using related themes. |
| Data display | A display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action. Better displays are a major avenue to valid qualitative analysis. | Display the data in a way that will be easily understood by others. |
| Conclusion drawing and verification | From the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst is beginning to decide what things mean. Final conclusions may not appear until data collection is over. | Test the validity of the data (triangulation) |

Adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 10-11.

Reliability and Validity

According to Guba and Lincoln (1981) there is a problem of establishing validity and reliability in this type of evaluation because it is complicated by a series of issues that relate to the social science as a whole. It was suggested that the concept of credibility ought to be substituted for these scientific terms with carrying out such a responsive evaluation. Therefore the researcher used three methods to establish credibility. To ensure validity and reliability of the study, the researcher piloted the survey, used member checking with focus groups and one-on-one interviews, and triangulated the survey, focus group and interview data.

The researcher conducted an evaluation using a responsive model. Because of the emergent nature of responsive evaluations (Gall et al., 1996), questions may change during the course of the study. The researcher used the following questions to guide the

study:

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by a southeastern university?
2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university fulfill its goals and objectives?
3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?
4. What are the barriers to an effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?

The researcher also piloted the survey by a group of middle level education and other education professionals from various universities. The middle level professionals were chosen because they are believed to have the most updated middle level education information. The pilot was to inform the researcher of any format or content changes that needed to be made. Changes were made to the survey based on the pilot participants' feedback.

Member Checking. The researcher used member checking to ensure dependability of the data results (Creswell, 2003; Patten, 2007). All focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Each focus group participant received a copy of the focus group transcript to check for accuracy. All interview participants received a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy of any conversation related to the study. Creswell recommended that member checking be used as a strategy to check for accuracy of results when conducting qualitative studies.

Triangulation. The researcher used data triangulation, which includes using more than one form of data collection, to ensure the validity of this study (Patten, 2007). The

researcher collected data using three methods—survey (questionnaire), focus groups and one-on-one interviews—to ensure the results of the study are valid and representative of all participants. The data collected through the online survey, guided the topics discussed during the focus group discussions, which in turn provided more in-depth questioning during interviews which produced themes across the study.

Summary

Participants of this study were former graduates, current students or non-completers of the Master's in Middle Level Education program and were identified by the program coordinator and Dean of Graduate Studies. A total of 68 completers of the program and 12 non-completers were asked to participate in this study. The participants had an opportunity to complete an online survey. Focus groups were conducted October 22 through November 2. Based on the survey responses, the researcher formulated focus group questions. The one-on-one interview questions were based on responses from the survey and focus group sessions. The interview data further validated themes discovered during the survey and focus groups. These interviews were conducted to clarify and illuminate these topics. In the following chapter, the researcher provided an analysis of the findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the quality of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university. A responsive evaluation was used to conduct the study to determine program quality (Stake, 2004). Stake described how the use of this evaluation will assist in discovering stakeholder concerns (Stake). The researcher used four phases of responsive evaluation, soliciting concerns; discussing the concerns with all stakeholders; data collection on unresolved claims; and negotiation of unsettled claims once data were collected (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Therefore, the data analysis sequentially followed the phases outlined in the evaluation. The issues and concerns were initially elicited from the southeastern university's college of education teaching staff and administration and from students through surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews.

The participants for this study included former graduates, currently enrolled students, and non-completers of the Master's in Middle Level Education program who completed the requirements as well as applicants who did not complete all requirements. Seventy-three applicants completed or were enrolled in (completers) and 35 applicants did not complete (non-completers) the program. The researcher was able to contact 68 completers and 12 non-completers for this study. All applicants contacted were given an equal opportunity to participate in surveys and focus groups. Participants who were unable to participate during the focus group discussions were extended an invitation to participate in one-on-one interviews.

All applicants of the program, completers, currently enrolled students and non-completers, were sent an internet link to the survey. The response rate was 42% (n=29)

for completers and 33% (n=4) for non-completers. Applicants who did not initially respond were sent reminders at three different times. All applicants of the program were invited to attend focus groups sessions which were held in two central geographic areas over 3 days for the convenience of the participants. The participation from completers was 8% (n=6) and non-completers chose not to participate, even after reminders by the researcher. Interview invitations were sent to all participants who were unable to participate during the focus group sessions. The interview response from completers and non-completers was 11% (n=8) and 16% (n=2), respectively. See figure below for a comparison of response percentages.

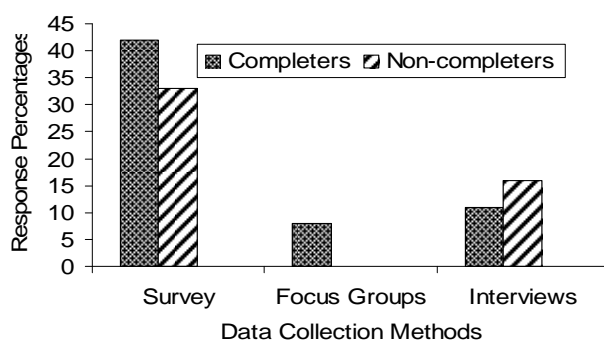


Figure. Data Collection Response Percentages.

This study applied the sequential model of data analysis. Data were analyzed as collected from the survey. Answers were analyzed and emergent themes were identified by the researcher from data collected from focus groups and one-one-one interviews. Responsive evaluation permits the inclusion of data from multiple sources and the collection of data through multiple means, resulting in both quantitative and qualitative data (Stake, 2004). The researcher used a mixed methods approach which resulted in

collecting quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were collected via questions from part II of the survey. Qualitative data were collected through sections I and III of the survey, focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

The researcher used the four phases of responsive evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to formulate the following questions to guide the study:

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the southeastern university?
2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university fulfill its goals and objectives?
3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?
4. What are the barriers to an effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university?

During phases I and II of this evaluation, the stakeholders were identified as the college of education Master's in Middle Level Education program faculty and administration. The stakeholders discussed their concerns. All stakeholders were concerned about the small number of total program enrollees and the decreasing graduation rate. The stakeholders also discussed programmatic changes as related to the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university. Because the program has experienced a steady decline in enrollment, graduate faculty was concerned about the future of the program. During the second phase, each stakeholder concern was introduced to other stakeholders, such as other graduate faculty who may be affected by middle level enrollment. Concerns were discussed and suggestions were made. In order to make informed decisions about programmatic changes, faculty and the administration

wanted and needed data-driven information. A program evaluation had never been done for the Master's in Middle Level Education program; therefore, the program coordinator requested that a program evaluation be conducted. Next, the researcher collected data on the unresolved claims (phase III).

Data Analysis

The results of the study are based on the following research questions.

1. *What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the southeastern university?*

The researcher analyzed part I of the survey as well as focus group and interview responses for this question. In section one of the survey, participants were asked, "What were the reasons for choosing the Master's in Middle Level Education program?" They were given a menu of multiple choice responses. Participants were allowed to choose all items that applied to them and there was an opportunity to add any items not listed. Three participants stated that the southeastern university provided resources as defined in this study. These participants were part of a special cohort in an adjacent state school district. The resource provided to them was an opportunity to receive a Master's in Middle Level Education tuition free. Comments listed in part I of the survey were: "The program was paid for by the school district if teachers worked in an equity plus/FOCUS school" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); "I was in a cohort that my school district put together" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and "The education was free; the county paid for all coursework" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009). All three participants completed the program.

During the focus group discussions, the researcher posed the same question from the survey adding, "What made you decide, 'I am going to continue,' once you were

accepted into the program?” The tuition free program was a consistent theme. Two of the completers who participated in the focus group sessions were products of the program and they both agreed that one of the reasons they stayed in the program was due to the tuition free status. Students who were a part of the tuition free program agreed to remain at their current school for 3 years. One participant stated, “I was tempted to leave the school...so I basically stayed at the school 3 years teaching because of the Master’s program and they were paying for it” (E.G., personal communication, October 22, 2010).

During one-on-one interviews, the researcher continued to probe why the participants chose the Master’s in Middle Level Education at the southeastern university. One program completer stated that she was part of the tuition free special cohort. She listed that “we did not have to pay any money out of pocket” as a benefit (E.G., personal communication, October 22, 2010). Another interview participant revealed that she received assistance from a professor to write a grant which resulted in \$200-\$300 toward her tuition or materials. Based on the data collected from the participants, the southeastern university provided resources in the form of special programs only. None of the participants mentioned receiving any scholarships from the university other than the small grant. Table 5 displays the frequency of the financial assistance theme based on data collection method.

Table 5

Frequency of Themes Emerging from Data Collection Methods Regarding Resources Provided by a Southeastern University to Completers

| Themes | Survey N=29 | Focus Groups N=6 | One-on-one Interviews N=8 |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Financial assistance provided | 3 | 2 | 2 |

Participants mentioned many reasons for attending the university on the survey but only three of them mentioned that financial assistance was provided. Responses during the focus groups and one-on-one interviews were comparable. Although there were few participant responses, the theme was consistent among all three data collection methods. To triangulate the data, the researcher checked the three procedures for commonalities. The financial assistance theme was present for all three procedures. The researcher was unable to triangulate data for non-completers because they did not participate in focus group discussions.

2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the university fulfill its goals and objectives?

The researcher analyzed data from part II of the survey as well as focus group discussions and one-on-one interview responses. The Master's in Middle Level Education program was designed to align the university's Advanced Conceptual Framework, NMSA standards, NCATE guidelines and National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Core Propositions. The intent of the college of education program faculty was to ensure that graduates of the Master's in Middle Level Education

program successfully achieve these goals. The goals of the southeastern university's Master's in Middle Level Education program are listed in detail in Table 6.

Table 6

Goals and Objectives-Master's in Middle Level Education

| Goal Number | Goal Description | Number of Survey Responses |
|-------------|---|----------------------------|
| G1 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to develop as a leader to my fullest potential. | 33 |
| G2 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program helped me to enhance my content knowledge (math, language arts, science, social studies, and technology). | 33 |
| G3 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to make curriculum decisions based on my knowledge of middle school theories and young adolescent development. | 33 |
| G4 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to develop a managed learning environment for young adolescents of diverse backgrounds, abilities and needs. | 33 |
| G5 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to be a reflective educator. | 33 |
| G6 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to use research to inform my practice. | 33 |
| G7 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to refine my personal philosophy of education. | 33 |
| G8 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to model being a lifelong learner. | 33 |
| G9 | The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to care for and relate to students, families and the larger learning community. | 33 |

During the one-on-one interviews, the participants were posed a specific question that included all nine goals and objectives. The researcher pulled recurrent themes from one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions, based on the participants' conversations. Themes such as develop as a teacher leader, gain middle level knowledge, and make curriculum-based decisions emerged during the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews.

Part II of the survey was comprised of 15 closed-ended questions that required a response based on a 5-point Likert scale (1-strongly agree, 2-agree, 3-not sure, 4-disagree, 5-strongly disagree). The participants were asked nine questions about the goals and objectives of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. The interpretations of the goals follow:

Goal 1 Leadership. Goal 1 dealt with preparation to become a leader. Based on participant feedback, Goal 1 was met. Of the survey participants responding, 42.42% (n=14) of participants strongly agreed and 39.39% (n=13) agreed that Goal 1 was met. Of the participants who chose a different response for this statement, 15.15% (n=5) were not sure, and 3.03% (n=1) disagreed. The participant who disagreed was a completer. Of the 27 participants who agreed the goal had been met, one of them was a non-completer. Two of the five participants who were not sure were non-completers. Overall, 81.81% of the participants agreed the goal was met. This was further confirmed through conversations during the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews. Participants made the following statements regarding leadership: "Eventually it gave me that leadership that I needed to move into the administrative part of it (middle level education) at middle school" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); "I now see myself as a leader within my school because of the training I received at the southeastern

university” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “We were encouraged to present at conferences, write journal articles, and be a leader within our school while our professors offered us any support we needed” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “I really do feel like having the degree, having gone through the coursework, prepared me to be leader for middle level” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “It gave me the leadership that I needed to move into an administrative position” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Goal 2 Content Knowledge. Goal 2 relates to the enhancement of content knowledge (math, language arts, science, social studies, and technology). Of the participants responding, 36.36% (n=12) strongly agreed and 33.33% (n=11) agreed that Goal 2 was met. Of the 12 who strongly agreed, one was a non-completer and of those who agreed, two were non-completers. Of the participants responding, 15.15% (n=5) were unsure and 15.15% (n=5) disagreed. One of the applicants who chose unsure was a non-completer and all five participants who disagreed with this statement were completers. Because these participants finished the program, they had more knowledge about the content courses offered. Conversations recorded during the focus groups sessions and one-on-one interviews confirmed the overall findings for this goal. Participants made the following comments: “I felt much more prepared from a content perspective, including the reading/literacy content area I chose to focus on” (M.M., personal communication, November 16, 2009); and “My content courses were the most valuable to me” (N.H., personal communication, November 5, 2009).

During the focus group sessions, two of the completers discussed the importance of having two content areas and were not in agreement with the comments about having

one content focus. One participant said, “I think it would be beneficial to have two content areas” (C.H., personal communication, October 26, 2009). He based this comment on his current experiences as a principal because he would rather hire someone with more content knowledge. “I think it makes you more marketable,” he also stated (N.W., personal communication, October 26, 2009). During the interviews, one participant stated, “I would have liked a few more classes that were solely about middle school math” (C.H., personal communication, October 26, 2009).

Goal 3 Middle School Curriculum and Philosophy. Over 90% of survey participants agreed that Goal 3, making middle school curriculum-based decisions regarding knowledge of young adolescents, was met. Of the participants responding, 72.73% (n=24) strongly agreed, 18.18% (n=6) agreed, and 9.09% (n=3) were unsure. One of the participants who chose “not sure” as a response was a non-completer. None of the participants chose “disagree” or “strongly disagree” as a response for this goal. Participants felt that the middle level content classes were especially relevant in helping them learn to make curriculum-based decisions, based on their knowledge of young adolescents. Comments made during one-on-one interviews further confirmed the large number of participants agreed that this goal was met. Some comments were as follows: “The knowledge I acquired in best practices, middle school philosophies, and research skills have been invaluable to me as a teacher. I am a completely different educator now!” (C.R., personal communications, November 6, 2009); and “As we learned the information, we had to prove we were applying it in our classrooms. In doing so it became second nature for me” (N.H., personal communications, November 5, 2009).

Goal 4 Managing Learning Environment. The satisfaction rate was very similar for Goal 4, to manage learning environments for young adolescents of diverse

backgrounds, abilities and needs. More than 90% of the participants agreed that the goal was met. Of the participants responding, 63.64% (n=21) strongly agreed and 30.30% (n=10) agreed. Approximately (6.06% [n=2]) of the participants, one completer and one non-completer, were unsure. Similar to Goal 3, no participants chose “disagree” or “strongly disagree” as their response. Completers provided additional comments to support their choices in the survey. “It prepared me to see the middle school student from various perspectives and viewpoints” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “I find myself constantly educating co-workers regarding special needs of adolescents, new ideas for incorporating technology in the classroom, and how to use data from students to facilitate everyday class work” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “I will be able to assist teachers with procedures and strategies that are appropriate for middle school students as an AP” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Although more than half of the participants agreed that Goal 4 was met, one completer felt the university did not cover this goal in the most effective way. She stated, “This area seemed a little weaker. I took these courses addressing this objective during the summer, so I couldn’t directly apply them in my classroom during the course” (N.H., personal communication, November 5, 2009). However, based on the overall pattern of responses, Goals 3 and 4 were met.

Goal 5 Reflective Educator. Goal 5 focused on the preparation to become a reflective educator. Overall 93.94% (n=31) of all participants agreed that Goal 5 was met. Of the participants responding, 72.73% (n=24) strongly agreed and 21.21% (n=7) agreed. Participants who were unsure equaled 6.06% (n=2) and one of the participants was a non-completer. There were few participant remarks regarding this goal; however, none of the

completers or non-completers disagreed with this goal being met. One completer commented, “I learned so much about myself and how to better meet the needs of middle schoolers” (J.M., personal communication, November 3, 2009). Overall, based on participant feedback, Goal 5 was met.

Goal 6 Using Research to Inform Practice. Goal 6 focused on preparing graduate middle level education candidates to use research to inform their practice. Of the participants responding, 66.67% (n=22) strongly agreed and 27.27% (n=9) agreed that Goal 6 was met. Two participants (6.06%) indicated they were unsure about this statement. One of the unsure participants was a non-completer. Several of the completers mentioned the amount of research required to complete the Master’s in Middle Level Education program. Participants shared positive comments during focus group sessions and one-on-one-interviews. “In undergraduate...it was really about pedagogy and being creative. At the southeastern university it was just about research and it was hard for me but I was satisfied” (R.C., personal communication, October 22, 2009); “I think it (Master’s in Middle Level Education) prepares you better than some similar programs because it requires you to implement those practices not just read about them. I think you learn more from actually implementing the procedures and processes” (D.S., personal communication, November 6, 2009); “Most of our coursework was designed around this principle. Any projects we completed were applied in our classrooms. We always had to use research to support our practice and be the basis of why we were doing what we did” (J.M., personal communication, November 3, 2006); and “I had an elementary education background and I did not feel prepared to teach middle level students and now I feel much more confident. I have the research knowledge that I need to inform parents of why I am implementing certain practices” (R.M., personal communication, November 5,

2009).

Despite the number of participants who believed this goal was met, some completers felt the research was tedious and unnecessary. As one student explained, “We can only research so much, and I feel like every time it was like ‘okay time to research it now.’ I don’t think we had enough hands-on type of things with it” (R.C., personal communication, October 22, 2009); and “Writing was not so applicable to me” (R.C., personal communication, October 22, 2009). Overall, participants did not find personal worth in the research but did not disagree with the goal being met.

Goal 7 Refine Teaching Philosophy. A consistent practice in the Master’s in Middle Level Education program is the writing and refinement of a candidate’s personal teaching philosophy, which was Goal 7. Of the participants responding, 57.58% (n=19) strongly agreed and 30.03% (n=10) agreed that goal 7 was met. Two completers and two non-completers, 12.12% (n=4), were unsure about Goal 7. Interview and focus group comments provided supportive evidence. Supportive evidence for these results follow: “I would have never imagined the growth I would see in myself philosophically” (J.R., personal communication, November 4, 2009); “My philosophy of education has become much more refined after completing the program” (R.R., personal communication, October 26, 2009); and “As we completed coursework, we were required to refine our teaching philosophy” (D.S., personal communication, November 6, 2009).

Based on survey, focus group and interview feedback, Goal 7 was met.

Goal 8 Lifelong Learning. Goal 8 pertained to a love for lifelong learning. Applying to a program was the first step in continuing their education. Of the participants responding, 66.67% (n=22) strongly agreed, 21.21% (n=7) agreed, 9.09% (n=3) were not sure and 3.03% (n=1) disagreed that Goal 8 was met. Of the participants who responded

“not sure,” one was a non-completer. Comments to support the results follow: “I feel as if it did help me continue my love for learning” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “In getting my Master’s, I was demonstrating lifelong learning. It also taught me to constantly seek new ways to become a better teacher” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “I still tell my students stories of what it was like when I was in school-demonstrating that we are all ‘lifelong learners’” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Overall participants agree that Goal 8 was met.

Goal 9 Relate to Students, Families and Communities. The purpose of Goal 9 was to prepare candidates to care for and relate to students, families and the larger learning community. Of the participants responding, 63.74% (n=21) strongly agreed, 27.27% (n=9) agreed, 6.06% (n=2) were not sure and 3.03% (n=1) disagreed that Goal 9 was met. Of the unsure participants, one was a non-completer. Comments to support the findings follow: “I apply my knowledge from my education to teaching my students and I do feel that it has made me a much better teacher” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “Our coursework made me consider different perspectives when working with students and families” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “I was challenged, stretched, and develop a set of skills that have made me a contributing member of the education community” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Based on the overall results, the participants agreed that all 9 goals and objectives were met. As further evidence of the overall agreement, the highest level of disagreement was only 15% (n=5) in the responses to Goal 2 (content knowledge). One completer stated, “I think the [southeastern university] surpassed the basic premises of the goals

listed” (J.R., personal communication, November 4, 2009).

To further explore the level of support for meeting goals of the program, the researcher posed the statement, “I was satisfied with the Master’s in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university” in order to see if the students feelings of overall satisfaction strongly related to whether or not they felt the goals and objectives of the program were met. The overall satisfaction with the program was 87.88%. Of the participants responding, 69.70% (n=23) strongly agreed with the statement; 18.18% (n=6) agreed and 12.12% (n=4) were not sure. Of the 12% of participants responding “not sure,” one was a non-completer. The researcher also questioned participants during the focus group sessions and interview sessions about their satisfaction with the program. She began the focus group sessions with an open-ended question like the following, “Were you satisfied with the Master’s in Middle Level Education program here at the southeastern university? Please explain.” The responses were as follows: “Yes (pertaining to satisfaction). Even now and I still have multiple classes to take, I think right now if I was put into a classroom I would feel prepared” (A.M., personal communication, October 22, 2009); “I feel like it was a really good program and I would highly recommend it” (N.W., personal communication, October 26, 2009); and “Overall I was satisfied. The one class I was disappointed in was data analysis and statistics” (E.G., personal communication, October 22, 2009). The class mentioned by this completer is not a middle level specific class. It is a general education requirement for all graduate education majors. Other completers stated, “I was satisfied with the program because it made me work” (N.W., personal communication, October 22, 2009); and “I was satisfied as well. I feel like I really gained a lot from all my classes” (R.M., personal communication, October 26, 2009).

The researcher used the same question for one-on-one interviews. Of the participants responding, 100% (n=7) of the completers interviewed were satisfied with the program and gave reasons for their satisfaction. “100% satisfied. It met all of my goals for getting my Master’s degree” (M.M., personal communication, November 16, 2009); “I was very satisfied with the program. I feel prepared enough to take my degree and move forward into a position beyond just a classroom teacher” (J.R., personal communication, November 4, 2009); “I am beyond satisfied with my degree from the southeastern university. I’ve taken a lot of classes at a lot of different schools and have many different degrees. The southeastern university’s is rigorous like the education I got from a private college. I was challenged” (D.S., personal communication, November 6, 2009); “I am very proud and satisfied to have my Master’s degree from the southeastern university” (J.M., personal communication, November 3, 2009); and “I could not have been happier. Each course seemed intent on being authentic to the main objectives and content was meaningful” (D.S., personal communication, November 6, 2009).

Non-completers were not asked this question since they did not complete the program, but the two who started the program and then chose a different route, responded. Even though they did not complete the program, the two participants shared their perception of the program based on their experiences. One of them responded, “I finished about half the program. I completely enjoyed every single class that I took in the program and deciding to not finish was a very hard decision for me to make” (L.S., personal communication, November 6, 2009). This non-completer discontinued the program to stay at home with her children. Another non-completer who decided to become a principal stated, “I have seen, first hand, the benefits of the program, and I have worked closely with the staff members at [southeastern university]. I know the program

provides a solid foundation for the teachers who complete the program” (D.P., personal communication, November 12, 2009).

There was some dissatisfaction with the program as noted by the percentages in Table 8. One of the completers was not fully satisfied with the program. When questioned about it during the focus group session, he mentioned that parts of the program were helpful to him, but this completer was passionate about needing more hands-on activities versus the large amount of research required for the program. He responded,

I remember one time we did the project and we broke down the characters....that is probably one of the things that sticks in my mind the most because it was hands-on. We were able to adapt it to all of our kids and we did not have to write about it and it was so much better. But we did not do that enough in my opinion (R.C., personal communication, October 22, 2009).

Table 7 summarized the percentages of responses in each category (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree) for each of the nine goals as well as the ratings for overall program satisfaction.

Table 7

Goals and Objectives Fulfilled Completers and Non-completers

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|----------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------------|
| Goal 1 Leadership | 42.42(n=14) | 39.39(n=12) | 15.15(n=5) | 3.03(n=1) | 0 |
| Goal 2 Content | 36.36(n=12) | 33.33(11) | 15.15(n=5) | 15.15(n=5) | 0 |
| Goal 3 Curriculum | 72.73(n=24) | 18.18(n=6) | 9.09(n=3) | 0 | 0 |
| Goal 4 Learning Environment | 63.64 (n=21) | 30.30(n=10) | 6.06(n=2) | 0 | 0 |
| Goal 5 Reflective Educator | 72.73(n=24) | 21.21(n=7) | 6.06(n=2) | 0 | 0 |
| Goal 6 Research | 66.67(n=22) | 27.27(n=9) | 6.06(n=2) | 0 | 0 |
| Goal 7 Philosophy | 57.58(n=19) | 30.30(n=10) | 12.12(n=4) | 0 | 0 |
| Goal 8 Lifelong Learning | 66.67(n=22) | 21.21(n=7) | 9.09(n=3) | 3.03(n=1) | 0 |
| Goal 9 Students, Families, Communities | 63.64(n=21) | 27.27(n=9) | 6.06(n=2) | 3.03(n=1) | 0 |
| Overall Satisfaction | 69.70(n=23) | 18.18(n=6) | 12.12(n=4) | 0 | 0 |

The researcher reviewed the focus group sessions and one-on-one interview transcripts for themes related to those mentioned in the nine goals in Table 6. In Table 8 the researcher shows Goal/theme Responses by Data Collection Methods and Student Completion/Non-completion.

Table 8

Percentages and Frequencies of Responses From Each Data Collection Method Regarding Master's in Middle Level Education Goals Met by Completers and Non-completers

| Goals | Survey Percentages | | Focus Groups | | One-on-one Interviews | |
|--|--------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | Completers | Non-completers | Completers | Non-completers (no participants) | Completers | Non-completers |
| Leadership Goal 1 | 27 | 2 | 4 | | 6 | 0 |
| Content Knowledge Goal 2 | 22 | 2 | 2 | | 0 | 0 |
| Curriculum-Based Decision Goal 3 | 30 | 3 | 0 | | 3 | 1 |
| Manage Learning Environment Goal 4 | 31 | 3 | 0 | | 3 | 0 |
| Reflective Educator Goal 5 | 31 | 3 | 1 | | 3 | 0 |
| Research to inform practice Goal 6 | 31 | 3 | 4 | | 2 | 0 |
| Refined Teaching Philosophy Goal 7 | 29 | 2 | 3 | | 0 | 0 |
| Lifelong learner Goal 8 | 29 | 3 | 3 | | 0 | 0 |
| Students, Families and Learning Community Goal 9 | 30 | 3 | 3 | | 2 | 0 |
| Overall Satisfaction | 29 | 3 | 6 | | 9 | 0 |

To triangulate the data, the researcher checked the three procedures for commonalities. There were four themes present for all three procedures. The themes were Goal 1 (leadership), Goal 5 (reflective educator), Goal 9 (use research to inform practice), and Goal 9 (working with students, families and larger learning communities). Overall satisfaction was a common theme among all three data collection methods. The researcher was unable to triangulate data for non-completers because they did not participate in focus group discussions.

3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university?

The outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education focus on the benefits of completing or participating in the program. The researcher analyzed part 1 of the survey, questions three and five through seven, overall focus group conversations and one-one-interviews. The researcher asked the question, "In your opinion, what were the benefits of the program?" On question five, the participants were asked to list other benefits not mentioned in number three. In question six, they were asked if they would recommend the program to others. Question seven asked for elaboration. The researcher used the same question to prompt responses for focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews. The themes apparent from the survey were career advancement, pay raise, middle level preparation /knowledge (those participants desired to have more knowledge of middle level structure and information about young adolescents), to receive a Master's/middle level certification (those participants just wanting a Master's degree and/or needing middle level certification) and financial assistance provided (those participating in the tuition free program or receiving some other type of assistance). The Master's in Middle Level Education is a non-certification degree for middle level

educators but students were able to use the middle level content classes for add-on certification. Another theme that emerged was the degree of satisfaction participants felt after being in the program, which included small class sizes, helpful professors and program rigor. See Table 9 for the frequencies of each theme.

The non-completers were unable to participate in a focus group so no responses were reported. See Table 9. Also indicated in the table are themes that did not emerge from all forms of data collection. For example, career and personal advancement was an emerging theme but it was not one mentioned by non-completers during the one-on-one interviews. New themes emerged during the focus groups and one-one-interviews.

Table 9

Frequencies of Themes Emerging from Each Data Collection Method Regarding Outcomes of Receiving a Master's in Middle Level Education

| Themes | Completers | | | Non-completers | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| | Survey | Focus Group | One-on-one Interviews | Survey | Focus Groups | One-on-one Interviews |
| Career/*Personal Advancement | 12 | 7 | 1 | 0 | | 0 |
| Pay raise | 21 | 1 | 1 | 4 | | 0 |
| Middle Level Preparation/ Knowledge | 17 | 10 | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| Master's/ Certification | 4 | 2 | 0 | 1 | | 0 |
| Financial Assistance Provided | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | | 0 |
| *Program rigor/*program satisfaction | 0 | 1 | 5 | 0 | | 3 |

*Themes that occurred for the first time during focus group sessions or one-on-one interviews.

The most frequently occurring theme was receiving a pay raise. Twenty-one

completers and four non-completers chose a pay raise as a benefit of the program. The second most frequently occurring theme was receiving middle level education preparation and/or gaining knowledge about middle school structure and young adolescents. Seventeen participants felt a benefit of the program was adequate preparation in middle level and they gained valuable knowledge about middle level students. Conversations during the focus group and interview sessions confirmed survey findings. Comments about pay raise or pay increase were as follows: “I would make more once I completed 18 hours” (R.C., personal communication, October 22, 2009); “The plus 18 pay raise that I enjoyed for one year was great” (L.S., personal communication, November 6, 2009); and “It was going to be an increase in pay for certification” (C.H., personal communication, October 26, 2009).

A second pattern was the benefit of increased middle level preparation and knowledge. Comments regarding middle level preparation/knowledge were: A benefit is “the knowledge that you learn” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “I have learned so much and feel like I am much more prepared” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

A third overall pattern related to Goals 3 and 4, the need to make curriculum-based decisions and to understand young adolescents, was to understand and apply knowledge of middle level students. Benefits were “learning the very unique traits of adolescents and how to help them succeed” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “I learned more than I would have ever imagined that I could learn about middle level: young adolescents, middle schools, teaching them and how to meet their needs academically, socially, emotionally and all those kinds of things” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “The knowledge I acquired

in best practices, middle school philosophies, and research skills have been invaluable to me as a teacher” (N.H., personal communication, November 5, 2009); and “Because I was secondary trained as an undergrad, I did not receive a great deal of instruction in dealing with middle schoolers. This program helped me tremendously with that” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Throughout the surveys, focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews, the participants expressed career or personal advancement as a major outcome of the Master’s in Middle Level Education program. Participants commented as follows: A “benefit is to have more career options. I have my bachelor’s degree in Spanish, so completing the program at a southeastern university helped me get a master’s in reading and language arts” (J.R., personal communication, November 4, 2009); and “The level of work expected of me also prepared me to obtain my National Board Certification” (C.H., personal communication, October 26, 2009).

The researcher triangulated the data by comparing the themes that appeared during all three data collection methods. The researcher found the top three themes to be: career and/or personal advancement, pay raise, and middle level preparation and knowledge. Although the numbers for financial assistance provided were low, the participants’ responses were consistent within the three data collection methods. Although the information is significant, the themes regarding receiving a Master’s and program rigor/satisfaction were not mentioned within all data collection methods. The researcher was unable to include information on triangulation for non-completers because they did not participate in the focus group sessions.

4. What are the barriers to an effective Master’s in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university?

The researcher analyzed questions from parts 1, 2, and 3 of the survey, focus group questions and one-on-one interviews for this question. In the survey, participants were asked about barriers to the program and then the participants were able to explain their answers in question 5. The researcher reviewed explanations for recommendations. Part 3 of the survey posed specific questions about predicted barriers. The participants chose responses from a menu of items and had an opportunity to give an explanation for each item. During focus group sessions, participants were asked to discuss barriers or disadvantages. See Table 10. Of the six completers who participated in the focus groups, two had been part of a special tuition free cohort. The others did not mention finances as a disadvantage. They also did not mention personal issues or course offerings being inconsistent. Two completers mentioned wanting more content related courses but this did not fall under the course offerings inconsistent/inconvenient theme. In the case of the non-completer focus groups, there were no participants to give responses.

Table 10

Frequencies of Themes Emerging from Each Data Collection Method Regarding the Barriers to an Effective Master's in Middle Level Education

| Themes | Completers | | | Non-completers | | |
|--|------------|-------------|------------|----------------|-------------|------------|
| | Survey | Focus Group | One-on-one | Survey | Focus Group | One-on-one |
| Financial hardship/tuition too expensive | 5 | 0 | 2 | 1 | | 5 |
| Course offerings inconsistent/inconvenient | 11 | 0 | 0 | 2 | | 2 |
| Personal issues | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | | 1 |
| Non-certification program | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | | 0 |
| Program dissatisfaction | 2 | 5 | 2 | 0 | | 1 |

Based on the data, the top three recurring themes were inconsistent/inconvenient course offerings, financial hardship, and program dissatisfaction. Participants made several comments about classes being offered out of sequence, sporadic course offerings, fewer courses, specifically a lack of online classes. Non-completers' comments support the data collection findings: "I did not finish the program because there were no online classes or distance learning opportunities. I could not hire a babysitter as a stay-at-home mom to finish my course work and go to the Winthrop campus to attend classes" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009);

I would finish the program if I could complete it online-it is too difficult and expensive to find sitters to attend evening classes, but most importantly, attending

evening classes means I lose time with my children in the evenings that I already lose by working during the day. (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009)

There were “fewer options in classes and timing of classes” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

Both completers and non-completers expressed financial hardship as a barrier to completing the Master’s in Middle Level Education. Even though completers did not allow financial hardship to deter the completion of their degree, they were equally concerned about tuition increases. Comments were as follows: “Financially, it is kind of expensive as compared to surrounding state programs and especially on a teacher’s salary” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “Tuition is very high and continues to rise” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); “The cost is definitely a disadvantage when trying to pay for it on a teacher’s salary” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009); and “The cost was the biggest reason that I could not find a way to finish (Master’s in Middle Level Education)” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 8, 2009).

In looking at the responses from the surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews inconvenient or inconsistent course offerings was the biggest barrier or disadvantage for completers and non-completers. Even though this theme was not mentioned during the focus group sessions, 39.39% (n=13) of the participants mentioned it on the survey and 100% (n=2) of the non-completers mentioned it during one-on-one interviews. This data could not be triangulated because responses were missing for several theme categories for surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the quality of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university. A responsive evaluation was used to conduct the study to determine program quality (Stake, 2004). The researcher used four phases of responsive evaluation, soliciting concerns; discussing the concerns with all stakeholders; data collection on unresolved claims; and negotiation of unsettled claims once data were collected (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Therefore, the data analysis sequentially followed the phases outlined in the evaluation. The issues and concerns were initially elicited from the southeastern university's college of education teaching staff and administration and from students through surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews.

The researcher analyzed the data based on participants' feedback on a survey, during focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews. The data and feedback provided will allow the researcher to inform the faculty in the southeastern university's college of education of the benefits and barriers to participating in the Master's in Middle Level Education program. The data and feedback will also allow the researcher to share the degree to which the program meets its goals and objectives and overall program satisfaction.

The researcher concluded from the data analysis that the southeastern university offers limited financial assistance for graduate students other than special cohorts and small grants. Based on participant feedback, the Master's in Middle Level Education goals and objectives were met. The main reason participants chose to enroll in the Master's in Middle Level Education was to receive a pay raise. The next two themes, in order of preference, were to receive middle level preparation or knowledge and for career

or personal advancement. The biggest barrier for completers and non-completers was financial hardship, which is consistent with the lack of financial assistance offered by the university.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the quality of the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university. A responsive evaluation was used to conduct the study to determine program quality based on participants' (completers and non-completers of the program) feedback from a survey, focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews. A "master's degree program should enhance the general expertise of middle level educators by ensuring a deeper more comprehensive understanding of early adolescent learners and schooling that is responsive to students' developmental nature and needs" (NMSA, 1991, p. 13). According to NMSA, the guidelines for the graduate education program should include:

1. Major theories and research findings concerning early adolescent development; physical; social; emotional; intellectual; and moral;
2. The history, philosophy, and future development of middle level education;
3. Curriculum theories and research focusing on middle level education;
4. Pedagogy appropriate for early adolescent learners;
5. Advanced study in one or more teaching fields; and
6. A culminating examination, project, or thesis that links theory and practice.

The southeastern university's college of education faculty created a graduate program based on these principles. Additionally the Master's in Middle Level Education degree was not designed for initial certification. Instead, it provided certified teachers an opportunity to gain advanced knowledge in their field.

Research Questions

The questions the researcher used to guide the study are as follows:

1. What are the resources provided to Master's level students by the southeastern university?

2. To what extent does the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university fulfill its goals and objectives?

3. What are outcomes demonstrated by the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university?

4. What are the barriers to an effective Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university?

The researcher used a quantitative-qualitative method of data collection. The three forms of data collection used were:

1. A survey including three parts and 31 items. Part I focused on general information, benefits and barriers. Part II focused on the goals and objectives of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. Part III targeted non-completers and focused on reasons they may have discontinued the program. Survey questions were open and closed-ended including the questions in part II which were based on a 5-point Likert scale. The survey was posted online.

2. Focus group sessions were also facilitated in order to corroborate the findings of the survey. Three focus groups were planned and two were successfully conducted in two different school districts to accommodate distance participants had to travel.

3. One-on-one interviews were conducted in order to triangulate the findings from the survey and focus groups. All interviews were conducted in person, via telephone or via an electronic option.

All participants, completers and non-completers were given an opportunity to participate in all three forms of data collection.

Limitations

The researcher based her data analysis on information collected from one college of education housed in one university with a small sample of students from the southeastern university. The results of the study are representative of a very small population.

The researcher is a former graduate of the Master's in Middle Level Education program and is currently a part of the program faculty of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. Due to the researcher's status, participants may have been less likely to participate in focus groups and one-on-one interviews due to the lack of anonymity. Because the researcher is connected with the Master's in Middle Level Education program, her research could be viewed as biased.

Participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis. There were no rewards or punishments for participants. Because participation in the study was voluntary and there were no incentives, participant numbers were low. Also because a number of the participants knew the researcher, they may have been likely to answer in a way that the researcher would perceive as favorable.

Delimitations

A number of participants for the study, with the exception of the eight who are currently enrolled, were not easily accessible. The researcher was able to obtain complete contact information for 68 out of the 73 completers. The researcher made the decision to exclude the five completers who could not be contacted. Contact information for non-completers was unavailable, limited or incorrect. The researcher was only able to contact 12 of the 35 non-completers. The non-completers were the most challenging to locate because they had not enrolled in a middle level program class; therefore, there was

no way to track them via program records or alumni relations. The researcher made the decision to exclude the 23 non-completers who could not be contacted. These issues are delimitations because with persistence the researcher may have been able to locate good contact information for more completers and non-completers of the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Recommendations

Phase IV of responsive evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), calls for information gathered to be shared with stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to analyze the data for implications. Overall, participants were satisfied with the program, with over 87% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing. See Table 7. The most noted outcomes of the Master's in Middle Level Education program included receiving a pay raise, gaining knowledge about middle level education or young adolescents, and career and/or personal advancement.

Twenty-one completers and four non-completers chose "pay raise" as an outcome of the Master's in Middle Level Education. Seventeen completers and one non-completer stated they received an abundance of knowledge about middle level education. Twelve completers chose career/personal advancement as an outcome of completing the Master's in Middle Level Education. Many participants became principals, assistant principals, academic coaches and/or received National Board Certification. With the exception of goal 2, which related to enhancement of content knowledge, more than 80% of the participants agreed that the goals and objectives of the Master's in Middle Level Education were met. It is clear that completers view the program as a satisfactory experience.

Participants agreed with program faculty about the declining enrollment in the

Master's in Middle Level Education program. The most common barriers indicated in the study were inconvenient or inconsistent course offerings and little financial assistance provided. Participants made comments about classes being offered infrequently or options such as online classes not being provided. Specifically, during the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews, three participants commented about the lack of content-specific instruction and how more content-specific classes are needed. This would indicate program faculty need to address this component of the program.

With the exception of an off-campus cohort who received tuition from their district, the southeastern university provided limited resources to participants. Three completers who were part of the off-campus group agreed they remained in the program because financial assistance was provided. Based on the number of respondents who commented on the lack of resources, this may be a barrier to future participation in the program. Program faculty may want to discuss this issue and explore options for supporting students.

Although completers mentioned barriers to the Master's in Middle Level Education program, the barriers did not prevent them from completing the program. The completers were also easier to locate and more willing to discuss their feelings about the program. Because of the difficulty in location non-completers, the researcher recommends to the southeastern university college of education faculty that an exit system be set up for non-completers similar to those who graduate from a program. Completers have to meet certain check-points before they can graduate and they must complete an exit review. Non-completers should be given the opportunity to fill out a survey online, to protect their anonymity, immediately when they withdraw from the program or if they are not present in the class they sign up for. Putting the process in

place and requesting non-completers to finish the survey immediately will provide program faculty with valuable information in a timely manner.

Conclusion

To keep in line with the original design of the Master's in Middle Level Education program, the researcher recommends to program faculty and other stakeholders, that ongoing evaluation of the program continue and that any follow-up with students (completers and non-completers) be immediate. Because a large percentage of participants were satisfied with the program, the stakeholders should consider keeping the program in existence and making modifications based on participant feedback and data reported in this and future program evaluations.

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Appendix A

Program of Study for Master's in Middle Level Education, College of Education at a
Southeastern University

Program of Study for Master's in Middle Level Education

Professional Education Core (9 hours)

- EDUC 640 Educational Research, Design, and Analysis
- EDUC 670 Schooling in American Society
- EDUC 681 Advanced Educational Psychology

Middle Level Education Core (15 Hours)

- EDCI 600 Philosophy, Organization, and Curriculum of the Middle School
- EDCI 610 Early Adolescence in Contemporary Society
- EDCI 620 Introduction to Content Literacy in Middle Schools
- EDCI 630 Pedagogy and Assessment in the Middle School
- EDCI 690 Capstone and Advanced Field Experiences in the Middle School

Disciplinary Focus (12-15 hours)

- Elective Courses in Discipline

Appendix B

Four Phases of Responsive Evaluation

Four Phases of Responsive Evaluation

| Phase | Description |
|-----------|--|
| Phase I | Stakeholders are identified and are solicited for those claims, concerns, and issues that they may wish to introduce. |
| Phase II | The claims, concerns, and issues raised by each stakeholder group are introduced to all other groups for comment, refutation, agreement, or whatever reaction may please them. |
| Phase III | Those claims, concerns, and issues that have not been resolved become the advance organizers for information collection by the evaluator. The gathered information may be quantitative or qualitative. |
| Phase IV | Negotiation among stakeholding groups, under the guidance of the evaluator and utilizing the evaluative information that has been collected, takes place, in an effort to reach consensus on each disputed item. |

Adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1989), p. 42.

Appendix C
Contact Verification Letter

Hello,

My name is Abbigail Armstrong and I am a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University. My topic of study is *A Case Study: The Evaluation of a Middle School Education Program at a southeastern university*. The university that I am using for my study is a “southeastern university.” Since you are a recipient of a Master’s in Middle Level Education at a southeastern university, or you applied to the program and took a different route, I would like to give you the opportunity to participate in my study. The purpose of this email is to make sure that I have everyone’s correct or preferred contact information, it **does not** in any way obligate you to participate in the study. Next week you will receive a more detailed email describing the study.

If you have the correct contact information for anyone in your cohort not listed or the listed information is incorrect, please forward this email to them.

Thank you,

Abbigail Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix D

Initial Invitation Letter

Month, Year

Dear _____,

My name is Abbigail J. Armstrong and I am a doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University. My dissertation topic is *A Case Study: The Evaluation of a Middle School Education Program at a southeastern university*. I am inviting you to participate in the study because you received a Master's in Middle Level Education degree or applied to the program but decided to take a different route.

I would like your assistance in collecting data for the program evaluation. The information you provide will allow me to make recommendations to the southeastern university College of education faculty and administration so they can assess the Master's in Middle Level Education graduate trends as well as make changes to the program to fit the needs of their students.

To collect data for my study, I will be using an on-line survey, focus groups and individual interviews. Please indicate your interest in participating in this study by sending the following information to the researcher, Abbigail Armstrong at armstronga@winthrop.edu.

- (a) Yes or No I would like to participate in the study.
- (b) I prefer being contacted via email or United States postal mail (include address)

Your participation is greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance for assisting me with evaluating the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

Thank you,

Abbigail J. Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix E
Survey Invitation Letter

October 7, 2009

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Master's in Middle Level Education program evaluation study. I would like for you to complete an on-line survey pertaining to your perceptions of the program. This is the first step in my data collection process and you will receive an invitation for each method individually.

The information you provide will allow me to make recommendations to the Richard W. Riley College of education faculty and administration about possible changes needed to be made to the Master's in Middle Level Education. Please share your feelings about the Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university. Your survey responses will be kept confidential and anonymous and Winthrop's name will not be used in the final report. To protect your privacy, you have been assigned a random number to use as your signature for the survey. Information from the survey will be shared but the feedback you provide **WILL NOT** be directly connected to you.

You will find the survey at:

<http://FreeOnlineSurveys.com/rendersurvey.asp?sid-pc2xck6dszrgk04640357>

A survey consent form is attached to this email. If you decide to complete the survey, please sign and return the consent form. You may fax or mail the consent form. All postage will be refunded at the conclusion of the study.

Please complete the survey by October 14, 2009 and don't forget to include your survey signature code on the survey (Question #30). The signature code is used to protect your anonymity and provide confidentiality.

Your signature code is_____.

Thank you in advance for your time and support of this project.

Abbigail J. Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix F
Survey Consent Form

Survey Consent Form

I _____, consent to complete the online survey for the purpose of providing the researcher with helpful information regarding the Master's in Middle Level

Education program at southeastern university. The researcher has explained the purpose of her study and her data collection methods.

I understand that:

- The survey is in on-line format and I may request a paper copy if that is my preference.
- The survey data will be compiled in a report and I may obtain a copy if I desire to have one.
- I have been provided a random number to use as my signature to protect my anonymity and confidentiality.
- My participation is voluntary and I am free to decline the submission of my survey.

Having been fully informed of the conditions of the research, I hereby agree to participate

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix G

Survey (open and closed-ended questionnaire)

Survey

The survey will be adapted to an on-line version and the final survey may appear in a different format but the questions will not change.

Thank you for agreeing to complete a survey about the Master's of Education Degree in Middle Level Education Program at southeastern university. Your feedback is essential and will be helpful for an effective evaluation of the program. Please indicate if you would like a report of the results once the evaluation process has been completed. To ensure anonymity, each participant has been assigned a code. At the end of the survey please type in your code number.

Section I.

In this section please circle the answer that best describes you and justify your answer when prompted to do so.

1. Please choose the statement that best describes you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
 "I applied to the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education program and I..."
 - a. Completed the program.
 - b. Was accepted but decided to take a different program at Winthrop.
reason: _____
 - c. Took some courses but decided to not finish the program.
reason: _____
 - d. Was accepted but decided not to attend southeastern university.
reason: _____
2. What were the reasons for choosing the Master's in Middle Level Education program? Choose all that apply to you by typing the letter of your choice in the text box and providing an explanation when prompted to do so.
 - a. Campus reputation
 - b. Referral from another student/colleague
 - c. Small Class size
 - d. Program reputation
 - e. Quality of faculty
 - f. Other _____ (explain)
3. In your opinion, what were the benefits of the program? Choose all that apply to you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
 - a. Career advancement, new position (administrative, professor)
 - b. Pay raise
 - c. Other _____ (please explain)

4. In your opinion, what barriers exist in the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education program at the "southeastern university?" Choose all that apply to you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
- Degree requirements too challenging
 - Program didn't meet my certification needs
 - I needed more flexible options such as on-line classes or distance learning
 - Other _____(explain)
5. What were other outcomes (barriers or benefits) of receiving a Master's in Education in Middle Level Education at a southeastern university, not mentioned in questions 3 and 4?
6. Would you recommend the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education program at a "southeaster university" to another prospective student?
- Yes
 - No
7. Explain your answer for number 6. Please use the space provided to write your answer.

Section II

In this section you will rate each question or statement as it pertains to you by circling, Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

8. A southeastern university provided adequate financial opportunities for me to pursue my Master's in Middle Level Education degree.
- SA A NS D SD
9. A southeastern university did not supply enough available funds for me to pursue my degree.
- SA A NS D SD
10. I was unable to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program because of financial hardship.
- SA A NS D SD
11. I was unable to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program because of a lack of scholarships available to graduate students.
- SA A NS D SD

12. Financial reasons did not affect my decision to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program.
SA A NS D SD
13. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to develop as a leader to my fullest potential.
SA A NS D SD
14. The Master's in Middle Level Education program helped me to enhance my content knowledge (math, language arts, science, social studies, technology).
SA A NS D SD
15. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to make curriculum decisions based on my knowledge of middle school theories and young adolescent development.
SA A NS D SD
16. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to develop a managed learning environment for young adolescents of diverse backgrounds, abilities and needs.
SA A NS D SD
17. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to be a reflective educator.
SA A NS D SD
18. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to use research to inform my practice.
SA A NS D SD
19. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to refine my personal philosophy of education.
SA A NS D SD
20. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to model being a life-long learner.
SA A NS D SD
21. The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to care for and relate to students, families and the larger learning community.
SA A NS D SD
22. I was satisfied with the Master's of Education in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university.
SA A NS D SD

Section III.

23. Please indicate all that apply to you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
 “I did not complete the Master’s of Education in Middle Level Education program at a ‘southeastern university’” because of.....”
- a. Personal Factors (relocation, status change)
 - b. Monetary Factors (lack of financial aid)
 - c. Teacher Licensure Factors (needed middle level licensure)
 - d. Other_____ (please explain)
24. If indicated personal factors, please select the ones that best describe you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
- a. Relocated
 - b. Birth of a child
 - c. Status change (divorce, marriage)
 - d. Chose another program
 - e. Not a personal reason
 - f. Program dissatisfaction_____ (explain)
 - g. Other_____
25. If your reason was monetary factors, please select the ones that best describe you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
- a. Not enough financial aid
 - b. Not enough available scholarships
 - c. Encountered financial hardship
 - d. Job loss
 - e. Not a monetary reason
 - f. Other_____ (explain)
26. If your reason was teacher licensure select all that best describe you by typing the letter in the text box and explaining your answer when prompted to do so.
- a. Needed middle level certification
 - b. Only needed to take enough classes for an add-on
 - c. Not due to licensure
 - d. Other_____ (explain)
27. If you chose another program at the southeastern university, please select it from the list below.
- a. Master’s in Curriculum and Instruction
 - b. Master’s in Counseling and Development
 - c. Master’s in Educational Leadership
 - d. Master’s in Reading
 - e. Master’s in Special Education
 - f. Other

28. Did you complete the other program at southeastern university?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Did not choose another program at the southeastern university
29. Why did you choose the other program? Use the spaced provided to explain your answer.

30. Please type the 3-digit code listed on your invitation letter or email.

31. I would like a copy of the survey report.

- a. Yes
- b. No

Appendix H
Survey Follow-Up Letter

Thank you for completing an on-line survey regarding the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a "southeastern university." If you have not completed the survey, please complete it on-line using the link below October 23rd. Your feedback is very valuable to me and your help is greatly appreciated.

Survey link: <http://FreeOnlineSurveys.com/rendersurvey.asp?sid-pc2xck6dszrgk04640357>

Survey signature code: _____

You were provided a survey signature code in the initial invitation letter. If you have misplaced that number, please contact Bradley Witzel at witzelb@winthrop.edu. If you are experiencing problems with the link or have any other questions, contacting him will ensure your anonymity.

Thank you,

Abbigail J. Armstrong

Appendix I

Focus Group Invitation Letter (completers)

Dear _____,

You are invited to participate in the Master's in Middle Level Education program focus group. You and a group of your peers will meet with me and I will facilitate a discussion on perceptions of the Master's in Middle Level Education program.

The information you provide will supplement what I have learned from the on-line surveys as well as help me to make recommendations to the Richard W. Riley College of education faculty and administration about possible changes needed to be made to the Master's in Middle Level Education.

I will facilitate two focus group sessions based on your status. The first session will be held at the "K" Middle School media center on Thursday, October 22nd from 5-6pm. The second session will be held at "DC" Middle School media center on Monday, October 26th from 5-6pm.

I have provided the school addresses below so you may look up directions according to your location but if you need any assistance in finding these schools, do not hesitate to contact me.

"K" Middle School
XX Lane
XXX,XX
Phone: (xxx)-xxx-xxxx

"DC" Middle School
XX Street
XXX,XX
Phone: (xxx)-xxx-xxxx

Please indicate in your email response which session you will be able to attend by Wednesday, October 21, 2009 at midnight.

Thank you,

Abbigail J. Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix J

Focus Group Invitation Letter (Non-completers)

Hello,

I will be facilitating two focus group sessions based on Monday, November 2 from 5-6:15pm at “DC” Middle School. If you would like to attend so you can share your feelings about why you chose a route different from the middle level program, please consider attending. I have facilitated two other focus groups and the information has been invaluable. Please RSVP by Monday at 2pm.

I have provided the school addresses below so you may look up directions according to your location but if you need any assistance in finding these schools, do not hesitate to contact me.

“DC” Middle School
XX Street
XXX,XX
Phone: (xxx)-xxx-xxxx

Please indicate in your email response which session you will be able to attend by Wednesday, October 21, 2009 at midnight.

Thank you,

Abbigail J. Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix K
Focus Group Consent Form

Focus Group Consent Form

I _____, consent to participate in a focus group discussion for the purpose of providing the researcher with helpful information regarding the Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university. The researcher has explained the purpose of her study and her data collection methods.

I understand that:

- The focus group discussion will be taped and transcribed for use in the analysis of the data and the doctoral dissertation.
- The transcribed copy of the focus group discussion will be provided to me to ensure that the transcription accurately portrays the issues and concerns I discussed.
- All information collected from focus group discussion will remain confidential and a pseudonym, when necessary, will be used to protect my identity.
- My participation is voluntary and I am free to discontinue my participation at any time.

Having been fully informed of the conditions of the research, I hereby agree to participate

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix L
Focus Group Follow-Up

Focus Group Follow-Up Letter

Hello,

Thank you for responding about the focus group sessions. If you have not had an opportunity to respond, it is not too late. The deadline for tomorrow's session is midnight but you can RSVP for the Monday session through Sunday (October 25).

I will facilitate two focus group sessions. The first session will be held at the "K" Middle School media center on Thursday, October 22nd from 5-6pm. The second session will be held at "DC" Middle School media center on Monday, October 26th from 5-6pm. Light refreshments will be served.

I have provided the school addresses below so you may look up directions according to your location but if you need any assistance in finding these schools, do not hesitate to contact me.

"K" Middle School
XX Lane
XXX,XX
Phone: (xxx)-xxx-xxxx

"DC" Middle School
XX Street
XXX,XX
Phone: (xxx)-xxx-xxxx

Abbigail Armstrong
Graduate School
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix M

Focus Group Script (Completers)

Focus Group Script (Completers)

Prepare to focus group session (set-up tables and chairs, snacks)

Test assistive equipment (I-pod voice recorder)

Script:

Hello, I am Abbigail Armstrong and I will be facilitating our discussion today. I am conducting research on the Master's in Middle Level Education program for my dissertation at Gardner-Webb University. I will be asking questions about your experience as a candidate of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. Your responses will help me determine changes to be made to the program to increase retention and completion.

I will be recording our discussion and will transcribe all conversations that occurred during the focus group. Your privacy will be protected and your discussions will remain confidential. Information collected from our discussion will be shared with southeastern university officials but you will not be individually identified. The purpose of the participation forms that you have filled out is to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. You may share your honest expressions during this session. Would you like for me to clarify any directions before we begin? *Researcher will answer participant questions.*

Possible Questions for Focus Group Session (written in the order they are intended to be asked, but the order may change depending on the participants. Number one will be asked first)

1. Why did you apply for admission into the Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university?
2. What were the benefits of completing a Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university?
3. Were you satisfied with the Master's in Middle Level Education program? Please explain?
4. What was the experience you had like?
5. Were there barriers in the program that the southeastern university can improve upon?
6. Do you think having this degree played a part in any career advancement?
7. Would you recommend the Master's in Middle Level Education program to a prospective graduate student and explain why you would or would not?

We are done with the questions I have prepared for you. Would you like to add anything to what we have already discussed?

Thank you for time. The information we have discussed today will be helpful for the Middle Level Education faculty as they work to improve the program. You will be contacted once the focus group discussion has been transcribed so you may check the conversations for accuracy.

Appendix N

Focus Group Script (Non-Completers)

This script was prepared for non-completers but was not implemented.

Focus Group Script (Non-Completers)

Prepare to focus group session (set-up tables and chairs, snacks)

Test assistive equipment (I-pod voice recorder)

Script:

Hello, I am Abbigail Armstrong and I will be facilitating our discussion today. I am conducting research on the Master's in Middle Level Education program for my dissertation at Gardner-Webb University. I will be asking questions about your experience as a candidate of the Master's in Middle Level Education program. Your responses will help me determine changes to be made to the program to increase retention and completion.

I will be recording our discussion and will transcribe all conversations that occurred during the focus group. Your privacy will be protected and your discussions will remain confidential. Information collected from our discussion will be shared with southeastern university officials but you will not be individually identified. The purpose of the participation forms that you have filled out is to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. You may share your honest expressions during this session. Would you like for me to clarify any directions before we begin?

Answer questions from focus group participants.

Possible Questions for Focus Group Session (written in the order they are intended to be asked, but the order may change depending on the participants. Number one will be asked first)

1. Why did you apply for admission into the Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university?
2. What prevented you from completing the Master's in Middle Level Education program at southeastern university?
3. What factors would have allowed you to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education degree?
4. What would you recommend to the Master's in Middle Level Education faculty at southeastern university to improve the program?
5. Would you recommend the Master's in Middle Level Education program to a prospective graduate student? Please explain your answer?

We are done with the questions I have prepared for you. Would you like to add anything to what we have already discussed?

Thank you for time. The information we have discussed today will be helpful for the Middle Level Education faculty as they work to improve the program. You will be contacted once the focus group discussion has been transcribed so you may check the conversations for accuracy.

Appendix O
One-on-one
Interview Invitation

One-on-one invitation letter

Thank you for completing the survey and/or participating in a focus group session for my dissertation data collection. I appreciate the use of your precious time to help me collect data.

If you were unable to participate in a focus group discussion, I invite you to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interview sessions will be less formal than focus groups and will be based on your availability from Tuesday, November 3rd-November 9th. I will be glad to come to your school or convenient location for you or you may come to my office. If you would rather talk via telephone, please send me your phone number and times that you will be available. The interview will last no longer than 15-20 minutes depending on what you have to say.

Please email me if you are interested with your preference for the interview. I hope to hear from many of you soon!

Abbigail J. Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix P
One-on-one
Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

I _____, consent to participate in the interview for the purpose of providing the researcher with helpful information regarding the Master's in Middle Level

Education program at southeastern university. The researcher has explained the purpose of her study and her data collection methods.

I understand that:

- The interview will be taped and transcribed for use in the analysis of the data and the doctoral dissertation.
- The transcribed copy of my interview will be provided to me to ensure that the transcription accurately portrays the issues and concerns I discussed.
- All information collected from interviews will remain confidential and a pseudonym, when necessary, will be used to protect my identity.
- My participation is voluntary and I am free to discontinue my participation at any time.

Having been fully informed of the conditions of the research, I hereby agree to participate

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix Q

One-on-one Interview
Follow-up Email

One-on-one Follow-up Email

Hello,

If you are receiving this email, you were unable to attend a focus group session. It is not too late for you to share your thoughts about the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university. I would like to do a one-on-one interview with you so we can discuss why you chose to complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program or why you chose a different path. Please send me a time that I may interview you in person or via telephone.

Thank you in advance for your support.

Abbigail J. Armstrong
Graduate Student
Gardner-Webb University

Appendix R

One-on-one Interview Script (completers)

Completers Interview Script

Because responsive evaluations are emerging, the interview questions will be based on themes determined by the survey responses and focus group conversations.

1. Why did you apply for admission into the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a "southeastern university?"
2. What were the benefits of completing a Master's in Middle Level Education program at a "southeastern university?"
3. Were there aspects of the middle level program that you viewed as disadvantages? Please explain.
4. Listed below you will see the main objectives of the Master's in Middle level Education Program at the "southeastern university."

The Master's in Middle Level Education program prepared me to develop as a leader to my fullest potential, program helped me to enhance my content knowledge (math, language arts, science, social studies, technology, prepared me to make curriculum decisions based on my knowledge of middle school theories and young adolescent development, prepared me to develop a managed learning environment for young adolescents of diverse backgrounds, abilities and needs, prepared me to be a reflective educator, prepared me to use research to inform my practice, prepared me to refine my personal philosophy of education, prepared me to model being a life-long learner, and prepared me to care for and relate to students, families and the larger learning community.

In your opinion did southeastern university fulfill these objectives? Explain your answer.

5. Were you satisfied with the Master's in Middle Level Education program? Please explain.
6. Would you recommend the Master's in Middle Level Education program to a prospective graduate student? Please explain your answer?
7. What would you recommend to the Master's in Middle Level Education faculty at southeastern university, to improve the program?

Appendix S

One-on-one Interview Script (non-completers)

Non-completers Interview Script

Because responsive evaluations are emerging, the interview questions will be based on themes determined by the survey responses and focus group conversations.

1. Why did you apply for admission into the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a "southeastern university?"
2. If you applied to the Master's in Middle Level Education program at the southeastern university but never began the program (didn't take any classes in the program), what made you decide to do something different. What did you decide to do?
3. If you applied to the Master's in Middle Level Education program and took at least one class but later changed your mind, what factors brought you to that decision?
4. Although you chose to not complete the Master's in Middle Level Education program, would you recommend the program to a prospective graduate student? Explain your answer?
5. What would you recommend to the Master's in Middle Level Education faculty at "a southeastern university" to improve program recruitment and retention?

Appendix T
Debriefing Statement

Debriefing Statement

Dear _____,

Thank you for participating in the following study: *A Case Study: The Evaluation of the Graduate Middle School Education Program at a southeastern university*. All of the information you have provided has been helpful regarding the Master's in Middle Level Education program at a southeastern university. Your time and honesty is greatly appreciated.

A copy of the report to be given to the southeastern university college of education faculty is available to you per your request. You may contact me via email: armstronga@winthrop.edu or telephone: 704-862-0910. Please provide an email or mailing address and the report will be mailed to you promptly.

Thank you,

Abbigail J. Armstrong