Quick Studies: Colleges Ease Way For Teachers to Get Advanced Degrees --- With Higher Pay Automatic, Many Seek Out Programs; Five Courses in Five Weeks --- `I Want to Give You an `A' ''
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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- At Cambridge College no entrance exam or minimum grade-point average is required to be admitted into the master's program in education. Most students complete half the coursework in a five-week summer program and graduate in about six months. Nearly every grade is an "A." And completing the program guarantees most students a pay increase in their teaching jobs.

Located near academic powers Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge College has quietly developed a national reputation of its own among schoolteachers seeking a quick credential and boost in pay. With the federal government and many states demanding more advanced degrees of teachers -- and providing financial incentives -- Cambridge is one of many schools that have significantly sped up access to the master's degree in education through nontraditional schedules and other accommodations.

Some fear that all the shortcuts are putting too much emphasis on credentials as an end in themselves -- instead of focusing on what's best for students. "We ought not automatically reward teachers with a salary increase for master's degrees," says Jennifer King Rice, an education professor at the University of Maryland, who recently wrote an analysis of 80 studies on teacher training. "We should reward instead specific, demonstrated mastery of content and teaching methods."

Cambridge administrators say the urgent social need to train teachers justifies helping them in scheduling, grading and admissions. "We try to be as flexible as we can without giving away the store," says Jorge Cardoso, the 51-year-old director of the summer program, called the National Institute for Teaching Excellence.

Some research suggests that a teacher's gaining an advanced degree, particularly in education rather than in a specific subject taught, such as math or science, has little bearing on student performance. More vital are a teacher's intelligence, experience and mastery of the subject. The 2001 "No Child Left Behind" law, which requires that all teachers be "highly qualified" as a condition of federal aid to public schools in high-poverty areas, specifies that a graduate degree would be one way to meet that standard. The law also requires -- as do some states -- that schools show improvement in test scores or face escalating penalties culminating in shutdowns or state takeovers.
Twenty states require either a master's or graduate course work for teachers by the end of their first few years on the job, up from only a few states a decade ago. Nearly all school districts give a salary bump for the master's credential. In Detroit, the raise amounts to about $9,800, or 16%, for a teacher with 10 years of experience. In Philadelphia, it's about $7,000, or 13%, for a teacher with 11 years of experience. Under a 1998 law, the federal government forgives up to $5,000 in student loans for teachers from high-poverty schools, including borrowing for graduate work.

Eileen Moran Brown, the college's founder and chancellor, says she doesn't care if teachers enroll to boost their pay, as long as they improve their skills. "These are practicing teachers already working in classrooms," says Ms. Brown, 65. "You can either say, `To hell with them,' or make them better."

Incentives have spurred a surge in graduate education among teachers, especially minorities, who have long lagged behind whites in advanced degrees. The total of all master's degrees awarded in the U.S. rose 15% from 1996 to 2001. But those conferred in education increased 21% overall and by 42% among blacks and 55% among Hispanics.

The growth is taking place mainly in online and satellite, or off-campus, programs tailored to teachers who lack time and entry requirements for traditional programs. Enrollment in the online master's program in education offered by the for-profit University of Phoenix, a unit of consumer-services company Apollo Group Inc., soared to 4,800 at the end of May from 2,100 a year earlier.

Lesley College, in Cambridge, Mass., says an estimated 8,547 students will take its satellite graduate courses in education offered in 20 states this year, more than double the 4,074 in 2000. Lesley has recently stepped up recruiting in Georgia and South Carolina, Cambridge's biggest feeder states. Both Lesley and the University of Phoenix say their programs are as academically demanding as traditional offerings.

Unlike most traditional programs, none of these schools require entrance exams such as the Graduate Record Examinations. In a Cambridge College admissions survey, 42% of graduate students in education said the absence of tests was one of the three main reasons they chose the school, behind "flexible schedule" and "adult learning/teaching model."

Founded in 1971, the private, nonprofit college also offers degrees in psychology, management and other fields. It had 5,000 students and revenue of $34 million in the year ended June 30. President Mahesh Sharma likens Cambridge to public colleges that have long beckoned to minorities and immigrants with open access and low tuition.

Cambridge charges about $10,000 for the master's program in education, half the cost of most private programs. In the 2001-02 period, the college awarded 1,397 master's degrees in education, more than all but six schools in the U.S.

James Baker, who directs a center in Irwinton, Ga., for students considered in danger of dropping out, is one of five schoolteachers and administrators in his extended family with Cambridge College graduate degrees in education. Mr. Baker, 52, estimates that the pay increases from these
credentials mean "an additional half-million dollars coming into this family over the next decade." He adds: "We have found a user-friendly program to address our needs in an expedited manner without entrance barriers."

Mr. Baker's niece, Darlene Harrington, an elementary-school teacher in Decatur, Ga., heard about Cambridge at a family reunion this past spring. Weeks later, she flew to Massachusetts, handed in her application and began summer classes the same day. She expects to become the sixth family member with a Cambridge College degree.

Ms. Harrington, 44, says she has learned valuable lessons about adapting her teaching to children with a variety of learning styles. "They talked a lot about teachers coming out of the mode of the traditional classroom and into the new millennium," she says. "To me, it was an eye-opener."

Cambridge has long enjoyed the support of the Rockefeller family, which has donated several million dollars to the college. Peggy Dulany, daughter of financier and banker David Rockefeller, was the college's first chairman of the board and is currently a trustee.

Asked whether she thought the education-master's program was as challenging as it should be, Ms. Dulany noted that she hasn't visited courses for several years because she lives in Montana. However, she said, trustees and the college's academic leadership want to address any concerns about quality in the master's program.

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, which accredits Cambridge College, cited "quality control of academic achievement" in 1996 as an "issue of overriding concern which is central to the academic credibility of the college." Two years later, an evaluation team found that the issue continued to "challenge" the college although it had begun to establish "effective methods" of assessing student learning. A full review is scheduled for 2005.

Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University, says she has "never seen a master's degree program organized in that short amount of time." She also said that compressing the requisite classroom hours for an entire course into a one-week period is a "perversion of the way" credit hours "are usually counted."

Ms. Brown, the founder, says Cambridge "is at least comparable or in many cases superior to what a teacher who decided to go the route of piecing together courses from their local college would get. The coherence of the program makes up for less study time." Asked whether the graduates deserve the salary incentive, she says, "These people are underpaid to begin with. Think of the pathetic amount of funding that goes into giving teachers a salary increase, as opposed to what Halliburton is getting" in Iraq.

Cambridge originated as the Institute of Open Education within a Catholic college for women in Newton, Mass. Teachers weren't graded and received individualized attention, such as being videotaped in their classrooms and having the faculty provide critiques.

Such practices lapsed with Cambridge's expansion. Grades were introduced five years ago at the request of students, Mr. Cardoso says, because school districts required them before granting pay
increases. But, he adds, the college remains opposed to grades as a "sorting mechanism in our society. Our philosophy is, 'I want to give you an 'A.' "

If a teacher fails or withdraws from a course, that isn't recorded on the transcript submitted to his or her school district under what Mr. Cardoso calls "success-based transcripting."

After becoming independent in 1981, Cambridge predominantly served Boston-area teachers for a decade. Then it made two key changes that transformed its summer program into a magnet for teachers nationwide. It leased dormitory space, and sped up degree-completion time with a liberal policy on transferring credits from other schools.

The revamped program began in 1991 with 27 teachers and grew steadily. This past summer the National Institute of Teaching Excellence attracted 993 teachers and administrators pursuing master's degrees or a higher credential often required for principalship -- the certificate of advanced graduate study.

Three-fourths receive federal student loans, and 565, or 57%, are black, mostly from the South. The program draws so many Georgia teachers that it holds a graduation ceremony every February in Savannah.

Cambridge built the summer program by targeting states and districts that have big pay incentives for master's degrees and low proportions of teachers with the credential. The college began recruiting students in Puerto Rico in 1999, the year the island commonwealth raised its pay increase for a master's degree to $375 a month from $25 a month. Cambridge now plans a campus in San Juan.

Last year, Mr. Sharma says, Cambridge identified at least six fertile metropolitan areas: Minneapolis; St. Louis; Cleveland; Cincinnati; and Atlanta, Savannah and Augusta, Ga.

Candidates for an education master's must fulfill 32 credits -- comparable to traditional programs. They can get credit for four courses, or 12 credits, completed at other schools. Candidates take one course a week in the five-week summer program, counting for 15 more credits. The final five credits come from a seminar where they learn to carry out an independent project, and from the project itself. Most students complete requirements in about six months, less than half the standard time.

In the summer program, each class meets for 32 hours -- eight hours a day, four days a week -- a similar amount of classroom time to traditional courses meeting two hours a week for a semester. But Cambridge's homework demands of eight to 12 hours per course violate a longstanding rule of thumb of at least two hours of homework for each hour of class -- or at least 60 hours per course at many schools.

Cambridge also adapts its curriculum to state standards. It initiated a summer course in 2001 for masters students called "Spanish for School Personnel," to help New York teachers fulfill a state requirement that they take two semesters of a foreign language. Although the 32-hour course
counts as a full semester, instructor James Nocito says that "nobody's going to become fluent" in a week.

A high-school Spanish teacher, Mr. Nocito says the main aim of the class is for teachers to learn 20 phrases for emergencies with Hispanic parents or students. The list, originally designed for police training sessions he conducted, includes such expressions as "Do you speak English?" "Calm down," and "Do exactly what I say" (Haz exactamente lo que yo digo). Mr. Nocito says the course, which also includes role playing for school events such as open houses, is so popular that native Spanish speakers sometimes take it for credit toward their master's degrees, too. He says they like to study his teaching methods.

Celeste Crook, a 30-year-old kindergarten teacher in Atlanta attended the summer program this year and took Mr. Nocito's course. "I'm here for the money," Ms. Crook said. "But being here has renewed my love of teaching."

This summer, in a course titled "Selection, Development and Supervision," instructor James Jenkins didn't use a textbook because the one he wanted was out of print. Students had to write a two-page paper and give an hourlong group presentation. Mr. Jenkins, a retired former school superintendent in Oregon who has taught master's classes at Cambridge for nine summers, had his class demonstrate ways of praising schoolchildren, including the "silent cheer," "clam clap," "lobster cheer," "rainbow cheer," "butterfly clap," and "shake your tail feathers." He doesn't give long writing assignments, he says, because courses are too short. "Academic rigor is one of those things you give up in this program," he says.

In a course titled "Effective Schools," where degree candidates compared methods of handling student tardiness and other problems, the class didn't have time to read an entire textbook. So instructor Hulon Johnson, an elementary-school principal in Chicago, divided it into groups. Each group read a few chapters of the text and reported on them to the rest of the class. Mr. Johnson said the system works for adult learners because they "get more out of it. You remember 90% of what you teach."

The independent learning projects that complete the program are guided by faculty members in periodic sessions. The projects include preparing a handbook or a lesson plan or taking a survey on an educational issue. Due the December after the summer program, they are the school's substitute for a thesis.

Mr. Baker, of Irwinton, says he interviewed 100 students and consulted fellow teachers and administrators for his 92-page project, which involved designing a model for a character-education program in a rural Georgia high school. Robert Montrose, a Cleveland health teacher and basketball coach, surveyed 10 students -- five athletes and five nonathletes -- for his project exploring the lack of participation on sports teams at his middle school. Mr. Montrose says his project "would have worked better" with more students. But Cambridge, he says, "wanted a quick, simple paper."