PODIUM EDUCATION'S GLOBAL CAREER ACCELERATOR

Retention Impact of a High-Impact Practice at a Large, Access-Oriented Public University

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ASU Arizona State University UC Irvine Podium Education

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Executive Summary

The Global Career Accelerator (the Accelerator), a for-credit full-term work-integrated high-impact practice, was associated with increased retention rates across the academic years starting in the fall of 2021, 2022, and 2023.

In the year after participating in the Accelerator, students retained at significantly higher rates (6-10pp retention improvement) than their peers who did not participate in the experience.

6-10pp

retention improvement over peers who did not complete the Accelerator

4pp

higher retention for Accelerator students

Retention rates for participating students remained higher after accounting for many demographic and academic factors that affect dropout risk. In a matched-sample analysis that pooled participants across cohorts (4pp higher retention for Accelerator students), retention rates remained significantly higher.

This analysis reflects the strongest controls we can apply for unaccounted-for confounds with available data.

Theoretical Basis

High-impact practices (HIPs) are widely recognized as a powerful mechanism for engaging and retaining students in higher education (Kuh, 2008). Research has linked participation in HIPs to a range of transformative outcomes, including stronger academic motivation, expanded career-related learning, and greater access to educational and professional opportunities (Arikan et al., 2022; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008; Zilvinskis, 2019). As a result, colleges and universities continue to prioritize the expansion of these experiences (Hatch et al., 2016; Kuh, 2008). Yet scaling HIPs across increasingly diverse student populations and varied instructional settings has proven difficult (Dolan et al., 2022; VanWyngaarden et al., 2024).

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The importance of HIPs is especially closely connected to longstanding theories of student persistence and integration. Tinto's (1975) model of retention emphasizes the role of academic and social integration in shaping students' decisions to remain enrolled. Within this framework, persistence depends in part on the alignment between students' backgrounds—including factors such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status—and their experiences within the institutional environment. High-impact experiences can strengthen this sense of fit by fostering belonging, motivation, and commitment to the institution (Kirby & Thomas, 2022).

HIPs encompass a broad range of educational experiences, including internships, study abroad programs, undergraduate research, and capstone projects.

Despite their documented benefits, equitable access remains uneven, particularly for first-generation students, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and historically underrepresented groups (O'Shea et al., 2023).

KEY INSIGHT

College graduates who engaged in **at least one** internship are

48.5%

less likely to be underemployed than those who had no internships.

These challenges may be amplified in digital learning environments, where cultivating connection and engagement can require more intentional design and support (Linder & Hayes, 2018). Because HIPs rely heavily on active participation, sustained interaction, and meaningful engagement, implementing them effectively in online settings presents both significant opportunities and persistent challenges.

As concerns about the return on investment of post-secondary education have come into focus over recent years, significant high-impact practice discussion has examined work-integrated (or work-based) learning. College graduates who engaged in at least one internship, among the best known types of work-integrated learning, are 48.5 percent less likely to be underemployed than those who had no internships (Burning Glass Institute and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2024).

Benefits of work-integrated learning also extend beyond economics—bachelor's degree graduates who had one of these experiences are also more satisfied with their careers and are more likely to say that their education was worth the cost and helped them achieve their goals (Torpey-Saboe et al., 2022). Work-integrated learning (e.g., internships and co-ops), however, is difficult to scale, and supply has not kept up with demand. While an estimated **8.2 million learners wanted to intern** in 2023, only 3.6 million had the opportunity, and **just 2.5 million had a quality internship** (Williams et al., 2024).

This paper examines the outcomes of one of Arizona State University's curriculum-embedded, work-integrated learning initiatives that provides scaled access to high-impact practices.

Overview of the Accelerator at Arizona State University

At Arizona State University, the Global Career Accelerator (the Accelerator) is positioned as a for-credit field experience model of work-integrated learning. It is Podium Education's flagship offering, designed to ease the college-to-career transition by embedding applied, employer-relevant, durable, and technical skill development into a one-term (e.g., semester, quarter) academic experience.

The Accelerator combines the core elements of high-quality work-integrated learning and internships—including social capital, technical and broad skill development, mentoring, and credit (Torpey-Saboe et al., 2025), as well as key markers of structured support and focus on skills development (Williams et al., 2024)—and allows students to build meaningful employer experience at scale.

To date, several thousand Arizona State University students have successfully completed the Accelerator, earning course credit and industry partner skill certification along the way. Participating students at ASU represent both on-campus and online populations with a diverse array of majors and demographic characteristics.

The program is characterized as combining synchronous online “LiveLab” meetings with asynchronous coursework and several real employer projects focused on authentic workplace challenges.

Specifically, the program’s curricular architecture emphasizes flexible, high-production video lessons supported by on-demand advising, structured live and online sessions that convene students and build social capital. Students move through a portfolio-oriented sequence of capstone deliverables and micro-credentials intended to translate directly into labor-market signaling (e.g., résumé- and LinkedIn-visible certifications). They also engage with peers across a broad network of 100+ partner institutions, including Boston University, the University of Michigan, the University of Texas San Antonio, the University of California Riverside, and others.

Methods & Results

Participants were domestic students enrolled at Arizona State University across three academic years: 2021–2022, 2022–2023, and 2023–2024. International students and students with missing demographic data were excluded from all analyses. Accelerator enrollees were compared to non-enrollees across each cohort year, with sample sizes ranging from 814 to 1,157 Accelerator students and over 116,000 non-Accelerator students per year.

The demographic composition of Accelerator enrollees was broadly similar to the broader ASU student population, with some notable differences. Accelerator students were more likely to be from underrepresented minority groups, Pell-eligible, and enrolled primarily in online coursework (referred to at ASU as "digital immersion"). They were also more concentrated in the third and fourth years of study and less likely to be first-year students. These patterns were consistent across all three cohort years and are summarized in the table below.

Accelerator Enrollees Compared to Non-Enrollees at ASU

	2021-2022		2022-2023		2023-2024	
	Accelerator	Non-Accelerator	Accelerator	Non-Accelerator	Accelerator	Non-Accelerator
Total	907	116,486	814	120,191	1,157	122,338
First Generation	32.0%	31.8%	31.1%	31.5%	32.2%	31.8%
Female	54.1%	55.6%	53.8%	55.7%	49.2%	55.6%
Underrepresented Minority	41.0%	37.9%	39.2%	38.3%	43.3%	39.2%
Pell Eligible	58.1%	53.6%	59.0%	52.8%	56.5%	52.5%
Digital Immersion	54.1%	47.6%	52.9%	48.9%	58.7%	50.4%
STEM	29.9%	28.5%	28.1%	18.8%	32.3%	30.4%
Average Full-Time Ratio	37.2%	37.6%	31.7%	35.0%	33.1%	36.8%
Class Standing						
1st Year	1.5%	7.0%	1.6%	7.3%	1.9%	6.6%
2nd Year	13.8%	17.9%	19.8%	18.3%	17.6%	17.9%
3rd Year	26.1%	23.5%	23.7%	24.1%	25.8%	23.9%
4th Year	58.5%	51.7%	54.9%	50.5%	54.7%	51.6%

Note. Percentages are the percentage of Accelerator or Non-Accelerator students who meet the given criteria in each cohort. Standing refers to the year status based on earned credits and ASU's criteria at the end of the academic year. Pell eligible refers to students who were ever Pell-eligible throughout their total enrollment period. Digital refers to students who were predominantly enrolled in digital immersion courses. Full-time Ratio refers to the average percentage of terms students were enrolled full-time.

To examine the relationship between Accelerator enrollment and retention, we included both demographic and academic covariates across all analyses. These included gender, first-generation status, underrepresented minority status, Pell grant eligibility, digital immersion enrollment, STEM major, and academic class standing at the end of the academic year. Including these covariates allowed us to estimate the relationship between Accelerator participation and retention while accounting for pre-existing differences between students who enrolled in the Accelerator and those who did not.

Analysis 1: Cohort-Specific Retention Models

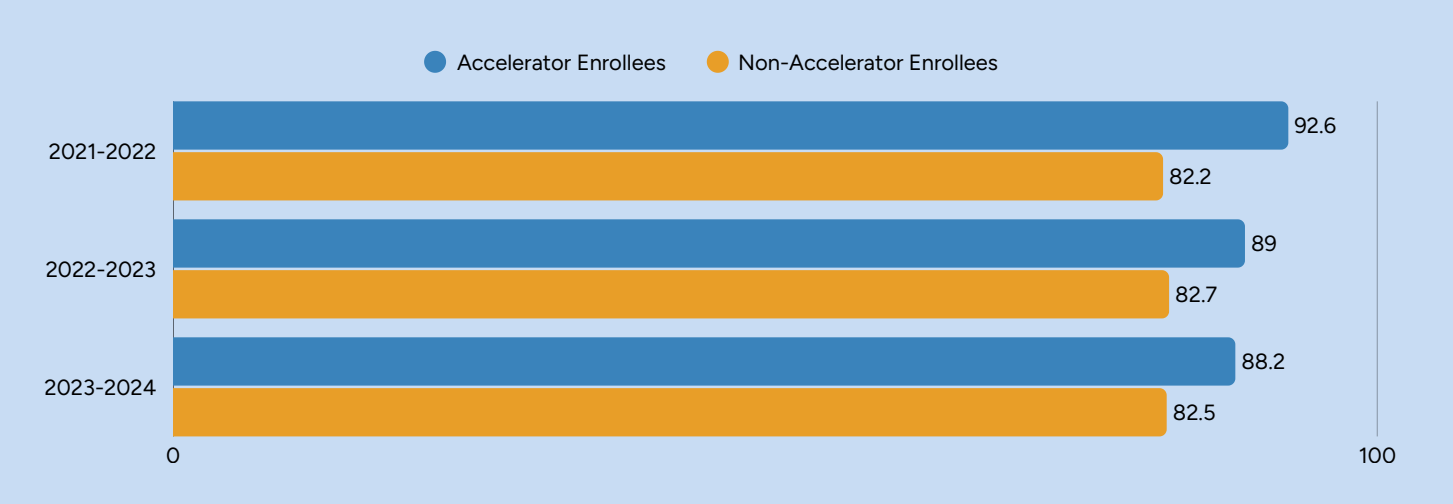
Approach

The first analysis examined whether students who enrolled in the Accelerator were more likely to be retained in the following year, defined as either enrolling in at least one course in the subsequent academic year or having graduated by that point. Separate models were estimated for each of the three cohort years. This approach allowed us to assess whether the relationship between Accelerator enrollment and retention was consistent across years or whether it varied over time. Each model controlled for the full set of demographic and academic covariates described above, as well as grade point average.

Results

Across all three cohort years, Accelerator enrollees were retained at higher rates than non-enrollees. In 2021–2022, retention was 92.6% for Accelerator students compared to 82.2% for non-Accelerator students. In 2022–2023, retention was 89.0% for Accelerator students compared to 82.7% for non-Accelerator students. In 2023–2024, retention was 88.2% for Accelerator students compared to 82.5% for non-Accelerator students. Differences were statistically significant in the 2021–2022 and 2023–2024 cohorts ($p < .001$).

The difference in the 2022–2023 cohort did not reach statistical significance ($p > .10$). Across all three years, we found no evidence that the relationship between Accelerator enrollment and retention differed by student background or academic characteristics.



Analysis 2: Matched Sample Retention Models

Approach

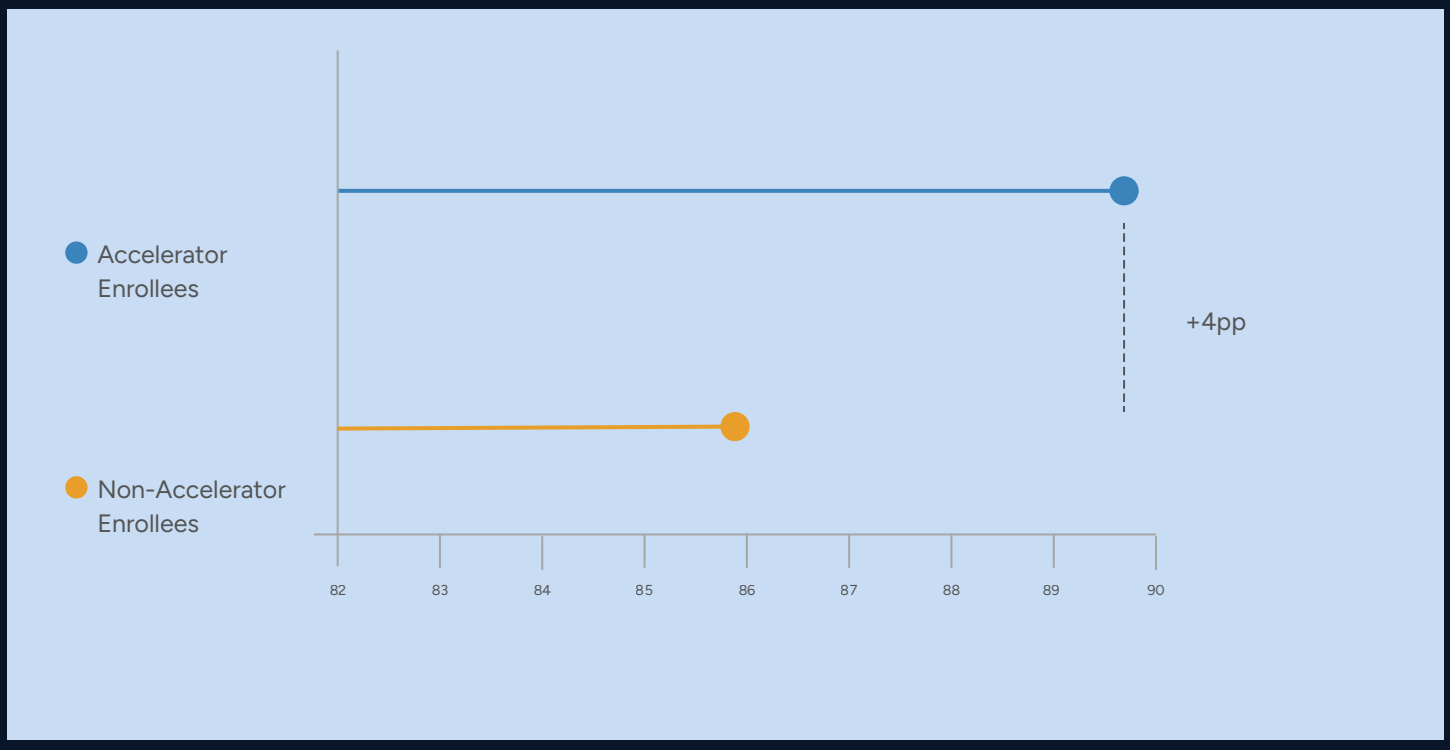
The second analysis addressed a key limitation of cohort-specific models: even after controlling for observed covariates, students who choose to enroll in the Accelerator may differ from those who do not in ways that are difficult to measure directly. To account for this, we used propensity score matching to pair each Accelerator enrollee with a non-enrollee who was highly similar across all observed demographic and academic characteristics, including first-generation status, underrepresented minority status, gender, Pell eligibility, GPA, digital immersion enrollment, class standing, STEM major, academic school, and specific major. Only a student's first Accelerator enrollment was included; students who

participated in the Accelerator more than once were counted only for their initial term. By comparing students who were closely matched on all available characteristics, this analysis provides the strongest available test of whether Accelerator enrollment is associated with higher retention, minimizing the possibility that observed differences are driven by pre-existing differences between the two groups.

Results

Among matched students, pooled across all three cohort years, retention was 89.7% for Accelerator enrollees compared to 85.9% for matched non-enrollees. This difference was statistically significant after controlling for demographic and academic variables ($p < .001$). As in the cohort-specific models, we found no evidence that the association between Accelerator enrollment and retention varied by student background or academic characteristics.

Retention (Matched Sample Only)



Interpretation

Taken together, the two analyses tell a consistent story: students who participated in the Global Career Accelerator were more likely to be retained than comparable students who did not, and this relationship held across multiple years and two methodologically distinct analytic approaches. The cohort-specific models established the pattern year by year; the matched sample analysis strengthened the inference by pairing Accelerator students with the most similar non-participants available, reducing the likelihood that the retention difference reflects underlying differences in student motivation, preparation, or background rather than the program itself.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The consistency of findings across both methods is meaningful in its own right. The fact that ***Accelerator-associated retention advantages*** appear in 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 – across a period of significant variation in enrollment conditions and student demographics – further ***supports the robustness*** of the finding.

Finally, and importantly, the analyses found no evidence that the retention benefit was concentrated among any particular group of students. The relationship between the Accelerator enrollment and retention was similar across students of different genders, first-generation statuses, minority backgrounds, and socioeconomic circumstances. For a program explicitly designed to scale access to high-impact learning experiences, this is among the most meaningful findings in the dataset.

Conclusion

FINAL TAKEAWAY

"Enrolling in an Accelerator experience at Arizona State University is associated with **significantly higher retention** in the following academic year."

Enrolling in an Accelerator experience at Arizona State University is associated with significantly higher retention in the following academic year. Digital and campus immersion students showed similarly higher rates of retention, as did first-generation students and underrepresented minorities. Importantly, these results remained significant after controlling for student background, course circumstances, and student achievement. The results of this study (an approximately 4-10 percentage point retention improvement) are consistent with prominent retention supports in the higher education space, such as chatbot nudges reminding students to enroll (Page et al., 2025) and meeting with an academic advisor (Tippetts et al., 2022).

Due to the broad scope of this study, this analysis was unable to examine other potential confounding or moderating variables, such as motivation, engagement in the Accelerator, career goals, participation in other high-impact courses, and other situational factors. This study was also limited in its focus on retention over other academic variables. To examine other variables, such as graduation rates and career transitions afterward, would require longitudinal data over a longer time frame than this study utilized. Future work may identify other positive relationships with Accelerator participation, such as graduation rates, confirmation of major, an easier college-to-career transition, graduate school attendance, academic motivation, and longer-term career success.

Future work could also examine student behavioral engagement with Accelerator course materials via digital trace data from the course platform software to identify variation in Accelerator outcomes related to student engagement and specific features of the Accelerator curriculum with higher and lower rates of student activity. Additionally, learnings from the pedagogy and methods of infusing career integration into the classroom in a scalable format may provide models for introducing other types of digital, scalable career integration into the curriculum.

Thank you.

To learn more about the research, findings, and Podium Education, please reach out to lindsey.rosenbluth@podiumeducation.com.

Podium Education

Arizona State University

UC Irvine

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Appendix

Accelerator Effects on Retention for Digital and Campus Immersion Environments

Similar to Analyses 1 and 2, we examined the relationship between Accelerator enrollment and retention within each cohort and in a matched sample, separately for digital and campus immersion students. Digital or campus immersion was identified as the majority immersion type for each student, based on their term-by-term data.

		Retention Rate	
Academic Year	**Accelerator Enrollment**	**Digital Immersion**	**Campus Immersion**
2021-2022	No	75%	89%
	Yes	89%	97%
2022-2023	No	75%	90%
	Yes	84%	94%
2023-2024	No	75%	90%
	Yes	91%	92%
Matched Sample	No	84%	93%
	Yes	86%	94%

- Accelerator enrollment for *campus-immersion* students is related to increased retention rates from 2% - 8%, depending on cohort.
- Accelerator enrollment for *digital-immersion* students is related to increased retention rates from 9% - 16%, depending on the cohort.
- However, Accelerator enrollment *did not* differ by campus-immersion type in our main analyses, suggesting that other variables explain much of the difference in retention by Accelerator enrollment and immersion type in the cohort samples.
- The small gains in retention for campus immersion Accelerator students in the matched sample may relate to a ceiling effect, where retention in this group was already close to 100%

Study & Partner Background

To produce this white paper, independent researchers at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) conducted an analysis of deidentified program and administrative data provided by Arizona State University (ASU). The study was commissioned by Podium Education and reviewed and approved by the University of California, Irvine Institutional Review Board, affirming compliance with human-subjects protections and confidentiality standards. The UCI research team maintained full analytic independence in developing the evaluation approach, conducting analyses, and reporting findings.

About the University of California, Irvine (UCI) Research Team
The University of California, Irvine (UCI or UC Irvine) is a public land-grant Research I (very high research activity) university in Irvine, California. Dr. Richard Arum is a professor of sociology and education and recently served as dean of the UCI School of Education (2016-2021), senior fellow at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2013-2015), and director of the Education Research Program at the Social Science Research Council (2006-2013). He is a preeminent voice in student success and higher education outcomes. Jeffrey M. DeVries is a postdoctoral scholar at UCI.

About Arizona State University (ASU)
Arizona State University, ranked No. 1 “Most Innovative School” in the nation by U.S. News & World Report for 11 years in succession, has forged the model for a New American University. ASU has topped more than 30 lists in the last three years, including: No. 1 in the U.S. for global impact (Times Higher Education) and No. 2 in the U.S. for employability (Global Employability University Rankings and Survey). ASU operates on the principles that learning is a personal and original journey for each student; that they thrive on experience and the process of discovery.

Through innovation and a commitment to accessibility, ASU has drawn pioneering researchers to its faculty even as it expands opportunities for qualified students, attracting some of the highest-quality students from all 50 states and more than 130 nations.

ASU enrolled over 194,000 students during the 2024-2025 academic year in in-person and digital immersion across over 1,330 majors and degrees. As of this same academic year, 36.5% of ASU undergraduates are first-generation college students, 40.2% receive Pell Grants, and 85% receive financial assistance.

Jennifer A. Malerich serves as Assistant Vice Provost for Academic and Global Engagement at ASU. The Global Career Accelerator initiative sits strategically within ASU's Global Education Office, allowing the program to operate in partnership with colleges and schools across ASU's academic enterprise.

About Podium Education

Podium Education is the leading experiential education company partnering with colleges and universities and industry to embed scalable, real-world, high-impact practices directly into the undergraduate degree for credit. Podium works with 100+ universities and 50+ leading employers like L'Oréal, OpenAI, Crocs, and Wells Fargo. Podium's experiences deliver fully digital, for-credit learning that strengthens student retention, confidence, and career readiness. Students from all backgrounds gain early career experience, explore potential pathways, and build the skills and competencies employers expect—through hands-on, work-integrated learning experiences that align with workforce needs.