

NEBRASKA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS: SUMMARY OF THE *HIGHER EDUCATION INVENTORY*

Austin, L. J. E., Sakai, L., Whitebook, M., Bloechlinger, O., & Amanta, F. (2015). *Teaching the Teachers of Our Youngest Children: The State of Early Childhood Higher Education in Nebraska, 2015*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

More than 100,000 children in Nebraska, age 8 and younger, are considered at risk for failing in school (Iruka, 2015). More than 47,000 of these children are between birth and 5 years of age and do not participate in a documented quality early childhood program, despite compelling evidence that doing so would improve their learning and developmental outcomes and success in school (First Five Nebraska, 2015). Many children between Kindergarten and the end of third grade are also at risk because the quality of their school experience is uneven as well.

Nurturing relationships and responsive interactions are key to children's healthy growth and development and to the impact of their educational experiences (Camilli et al., 2010). The Workforce Development Program of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute is committed to building a strong workforce of adults who care, nurture, teach, and advance children's development through meaningful relationships and enduring learning experiences from birth through Grade 3. In order to accomplish this, a well-coordinated and comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can strengthen the skills of the early education workforce must be established. Higher education institutions in Nebraska are critical to meeting the evolving and increasing demands for improving developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population. Therefore, as part of the workforce development program, the Institute in conjunction with the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, sought to gain an understanding of the landscape of early childhood preparation in the state.

The Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory

Teacher preparation in the field of early childhood education includes a variety of post-secondary degree programs in various child-related disciplines. The *Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory* (Kipnis, Ryan, Austin, Whitebook & Sakai, 2012) was designed to obtain a clear picture of a state's early childhood-related offerings and degree programs; it has been administered in more than a half-dozen states. The Inventory describes these programs, focusing on variations in program content, age-group focus, student field-based learning, and faculty characteristics. The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) administered the *Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory* in Nebraska during the 2014-2015 academic year to provide an overview of the state's associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level early childhood programs. The Inventory consists of three modules: a component that

maps the population of higher education programs; an online program survey completed by the degree program leader (e.g., dean, chair, or coordinator); and an online faculty survey that individual faculty members respond to.

Sample

The findings reported here are drawn from a sample of nine associate's, 15 bachelor's, and six master's degree programs. The faculty findings are drawn from a sample of 29 community college faculty members and 46 bachelor's and graduate degree faculty members. Twenty institutions of higher education in Nebraska were identified as offering a total of 42 early childhood degree programs. Among these, eight were public community colleges, which offered 12 early childhood associate degree programs. Six public colleges and universities offered at least one early childhood degree program at the bachelor's level, and four of the six also offered at least one graduate level program. Six private colleges offered at least one early childhood degree program at the bachelor's level and three of these offered a master's degree program. In total, these 12 colleges and universities offered 20 bachelor's degree programs, eight master's degree programs, and two doctoral degree programs in early childhood.

Selected Findings

- All, or nearly all, programs at all degree levels required course content related to child development and learning and teaching. The content topics examined by the Inventory are key content areas for creating high-quality experiences for young children.
- Course content was not consistently offered in the areas of administration and leadership across all degree levels.
- Infant and toddler content varied by topic and degree level. These topics were less likely to be offered than preschool or elementary age-focused topics.
- All programs at all degree levels required at least one practicum, but the hours required, the age focus, and the number of total practica required varied significantly.
- Most degree programs are staffed primarily by full-time faculty members.
- The majority of associate's and bachelor's degree faculty reported prior classroom experience in other roles such as teacher, coach, mentor, or trainer.
- Most programs at all degree levels reported that student recruitment was a challenge.
- The majority of associate degree programs reported that lack of recognition of early childhood as a valued field was a problem in their department or school.

CSCCE Recommendations

The CSCCE developed an executive summary and a full technical report that can be accessed at www.buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu. The recommendations from CSCCE are based on its decades-long work on child care employment and its knowledge from other state findings and national initiatives. Implementation of these recommendations for Nebraska will be contingent upon discussion of their relevance and importance among concerned stakeholders across the state.

CSCCE Recommendation 1: Unify expectations and pathways for early childhood workforce preparation.

Clarifying the purpose of early childhood higher education programs will require an understanding among those who offer post-secondary programs as to their purpose as well as a revision of Nebraska's current system for certifying teachers, administrators, and other practitioners. The goal should be to

create clear roadmaps for students when they enroll in degree programs so that their course of study prepares them for the demands of teaching young children and leading ECE programs. Across the state, students need specific information about the types of certificate endorsements available and which programs at institutions of higher education lead to particular endorsements. The efforts of policy makers and other stakeholders investing in pre-professional education and assessing staffing capacity would be better informed by greater differentiation among degree offerings, allowing more informed choices about the types of preparation programs available to future and current ECE practitioners.

CSCCE Recommendation 2: Strengthen program content and equity across the age span.

Many ECE stakeholders emphasize the importance of relying on evidence to guide ECE policy and practice, yet Inventory findings suggest uneven application of evidence across multiple domains of early learning and development for children from infancy through the early elementary grades. Program content must be strengthened across the age span, particularly in regards to issues of equity and diversity. Within Nebraska early childhood degree programs, fewer required the inclusion of infants and toddlers in the course content and field-based experiences compared to preschool age-children. Additionally, the increasing diversity of Nebraska's population suggests a need to prepare teachers to work with a range of children who differ by race, class, and a variety of other background characteristics and risk indicators.

CSCCE suggests engaging faculty groups representing different degree levels and types of institutions, as well as other experts, to develop program content standards and/or faculty professional development in the areas of:

- children's mathematical understanding from infancy through early elementary grades;
- children who are dual language learners;
- teaching methods (pedagogy) for children of different ages;
- infant development and learning across multiple domains;
- working with children with special needs;
- children, families, and communities from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and economic backgrounds; and
- degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, with opportunities focused on children from infancy through preschool, diverse children, and differentiated experiences for pre- and in-service students.

CSCCE Recommendation 3: Build a leadership pipeline.

In Nebraska, K-12 principals are required to have teaching experience and develop their leadership skills by earning an administrative certificate. In public school settings, those coordinating ECE programs are required to hold a teaching certificate with some ECE credits. Qualifications for directors or administrators in other settings vary, and may not require ECE-specific experience. In K-12, mentors and coaches are typically drawn from the teaching ranks and receive specific supervisory training (Isner et al., 2011). In contrast, there are no qualifications for mentors and coaches working with teachers of younger children. Specifically, CSCCE suggests:

- Establish a process to identify the specific skills and knowledge needed for common leadership roles;

- Identify the appropriate course of study and degree level for each leadership role;
- Identify options to create leadership programs, particularly at the master’s degree level; and
- Expand leadership certification standards for administrators in K-12 settings to include early education.

CSCCE Recommendation 4: Increase faculty support.

Despite relying on full-time faculty at higher proportions than the national average, early childhood post-secondary degree programs report the need for more full-time faculty. To facilitate improvements in program offerings, and enable degree programs to engage in reorganization or restructuring, CSCCE recommends establishing and funding an in-service academy with well-articulated expectations for individual faculty professional development and program improvement. Additionally, ensure that early childhood workforce data systems are coordinated to provide information about the early childhood workforce and the professionals and systems designed to support them.

Conclusion

Consistent with the goals of the Buffett Institute’s Early Childhood Workforce Development Program, these recommendations will help establish a strong preparation system for Nebraska’s early childhood teachers and administrators. The Buffett Institute plans to work closely with institutions of higher education, state agencies, and other stakeholders to develop specific action steps for Nebraska in these and related areas.

References

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