

ADVANCING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSION

Supporting Successful Degree Completion by Early Childhood Professionals

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THE EXPANSION OF STATE-FUNDED PREKINDERGARTEN programs and a new federal Preschool for All initiative (www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/early-childhood) to expand access to early childhood education to all Americans have led to renewed discussions about early childhood teacher qualifications, current career pathways, and related degree programs. What investments and models can increase the number of early childhood teachers who hold bachelor degrees? What strategies and policies will support degree completion and transfer for a diverse early childhood workforce?

Since 2001 the NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs (www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/ppp) have included a clear statement in support of articulation and transfer. The NAEYC standards urge against “transfer” associate degrees with substantial general course work but not a strong early childhood focus, which has little impact on students’ practice. NAEYC standards also urge against “terminal” associate degrees with substantial early childhood course work but too little general education work to meet the academic requirements of the baccalaureate. Instead, the NAEYC standards call for associate degrees that “simultaneously enhance one’s current practice while still maintaining transfer options from associate to baccalaureate to graduate degree programs” (Lutton 2012, 16).

How to accomplish the intertwined goals of successful degree completion, transfer, and increasing early childhood content and practice at each degree level is a question that has vexed our field for decades. But recent research indicates new evidence-based strategies worthy of our attention.

The early childhood degree as part of an effective professional development system

A number of studies demonstrate that while specialized degrees are a critical credential for any profession, “the level of degree attainment does not necessarily indicate the level of specialized early childhood preparation,” and degrees alone do not make an effective professional development (PD) system (Willer, Lutton, & Ginsburg 2011, 81). Most states today support at least a few of the following essential PD system components.

- Shared national standards for professional preparation and practice
- Specialized national accreditation to ensure that training and education programs meet the standards of the profession
- Professional credentials for individuals, including specialized degrees
- Worksite induction, mentoring, and coaching programs
- Development of on-site leadership in early learning programs
- Supports for adequate resources and working conditions, including compensation
- Ongoing, career-long professional development
- Engagement in professional networks and associations (Lutton 2012, 108)

Effective career pathways are made up of portable, stackable credentials—those that move with the individual and build increasing knowledge and skill levels over the course of a career. Portable credentials move horizontally across sectors of our field (child care, Head Start, and early grades) and across states. Stackable credentials build on each other to support upward mobility. Undergraduate degree programs are a foundational credential for a career in early education across the early childhood period of human development, birth through age 8.

Today’s nontraditional college students and the articulation swirl

The higher education landscape has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Today, 85 percent of college students are “nontraditional,” meaning they are the first generation in the family to attend college, from a racial or ethnic minority group, over age 24, don’t live on campus, or have adult family and work responsibilities. More than one-third of all college students work full time and 44 percent work part time (Soares 2013).

The role of community colleges continues to grow. They enroll about half of all undergraduates, about half of all Black students, and the majority of all Hispanic students.

About half of all community colleges have teacher education programs, and 54 percent have an early childhood/family studies program (AACC 2013).

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of today's higher education landscape is the movement of students from one college to another, sometimes called "the articulation swirl." One-third of all college students transfer at some point in their pursuit of a degree, and more than one-fourth of these transfers cross state lines. Of those who eventually earn a bachelor's degree, more than two-thirds attended at least two colleges along the way (NSCRC & PAS 2012). Only 58 percent of all four-year students complete a bachelor's degree in six years or less.

Data on degree completion and transfer

Enrollment patterns are correlated with completion and transfer. *Continuity*—attending continuously from one semester to the next—is associated with higher completion rates. *Intensity*—taking more courses each semester—is associated with higher transfer rates (Crosta 2013).

Focus on a specialized program of study, with visible milestones completed along the way to associate degree completion, is correlated with success. Students who complete at least nine credits in their major are more likely to complete associate degrees and transfer to baccalaureate degree programs (Jenkins & Cho 2012). Using prior learning assessments (PLAs) also supports degree completion. Students who take advantage of PLAs are three times as likely to complete four-year degrees in comparison to those who do not (Klein-Collins 2010).

College students with full- or part-time jobs need supports to maintain continuous enrollment and to manage more than one course at a time, especially students with low incomes who must work to support themselves and often their families. The 2012 *Reclaiming the American Dream* report recommends these strategies to support degree completion and transfer: agree on a core of professional course work, award a credential when students successfully complete the first year (30 credits) of an associate degree, and promote associate degree completion before transfer (AACC 2012).

Current articulation models

In most states, there is no intentional early childhood articulation plan—no agreed-on set of professional standards, credentials, or milestones designed to stack and be portable across colleges, training agencies, sectors of the field, and states. Four models are currently in use to ensure stability of the transfer agreement and quality of the program accepted in transfer.

Faculty-to-faculty model, based on trust. Early childhood faculty members negotiate transfer agreements between their own programs. Trust between the current faculty leaders is the measure of program quality. As a result, the transfer agreement can end when faculty leadership changes.

Course-to-course model, input based. Courses are matched between two institutions or across institutions at the state level. Matching numbers, titles, and syllabi content (inputs) are the measures of course quality. Transfer agreements remain stable when faculty change, but significant course changes jeopardize the transfer agreement.

Program-to-program model, input based. Transfer depends on student completion of the entire associate degree program, which transfers as a whole. Individual course matching is not necessary. Courses can be considered in blocks, and transfers can be organized differently across institutions. Inputs such as coverage of required content areas and field experiences measure quality.

Program-to-program model, outcomes based. This model shifts the focus from inputs to student performance (outcomes) as the primary measure of program quality. Performance is often documented in a capstone portfolio. National accreditation can provide structure for self-study and program quality improvement, affirm that key adult student assessments are aligned with national professional standards, and offer a way to review student performance data.

Evidence-based strategies for state career pathways

Recent studies and articulation models point toward the following promising strategies for state career pathways that support degree completion and transfer.

- **Use degree milestones to build portable, stackable credentials.** Offer an entry-level credential that can be earned through high school-level course work and field experience. Create a 30-credit credential that is earned after successful completion of the first year of an associate degree with at least nine credits in early childhood. Completion of an associate degree with at least 18 credits in early childhood and completion of a bachelor's degree in early childhood should each be linked to upward mobility on the career pathway.
- **Consider the program-to-program articulation model to encourage degree completion.** Focus on articulating expected student performance on key assessments that demonstrate and increase professional practice at each degree level rather than on matching course numbers, titles, hours, or credits.

- **Use shared national professional preparation standards to build common ground for competencies, standards, and training approval systems across sectors and states.** Let national accreditation systems do some of the program approval work to support strategic state investments and cross-state portability.
- **Support students with low incomes to maintain both enrollment continuity and intensity with grants and loans; offer substitutes for practitioners so they can participate in classes and required assignments; and provide compensation initiatives to reach both completion and transfer goals.** Develop evening, weekend, intensive, cohort, and online options based on identified needs.

An effective professional development system builds articulation by design

Every profession needs to ensure that its core body of knowledge is shared among its members, passed on to future generations, and integrated into the systems that support delivery of high-quality services. Stackable credentials that improve practice and are portable across sectors and states are an essential aspect of expanding access to high-quality early learning programs for children and families. We all share the responsibility to improve the transfer and articulation of professional credentials across higher education institutions; training programs; the child care, Head Start, and P-3 sectors of our profession; and across states.

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