

Evaluating an Early Childhood Degree Program

by Joleen Voss-Rodriguez

In the field of early childhood education (ECE), demands for increased education requirements are changing state-to-state. Over the past two decades, research has increasingly shown a link between ECE program quality and teacher preparation (Barnett, 2011; Bowman, 2011; Cassidy et al. 1995; Howes et al., 1992, 1995; Kontos et al., 1997). The ECE field has increasingly moved away from teachers holding a few units or credits in Child Development to teachers holding Bachelor's degrees and ECE credentials.

What do these educational changes mean to current and prospective ECE teachers? This varies by state. Current teachers may not be affected by changing requirements; although they can look at this as an opportunity to continue their education and to update their practices by taking classes. It is recommended that prospective teachers seek the highest level of academic attainment possible. Education, as a whole, is a field where level of education and wages are inextricably linked, especially in the public sector.

Head Start teachers have been returning to school as the qualifications for teachers increase. A memorandum issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011) outlines "Statutory Degree and Credentialing Requirements" speaks to the change in requirements:

By October 1, 2011, each preschool Head Start classroom in center-based programs must have a teacher who has at least one of the following:

1. An associate, baccalaureate, or advanced degree in early childhood education; or
2. An associate degree in a field related to early childhood education and coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education with experience teaching preschool-age children; or
3. A baccalaureate or advanced degree in any field and coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education, with experience teaching preschool-age children; or
4. A baccalaureate degree in any field and has been admitted into the Teach for America program, has passed a rigorous early childhood content exam such as the Praxis II, has participated in a Teach for America summer training institute that includes teaching preschool children, and is receiving ongoing professional development and support from Teach for America's professional staff.

With the rise in educational requirements, there has also been an increase in new ECE/Child Development degree-granting institutions promoting their programs. How do you choose the best program? This is a very subjective process where 'goodness of fit' is vital to student success. Programs will vary in location, cost, time required, unit requirements, accreditation standing, and more. Researching degree programs is the first step in the education process.

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Accreditation: One variable that all prospective students should research is accreditation status. Accreditation ensures that the institution adheres to the highest standards of quality of education. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) states, "The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality."

The United States is divided into six accreditation regions. The U.S. Department of Education does not participate in the accreditation process; accreditation is performed by non-gov-

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ernmental, private agencies. Accredited colleges and universities are reputable and reliable choices for a student's educational investment. Colleges and universities list their accreditation status on their websites. Students can also check accreditation status of a college or university by searching the U.S. Department of Education Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs (see Resources).

Program Reputation: The reputation of a program can be determined by interviewing or speaking with professionals in the field. Prospective students should ask local directors, teachers, and parents of young children what they think and know about the degree program. This information will lend insight into the community perception and the reputation of the quality of the program. Choosing a program that is reputable for its high quality is an important consideration. Professionals in the field often hold strong opinions about the reputation and the quality of degree programs. Students want to choose a program that will enhance, not weaken, their resume.

Location: Students can choose to take classes on-campus or online. There are a number of online college programs offering degrees and certificates in Child Development. Online programs are considered 'asynchronous learning,' while face-to-face instruction is referred to as 'synchronous learning.' This terminology refers to when and how the student learns — individually at the student's pace (asynchronous) or all students together in one place, at the same time (synchronous). Online programs are enticing to students for several reasons:

- Online classes are asynchronous, which means the students can complete the coursework on their own time and according to their own schedule. This is very appealing for the working individual.

- Online classes are a good option for the person who enjoys computers and working independently.

- Online classes are also a good option for a person who does not have easy access to a local college or university campus.

Overall, online degree programs can be an effective and expedient way to obtain a degree. Prospective students should check the accreditation status of online programs.

Students should consider that there is a certain skill set needed for a successful online experience; online instruction is not for everyone. At minimum, students need to have regular access to a computer and reliable Internet service. According to Dr. Wendy Bass, Distance Education Coordinator at Pierce College in Los Angeles, California, online students need to be self-motivated, organized, and have an intermediate level of computer literacy skills. To learn more about the online student experience, Mount San Jacinto College in California has developed a video with helpful tips from online students called, "What it Takes to Be a Successful Online Student" (see Resources). Students also should consider a self-assessment to determine their potential for success as an online student. Mira Costa College in the San Diego Community College district developed an online student self-assessment titled, "Test Your Potential as an Online Student" (see Resources).

In Child Development, there are mixed opinions about the level of quality for programs that are completed exclusively online, especially programs that do not require interactions with young children: How much can students learn about working with young children without actually interacting with them? Again, this references program reputation. Choosing an online program that

is respected in the community is an important consideration.

When looking at distance education programs, hybrid programs make a good choice. Hybrid distance education programs require partial online learning and partial residency (or face-to-face instruction). Hybrid distance education programs offer a more flexible option for the working student, as compared to synchronous or face-to-face coursework. Some hybrid programs offer the students opportunities to complete internships or practicum in the field or in a campus lab school. Prospective students should look for a high-quality program that offers access to young children, as this is an important component of teacher training.

Synchronous, or traditional college programs, offer the benefit of face-to-face interactions with professors and peers. Students may work in formal or informal cohorts where the students benefit from the relationships developed in a community of learners. In addition, many community colleges and universities have campus lab schools or on-site child care programs. High-quality programs will include interactions with young children. The opportunity to work with young children in a supervised practicum or internship setting is a very important aspect of bridging theory with practice.

Cost: One way to evaluate the financial investment of a degree is to consider the job opportunities available upon completion of the degree program. Students should research the average salaries for ECE Lead Teachers, Directors, and Program Directors in their community. Public institutions post salary scales; therefore, this information can be obtained online. Another option is to call employers directly to inquire about educational requirements and salary ranges.

Private colleges and universities are more expensive to attend, as compared to public programs. If tuition cost is a concern, seek out high-quality public programs in your area. If the local public college or university does not offer a high-quality program, there are an increasing number of private colleges and online colleges that offer accelerated programs. Accelerated programs offer the advantage of completing the program and entering the workforce earlier, which can help offset some of the cost of the program.

It is critical for students to meet with a financial aid counselor to review financial aid options. Students should also heavily research scholarship options. Scholarships can help alleviate the financial burden of tuition, books, and daily living expenses. Scholarships are not just for the top 10% of the class; scholarships are many and varied. Scholarships are established by schools, individuals, and families and are often available to students based on their nationality, religion, occupation, and life circumstances.

NAEYC Accreditation: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) can also provide information about the quality of ECE degree programs (see Resources). Most ECE professionals know that NAEYC has an accreditation process for pre-schools. Did you know that NAEYC also accredits associate degree programs? Many ECE professionals are not aware that NAEYC also offers an associate degree accreditation program. Associate degree programs can apply for NAEYC Commission on Early Childhood Associate Degree Accreditation. According to NAEYC (2013):

“The NAEYC Commission on Early Childhood Associate Degree Accreditation awards accreditation to associate degree programs that demon-

strate evidence of meeting the Professional Preparation Standards. Accreditation provides a framework for self-study, external evaluation, and improvement in the quality of teacher preparation programs.”

NAEYC also reviews Bachelor ECE programs for quality:

“NAEYC works with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education to review the early childhood programs at four-year colleges and universities. NAEYC peer reviewers are faculty in early childhood programs and evaluate program reports to determine whether programs meet the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards.”

It is important to note that NAEYC associate degree accreditation is not required; therefore, there are many high-quality programs that have not applied for NAEYC accreditation. For example, California has over 100 community colleges offering ECE programs; yet only one community college associate degree program is listed as accredited through NAEYC. Since NAEYC accreditation is not required and there is no additional funding at colleges to complete the accreditation process, it is not a popular choice among faculty. Faculty is often spread thin working to bring direct services to students in an effort to increase student success. Overall, NAEYC accreditation can be a definite plus for a program, but not having this specific accreditation does not indicate poor quality.

Consider your prospective employer:

A prospective employer is also a good resource for information on course requirements and on local degree programs. Employers have experience hiring and recruiting staff. They know what they are looking for and the type of training they value in their employees. Employers often favor certain

degree programs for their match in philosophy and for their depth of training. Prospective students should ask directors for their teacher requirements and also for their opinion on the best institution for ECE degrees.

Benefits of an Early Childhood Education Degree

As noted earlier, wage progression in the field of Education is linked to level of educational attainment, especially in the public sector. Typically, teachers with a higher level of education are more marketable. However, there are many cases in the ECE field where a teacher with as few as 12 ECE units has held a teaching position for many years or even decades. Often, the long-standing teacher is not required to attain a higher level of education to advance. For these veteran teachers, salaries may not be linked to continued education. However, there are other advantages for the veteran teacher to return to school. One advantage is to update his or her teaching practices. In the past decade, research into brain development has dramatically impacted what is known about children as learners. It is critical for educators to remain current in their practice. Workshops, conferences, and in-service training can offer insight into current practices, but the depth and scope of the information can be limited. Further, teachers often feel the pressure by parents and policymakers to replace play with early academics. Armed with current research, teachers can present themselves as well-educated professionals who can advocate for best practices, including play, in their classrooms and programs.

Choosing the best ECE degree program is a subjective process. The best fit is where the student has researched the options thoroughly and selected the program and institution that best meets his or her needs as a developing professional.

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Resources

Mira Costa College "Test Your Potential as an Online Student": www.miracosta.edu/instruction/distancededucation/quiz.aspx

Mount San Jacinto College in California, "What it Takes to Be a Successful Online Student": www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFEK52EE5ps

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): www.naeyc.org

U.S. Department of Education Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs: <http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>



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