



TEACHING THE TEACHERS OF OUR
YOUNGEST CHILDREN:
THE STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHER
EDUCATION IN NEBRASKA, 2015

HIGHLIGHTS
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INTRODUCTION

Today, the importance of early care and education (ECE) to children's lifelong learning and to our nation's economic well being is recognized up to the highest levels of government, and in businesses, schools, and living rooms across the country. This understanding represents a dramatic shift from earlier decades, and carries with it heightened expectations for what teachers of young children should know and be able to do,ⁱ in light of mounting evidence about inadequate and unequal educational quality, particularly for children of color and those living in low-income families.ⁱⁱ

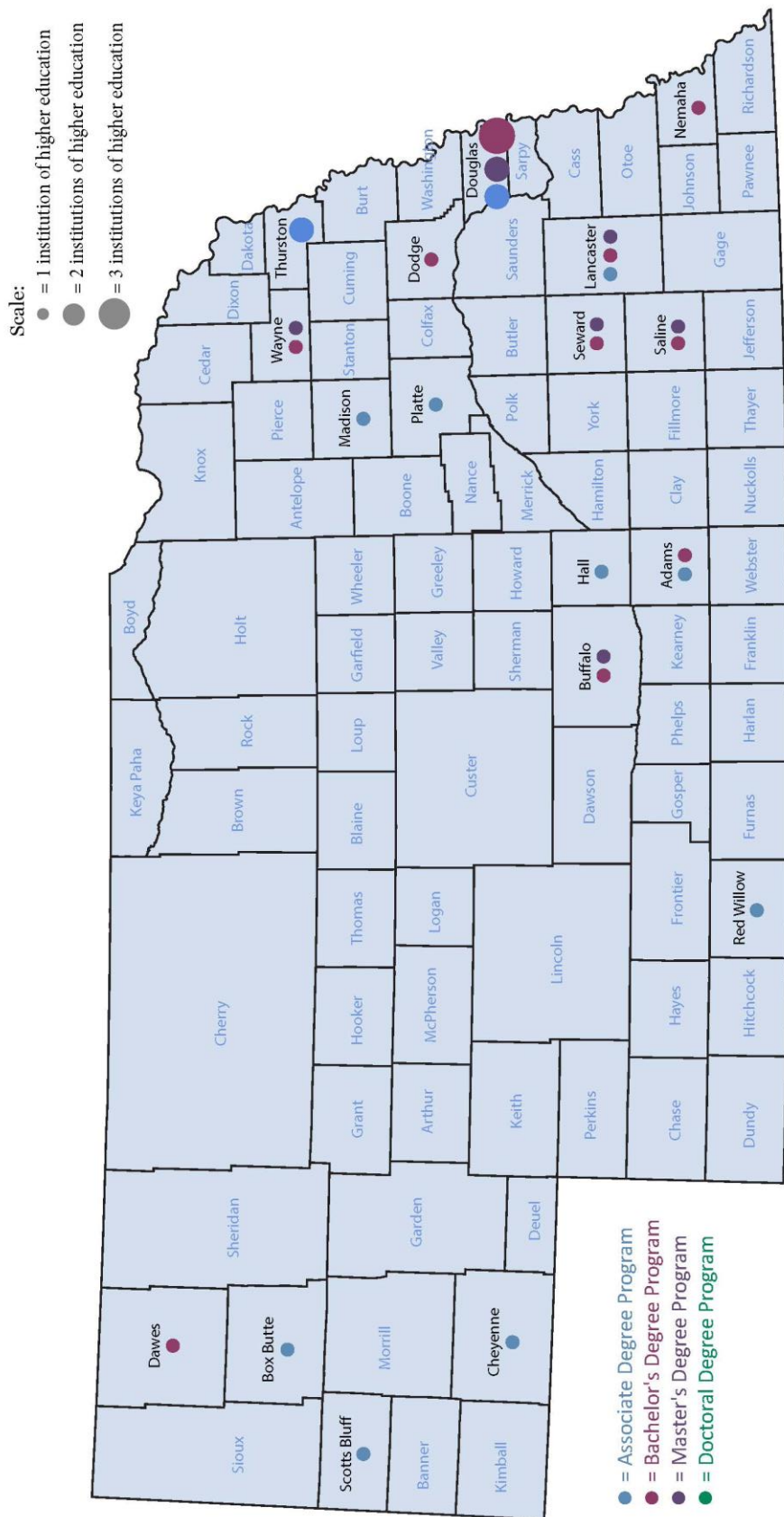
In recent years, Nebraska, like many states, has committed public and private resources toward multiple efforts to improve educational services and to ensure that teacher education degree and certification programs can better prepare their graduates to meet the complex needs of young children of all ages.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet there remains a demand for more than 7,000 new early childhood professionals to provide quality care and education to Nebraska's most at-risk children.^{iv} Critical to responding to this need is the establishment of a well-coordinated and comprehensive professional preparation and development system that can prepare an incoming generation of professionals while also strengthening the skills of the existing early education workforce. Institutions of higher education are key to meeting these evolving and increasing demands for improving developmental and learning outcomes for the state's young child population.

The following pages highlight findings from the *Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory*, and the extent to which Nebraska ECE higher education programs offer course content and learning experiences that are associated with effective teacher preparation.

The Early Childhood Higher Education Landscape in Nebraska Today

A network of eight community colleges, and six public and six private colleges and universities, offers an array of early childhood degree programs. The eight community colleges offer 12 associate degree programs, and the 12 public and private colleges and universities offer 20 bachelor's degree programs, eight master's degree programs, and two doctoral degree programs in early childhood.

Distribution of Nebraska Institutions of Higher Education Offering Early Childhood Degree Programs¹



¹Population of degree programs based on data collected in the 2014-2015 academic year.

PART 1: EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

Part 1 of the report examines program offerings, faculty characteristics, student supports, and institutional challenges.

FINDING ONE: PROGRAM OFFERINGS Goals, Course Content, and Age-Group Focus

Nebraska early childhood degree programs report differing goals for preparing students, with associate degree programs the most likely to identify teacher and/or

administrator preparation as their primary goal. In contrast, bachelor's degree programs are evenly divided between preparing students for teaching and/or administrative roles and preparing students for multiple roles involving young children. These programs offer a range of topics related to child development and approaches to teaching, but content focused on infants and toddlers, and on children who are dual language learners, is less represented across all degree levels. Fewer programs offer an in-depth focus on topics related to administration and leadership than other topics related to development and learning.

FINDING TWO: FIELD-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES Requirements and Age-Group Focus

Students earning a bachelor's degree in early childhood are typically required to complete a student teaching experience, and participate in additional practica. In

contrast, the majority of students completing an associate or master's degree in early childhood participate only in practica, and there is little consistency as to the duration and frequency of the experiences. All associate degree programs require practicum experiences to include a focus on all age groups of children from infancy through early elementary school, while bachelor's and master's programs report less focus on infants and toddlers.

FINDING THREE: PORTRAIT OF FACULTY Employment Status, Demographics, Professional Background, and Professional Development Needs

Nebraska early childhood degree programs are staffed mostly by full-time faculty. Nebraska's early childhood faculty workforce were somewhat less racially and ethnically diverse than the composition of the college student

body, and of the child population underage the age of five in the state. Between one-third and one-half of faculty members across degree levels identified Spanish as a language they would

like to know in order to communicate better with students. Most faculty members report having had academic preparation specific to early childhood, and most associate and bachelor's degree faculty report having worked in an array of ECE professional roles in the past decade. Most faculty, however, have not had recent experience teaching children, particularly infants and toddlers. Nebraska early childhood degree program faculty members are particularly interested in professional development related to working with diverse children, and utilizing technology in teaching.

FINDING FOUR: SUPPORTING STUDENTS Services Offered and Ongoing Challenges

Nebraska early childhood degree programs offer multiple types of support services designed to help students access resources and strengthen their academic skills.

Associate and graduate degree programs are more likely to make coursework accessible in multiple formats by offering courses online, off-campus, or during alternative hours, such as evenings and weekends. For many institutions, a primary challenge is having sufficient faculty with expertise in teaching diverse populations of children and adults.

FINDING FIVE: PROGRAM CHALLENGES Faculty and Program Needs

Nebraska early childhood degree programs experience challenges related to time and resources in fulfilling faculty responsibilities, as well as the need for

faculty with specific expertise, and for a more racially and ethnically diverse faculty that reflects the increasing diversity of the children and families in the state. Early childhood faculty members are also in need of resources to help them participate in professional development and program planning.

PART 2: EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHER EDUCATION, AN EVOLVING LANDSCAPE

Part 2 of the report examines how institutions of higher education are adapting to emerging research on the importance of family engagement and early mathematics to young children's development and learning.

FINDING SIX: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT Faculty Attitudes, Required Offerings, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider the inclusion of family engagement to be very important in the preparation of early childhood teachers, and rank its importance on a par with the domain of socio-emotional

development. Multiple topics related to family engagement are embedded in all levels of degree programs, with some variation in age-group focus by degree level and topic. Faculty members express varied levels of interest in professional development in this topic area.

FINDING SEVEN: EARLY MATHEMATICS Faculty Attitudes, Required Offerings, Faculty Self-Assessment, Teaching Experience, and Professional Development Interests

Faculty members consider it less important to include early mathematics than other domains in the preparation of early childhood teachers. Multiple topics related to early mathematics are embedded in required course content, with variation

among degree levels by topic and by age-group focus. Many faculty members do not consider themselves prepared to teach early math content, yet interest in ongoing math-related professional development varies by degree level and topic area.

SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

We outline below an approach to reconfiguring and strengthening early childhood higher education in Nebraska. Our approach is predicated on identifying new resources from state, federal, and philanthropic sources, and reallocating a portion of existing revenues for quality improvement and workforce system development.

1. Unify expectations and pathways for early childhood workforce preparation

- Erase divisions in professional expectations and preparation across and within age groups in the birth-to-age-eight spectrum by establishing a coordinated and comprehensive approach to early childhood certification, for teachers and administrators across settings and with similar levels of education;
- Provide clear roadmaps for students enrolling in degree programs to meet teacher education or director requirements (e.g., in Quality Rating and Improvement System [QRIS], Head Start, or public preschool programs), identifying whether particular courses of study will prepare them for the demands of teaching young children and/or for leading ECE programs; and
- Provide clear information statewide about the types of certificate endorsements available, and coordinate among institutions of higher education to use standardized titles for degree programs that lead to the same endorsement.

2. Strengthen program content and equity across the age span

- Engage faculty groups representing different degree levels and types of institutions, as well as other experts, to strengthen required course content related to development and pedagogy across multiple domains. Particular attention should be paid to children's mathematical understanding from infancy through the early grades, with a focus on children who are dual language learners, and to working with children and families from diverse linguistic, racial/ethnic, and economic backgrounds; and
- Engage faculty groups representing different degree levels and types of institutions to develop degree program standards for the timing, frequency, and duration of field-based experiences, differentiating between experiences for pre-service and in-service students, and offering opportunities focused on children across the entire birth to age-eight spectrum, and children from diverse backgrounds.

3. Build a leadership pipeline

- Establish a process to identify the specific skills and knowledge needed for common leadership roles in ECE (including teacher leaders, coaches, site administrators, principals, program/quality improvement managers, and teacher educators);
- Identify the appropriate course of study, degree level (lower division, upper division, graduate), and certification for each leadership role, based on the specific skills and knowledge identified above; and
- Investigate strategies used in a variety of disciplines (e.g., health, education, social welfare) to increase minority representation, such as fellowship opportunities, and develop a plan tailored to Nebraska to increase minority representation among ECE faculty.

4. Increase faculty support

- Establish an ongoing fund, with well-articulated expectations, for honoraria for individual faculty professional development and for program improvement grants.

END NOTES

A complete list of references can be found in the full narrative report.

ⁱ Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014) *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ReportFINAL.pdf>

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^{iv} First Five Nebraska (2015). Letter to Senator Mike Gloor and the Revenue Committee, March 11, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.firstfivenebraska.org/uploads/First_Five_Nebraska_Written_Testimony_-_LB645.pdf

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