



Examining Early Childhood Teacher Preparation in North Carolina during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Summative Brief

Prepared by: Callie Edwards, Ph.D., Jemilia Davis, Ph.D., Elizabeth "Kenzie" Bell
and Emily Saylor

The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation
North Carolina State University

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Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research

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About the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to lead the transition to next-generation education systems that will prepare students for success in the digital-age world. It conducts research, develops educational resources, provides professional development programs for educators, advocates to improve teaching and learning, and helps inform policymaking. The Friday Institute is a part of the NC State College of Education. Visit fi.ncsu.edu to learn more.

About the Belk Center

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, at North Carolina State University's College of Education, develops and sustains exceptional community college leaders who are committed to advancing college access, the social and economic mobility of their colleges' students, and the economic competitiveness of their regions. The Center conducts and disseminates research to address current and emerging student success challenges facing community college leaders and policymakers in North Carolina and beyond.

Visit <https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/> to learn more about the center and our commitment to equity.

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Table of Contents

About the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation	2
About the Belk Center	2
Acknowledgments	3
Table of Contents	4
Overview	5
What Happened During the Pandemic	7
Data Profile for Students	10
Data Profile for Faculty	13
Promising Practices	15
Conclusion	16

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College of Education
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation



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Overview

Community colleges are an integral component of the United States' (U.S.) educational pipeline and play a critical role in developing early childhood educators. In fact, research suggests that most U.S. early childhood education degree programs are provided by community colleges (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). North Carolina is home to 58 community colleges, making it the third largest community college system in the nation enrolling more than 700,000 students (North Carolina Community College System, 2016). All 58 North Carolina community colleges provide courses that prepare early childhood educators for earning credentials, including a diploma, certificate, and an associate's degree (NC Institute for Child Development Professionals, n.d).

This pilot study, funded by a Friday Institute and NC State College of Education Catalyst Grant, set out to examine how early childhood education (ECE) programs in North Carolina community colleges navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Three research questions guided the work:

- RQ1a: To what extent did enrollment and completion outcomes change for community college students who were enrolled in face-to-face (F2F) early education courses that transitioned to a remote learning environment?
- RQ1b: How do overall enrollment and completion trends compare for Black, Latinx, and American Indian students?

- RQ2: What supports and barriers did community college faculty have to transition these F2F early education courses to a remote learning environment?

The research team employed a sequential exploratory design in which the qualitative portion occurred first and then informed the quantitative portion (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2016). The qualitative analysis featured virtual interviews and focus groups with community college faculty members (n=8), a systems' level administrator (n=1), and community college students (n=5), which were analyzed using a mix of priori and emergent coding schemes. The quantitative analysis featured descriptive statistical testing of the data provided by the North Carolina Community College System's (NCCCS) Data Dashboard.

This summative brief highlights the main findings from investigation, including details of how the pandemic impacted ECE programs generally, a data profile for students, a data profile for faculty, and promising practices that emerged from the study. For a more detailed look at the landscape of ECE programs across North Carolina, readers are invited to read the companion piece to this brief, [High-Quality Credentials for Childcare Workers](#).



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What Happened During the Pandemic

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, North Carolina community colleges had to reimagine course delivery methods and student support services. Many ECE programs in North Carolina are offered entirely online, allowing for a simple transition to virtual course delivery for the remainder of the spring semester. Professors largely had experience teaching in a remote learning environment and those who did not were met with technical assistance and tutorials to help create a meaningful learning experience for their students.



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Two sources of resources that were particularly helpful to ECE faculty members were SCRIPT- NC and ACCESS. SCRIPT-NC, which is a project of the UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education, works with a select number of community college ECE programs in North Carolina to “assess, enhance, and redesign courses to better prepare pre-service early childhood practitioners to meet the needs of children in their communities” (SCRIPT-NC, nd.). The Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators – ACCESS to Shared Knowledge and Practice Network, more commonly known as ACCESS, is a national network of faculty members who teach in associates-level ECE preparation programs. North Carolina’s ACCESS affiliate, NC-ACCESS, is the largest state-level affiliate ACCESS chapter, and the current president of the national organization is from NC-ACCESS.



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One faculty member remarked that by the end of March, “SCRIPT-NC was already banging out webinars for us. They helped support us and they did such an awesome job. I remember sitting there thinking, ‘Gosh, did they know about the pandemic, because they were on top of it!’” as a way to express their appreciation of the support they received. Likewise, another faculty member said of ACCESS, “I would say ACCESS jumped right in. They were busy doing it, but it’s a network of the same people, like we are. They’re college instructors and they got together and said, “Hey, we need to come up with some plans.”

In terms of their course structures, many ECE programs were well prepared for completely online course delivery, as their programs were already primarily online. Though many courses within ECE programs were already offered online, capstone classes – typically an in-classroom, practicum experience – were difficult to reimagine. One administrator saw this aspect of ECE programs as a “high-stress area” for faculty. She went on to state, “The capstone classes require a significant number of hours in a placement site to complete the degree. And we have one capstone class that’s in the core, so it can’t be substituted.” The capstone course allows students to apply their knowledge in a real classroom. At the onset of the pandemic, many childcare centers closed and could not accommodate student-teachers, and many students who were enrolled in their capstone course lost their position. Those who continued working virtually struggled

with inconsistent attendance from their students, parents who pushed back on the value of virtual learning, and the stress of reimagining their lesson plans to function in a virtual setting. To address the challenges posed by reimagining the practicum experience, ECE faculty members worked closely with their students to create individual learning plans that addressed each student's specific needs. Faculty across colleges shared resources such as videos that students could watch to replace observation experiences.

The pandemic necessitated swift action, and the NCCCS took broad measures to support students through the pandemic. Rather than moving slowly, like "molasses" or a "sloth" as described by one faculty member, ECE programs and their associated colleges had to quickly orient themselves to solutions. The NCCCS adopted a new grading model, allowing students to opt for an emergency incomplete or withdrawal from a course without damaging their overall GPA. Many institutions either created or expanded food pantries for students experiencing food insecurity. For those in rural communities and other communities without reliable internet, parking lots became a temporary classroom. One faculty member attested to the lengths their institution went

“We’ve set up parking lots where students could actually have access to technology and to the internet. We had people walking around with snacks, water, and food, just to share with them while they were sitting in the parking lot doing their homework. For those that did not have consistent access, we printed things out and... made copies for our students. Students would call in and make an appointment, and [staff] would be out there on the sidewalk with their masks and gloves, handing off paperwork and packets for students.”

to ensure reliable access to course materials and technology:

North Carolina community colleges understood that students relied on their institutions for more than just classroom space. These institutions quickly took measures to support student needs and mitigate common hardships to ensure students would still have a meaningful experience while staying safe.



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Data Profile for Students

Like many community college students, ECE students faced unique and persistent challenges during the pandemic. This study aimed to highlight the extent that enrollment and completion outcomes changed for community college students over the course of the academic year where COVID-19 directly impacted students' educational experiences both inside and outside of their academic responsibilities.

Enrollment and success mirrored a similar trend to years prior to the pandemic.

When reviewing the course success data across Fall 2019, Spring 2020, and Fall 2020, there was minimal change in the course success in EDU 119. EDU 119 is the "Introduction to Early Childhood Education," offered at all North Carolina's 58 community colleges, and fulfills the requirement for lead teachers. In the spring of 2020, at the onset of systemwide decisions to close in-person campuses, the EDU 119 course success rate was at 71%. There was a decrease noted for Fall 2020 to 67% but this decrease was not statistically significant. Comparatively, in the 2018, 2019, and 2020 semesters, the largest change was a decrease of approximately 800 students between 2019 and 2020 fall semesters. Changes over the next few semesters will identify whether this is the beginning of a downward trend or part of the natural ebb and flow of course success each semester. The data right now is inconclusive but should continue to be watched closely in the upcoming year to see how this program and the pipeline of ECEs may be changing.

Although the extent of course success did not demonstrate drastic changes across the students enrolled in EDUC 119 overall, when disaggregated by race/ethnicity, the disparities between these groups were sustained. For example, in Spring 2019, there was a 23% gap in student success between Asian and Black students. This increased to 28% during Spring 2020. Data on course success disaggregated by race/ethnicity provides a counternarrative for Black students who, over the past 4 semesters (Spring 2019-Fall 2020), have consistently demonstrated success outcomes below the average for the collective group. The data suggests the pandemic may not have directly influenced the success rates negatively or positively based on the changes and adjustments made in the programs to accommodate students. When interpreting the data, it is important to note that the findings were presented as percentages for enrollment/success rather than the quantity of students, which is a limitation. An alternative data presentation may produce a more nuanced interpretation. Nonetheless, the inequity across success outcomes for Black students, in particular, has been perpetuated throughout the pandemic.



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Students who were interviewed discussed barriers to fulfilling their course requirements while managing their family responsibilities, work responsibilities, and external factors – like limited WiFi access that directly influenced their success in coursework. One student shared how they were concerned about the availability of teachers, so they hesitated contacting them while also working and taking care of her household who was quarantined for COVID. The student said, “I feel like we get over one hump, and I got a routine and a flow of things and it was like nope... you just have to make do with what you have.” Another student shared how distance



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from their faculty members negatively impacted their success. “It’s really hard for me to [learn] on video because it’s not a real person.” Another student talked about the stress they experienced while they attempted to get their work done saying, “I couldn’t get all my stuff due on time. I was really stressed out and I couldn’t do it all the time. Then I’d have to worry about going outside, and seeing I might get [COVID-19], and I did get [COVID-19], sadly.”

The pandemic illuminated the weight of factors within and outside of the students’ control and how it directly influenced their success. Nonetheless, students reflected primarily on the support they received from their faculty and the institution to mitigate some of the challenges they faced. For example, one student shared, “If it had not been for my one instructor, I wouldn’t have continued.” Students shared how the faculty provided resources when they were facing possible homelessness and limited access to food. The faculty’s accessibility to the students helped students to feel as though there was a culture of holistic care for their persistence in the program. To close their interview, one student shared how they would recommend all faculty make a personal connection with their students by, “Just checking in on [their] students because I do understand that a lot of us have been through a lot during COVID, even outside of the education field. So I would pretty much say just more of the reaching out, even if it’s just an email, just more reaching out to the students just to see how they’re doing even outside of education.” Consistent and personal communication was a key that helped the student participants persist in their courses during the semester.

Data Profile for Faculty

According to the most recent data available, there are more than 16,000 community college faculty in the state of North Carolina. These faculty include individuals who teach courses across basic skills, continuing education, and curriculum content areas. ECE faculty, in particular, were on the frontlines, responding to the aforementioned pressing needs of their students such as adapting and delivering the EDU 119 course. In the midst of this unprecedented context, ECE faculty emerged triumphantly. Faculty and administrator interviews and focus groups demonstrated that ECE faculty had two major strengths that readied them for the pandemic: a close-knit community of practice and existing remote learning.

Close-knit community of practice. To start, on a whole, ECE faculty are a well-networked group of professionals who have functioned as a cohesive unit well before the pandemic. The primary focus of the ECE network in North Carolina is NC-ACCESS. Not all North Carolina ECE faculty are members of NC-ACCESS, but a majority are, while some resources are only available to members, during the pandemic, NC-ACCESS, along with the national organization, provided resources to all ECE faculty free of charge – including resources that assisted with transitioning courses to a COVID-informed environment. As such, it was common for faculty in these programs to share insights and resources with colleagues across the state. The ethos of these faculty exemplified openness, collaboration, and continuous learning and improvement. As one systems-level administrator explained, “[ECE] faculty were really good at supporting each other and sharing their ideas and sharing their resources.” In short, ECE faculty were not siloed to their institutions, and their willingness to communicate and learn from each other set them apart from their peer faculty members in different departments. For example, when describing how ECE faculty compare to other disciplines at their college, one faculty member stated:

“ I think the early childhood group, we’re head and shoulders above some of the other instructors as far as making our courses more educational worthy and exciting to the students because we rely on each other. It’s that networking that does it. [Other faculty] don’t have the strong organization that we do. And so I think that’s made a big difference. ”

Being a part of a tightly connected collective group helped ECE faculty to thrive during the pandemic because, in the face of uncertainty, these faculty members had colleagues



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they could reach out to for advice and support. While there was no playbook for how to navigate this once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, faculty felt supported because they essentially had a cohort to experience it with.

Existing remote learning within programs. In addition to having a built-in community of practice, many ECE programs already had online components, and faculty had received training in delivering virtual instruction. By establishing this foundation, a good deal of ECE faculty had a very minor experience of transitioning to remote course delivery because of their familiarity with online teaching and learning practices. One systems-level administrator described this phenomenon as follows:

“ When the pandemic first hit, the good thing about the early childhood program is that most of our programs have at least part of their programs [and] part of their courses online. [Also] because of our work together with the NC-ACCESS Group, we have had trainings in the past to work on technology resources, different technology programs to use and those types of things, and we’ve also had training for ADA compliance online. ”

Still, it is important to note that the transition to move all coursework, assessments, and practicum assignments completely online was a new challenge for some programs. However, in those instances, faculty relied on their network of peers to navigate the virtual terrain. Not only did ECE faculty help their similarly situated colleagues, but multiple focus group participants also extended support beyond the postsecondary education, using their previous knowledge and experience teaching online to help K-12 educators adapt to remote learning. As one ECE faculty member shared:

“ I contacted all of our high school, [career and technical education] early childhood teachers, because we had six high schools in our region [...] [They] were not at all prepared for online teaching. And I helped at least two high schools. [...] What I saw [as the main difference] between [ECE faculty] and the rest of my campus is [other faculty] were sharing among the campus, but not necessarily sharing among other colleges, other states, [and] other colleagues.”

Promising Practices

Coming out of our research, we identified the following three themes: 1) The professional learning community NC-ACCESS was a vital resource for ECE faculty members when adapting to the pandemic, 2) ECE faculty leveraged their strength of community and student-centered approaches to fulfill opportunity and access gaps experienced by students, and 3) Community Colleges worked to support students holistically during the pandemic. One of the biggest takeaways of this research is how quickly and effectively the ECE programs adapted in North Carolina. Based on our research on the ECE program, we recommend the following two promising practices for North Carolina community college programs:

Share knowledge through networked professional learning communities.

ECE faculty members attribute much of their success in adapting to COVID-19 to the strength of their pre-existing statewide professional learning community, NC-ACCESS. As one faculty member described when talking about how NC-ACCESS and the ECE faculty in North Carolina adapted to the challenges posed by COVID-19, “Each of us knows something that somebody else doesn’t, and everybody was willing to share it.” From exchanging ideas on how to adapt in-person practicum experiences to an online environment to advice on how to support struggling students, faculty members worked together to support the needs of ECE students statewide.

Support students through strong 1:1 relationships. ECE students who felt supported by faculty persisted despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. One student stated that “I had one instructor that said ‘You are not giving up. You are not, we are not.’ I truly believe if it had not been for me meeting her, or having her be a part of my life, or just being my instructor at that time, I don’t think I would’ve carried on.” While in some cases students had relationships with their instructors before COVID-19 struck, in many cases, ECE faculty needed to find ways to create bonds with new students they had never met in person. ECE faculty found ways to stay connected with their students, such as texting using the app GroupMe, and connected their students with resources available at their schools. As one faculty member put it, “We’re trying really hard to make sure that we’re reaching out to students. If they go off the grid, it is our responsibility to go out and chase them and say ‘Where are you? What do you need? How can I help you?’” Through their intensive support of their students, ECE faculty helped their students to persist despite the hardships they were experiencing.

Conclusion

In 2020, North Carolina ECE students and faculty alike adjusted to the changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as in the rest of the world, the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities and laid bare structural issues. However, in several key ways, the ECE faculty were better prepared to address these challenges due to pre-existing structures of support that can be replicated within other professional communities.



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