

SHAYNA COOK

# WHEN DEGREE PROGRAMS FOR PRE-K TEACHERS GO ONLINE

## Challenges and Opportunities

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## About the Authors



**Shayna Cook** is a policy analyst with the Education Policy program at New America who works on the Learning Technologies Project and reports on a wide array of policy issues concerning children from birth through third grade. A former teacher, she holds a master's degree in education from American University, focusing on policy and leadership, and a bachelor's degree in classics from Howard University.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Before they enter kindergarten, many young children spend a significant portion of their days in early care and education programs, where the quality of their experiences determines whether they will gain a solid foundation for building both academic and social skills in their later years. A growing body of research<sup>1</sup> shows that the quality of everyday interactions between a young child and a caring adult—interactions infused with playful learning experiences that are rich in content and vocabulary—is essential to ensuring that early learning programs make a positive impact on children, particularly for those from high-poverty communities.<sup>2</sup> That research shows that effectively fostering children’s development in key domains (such as socioemotional learning, early literacy, early math, fine motor skills, cognition, and approaches to learning) takes skillful planning, execution, and reflection.

**Research shows that effectively fostering children’s development in key domains takes skillful planning, execution, and reflection.**

The recognition that teaching young children takes well-honed skills and knowledge—it is not just babysitting—has led policymakers and the

early childhood field to push to professionalize the workforce. Federal, state, and local leaders across the United States are working to steadily raise credential requirements. Programs like Head Start and public pre-K programs for three- and four-year-olds have been on the leading edge of these changes for over a decade. Today, 35 state-funded public pre-K programs require that lead teachers hold a bachelor’s degree and many of those states require a major or specialization in early childhood.<sup>3</sup>

These policies are raising big questions: What is the best way to support lead teachers in attaining a bachelor’s degree? What are the equity implications of this credential requirement for the existing workforce, for people new to the field, and for children? What do we know about the availability and quality of existing degree programs? Could they be offered in a way that would enable a teacher to earn her degree at night without disrupting her work with children? Could online degree programs provide new opportunities? Or do they simply represent a new set of challenges related to quality and access?

This report aims to start answering those last two questions, which represent new and unexplored terrain in early childhood education policy. To investigate the intersection of issues in teacher preparation, early childhood policy, and online degree programs, my colleagues and I synthesized

### Note on Terminology

In this paper, we use the terms lead educator and lead teacher to mean any professional who has primary responsibility for the care and education of young children on a daily or near-daily basis. This is based on definitions of professional roles described in *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. This does not include paraprofessionals, assistant teachers, or teacher aides.

findings from published reports on the state of teacher preparation, conducted interviews with experts (including members of the advisory group described on page 4), culled information from websites of institutions offering online degree programs, and analyzed national data sets on early childhood teacher preparation programs, as well as surveys of the early childhood workforce. We focused primarily on the segment of the early childhood workforce that is closest to achieving the bachelor's degree credential and commensurate compensation: pre-K lead teachers. Our findings show how online degrees can provide teachers with greater access to programs, but also point to the need for better higher education data and the benefits of degree programs that provide teachers with financial supports.

# THE IMPETUS FOR LEAD TEACHERS TO ACQUIRE A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

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Many policymakers, researchers, and early childhood professional organizations, including the Early and Elementary Education Policy program at New America, agree that one way to build the skills and knowledge of the early childhood workforce is to raise the bar for becoming a lead educator. The idea is to steadily shift from requiring little more than a high school diploma, which is the baseline requirement today, particularly in many private child care centers, to requiring a bachelor's degree for all lead educators working with children from

birth through age eight. The theory is that this will not only raise the esteem of early childhood educators generally and give them grounds for demanding higher salaries, but that it will also raise the skills, core competencies, and general knowledge of teachers in the classroom, greatly benefitting young children.

The seminal *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* report, released by the National Academies of Sciences,

Engineering, and Medicine in 2015, recommended that organizations and leaders in the field begin to build a system that could support lead educators in attaining a bachelor's degree, in early childhood education or a related subject. The authors of the report recognized that although there is no consensus among the small number of studies published so far on the correlation between teachers with bachelor's degrees and child outcomes, supporting the new credential would help to unify the workforce. Teachers of children younger than five would have the same set of qualifications, prestige, and skills as those teaching kindergarten

through third grade and above. The report laid out a proposal for the coming decades, envisioning a time when lead educators, across the developmental continuum from birth through third grade, possess the same set of core competencies and skills. The authors' intent was to unify the field around the implementation of the most up-to-date research around how young children learn best.

After the release of *Transforming the Workforce*, most of the debate in the field has been around how best to equitably achieve the bachelor's degree goal for all lead educators. However, there is dissent.

## Advisory Group on Online Degree Programs for Pre-K Lead Educators

This spring, New America's Learning Technologies Project and its Early and Elementary Education Policy team partnered to convene a group of experts in the preparation of early childhood teachers and in teacher preparation programs generally. This group met for a daylong meeting in May to discuss the feasibility of online bachelor's degree programs for pre-K lead educators, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. New America tapped the group members listed below to help us think about how to develop guardrails and to spotlight supportive programs to ensure that early educators are gaining access to affordable online degree programs that give them the skills and knowledge needed to better support the social and cognitive development of young children.

### Advisory Group

**Lea Austin**, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

**Laura Bornfreund**, New America

**Libby Doggett**, Libby Doggett Consulting

**Chip Donohue**, Technology in Early Childhood Center at Erikson Institute

**Fabienne Doucet**, New York University

**Raul Gonzalez**, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

**Lisa Guernsey**, New America

**Bridget Hamre**, University of Virginia

**Gail Joseph**, University of Washington/EarlyEdU Alliance

**Marica Cox Mitchell**, National Association for the Education of Young Children

**Abena Ocran-Jackson**, Council for Professional Recognition

**Hannah Putnam**, National Council on Teacher Quality

**Valora Washington**, Council for Professional Recognition

**Maria Worthen**, iNACOL, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning

Some policymakers question whether raising the early childhood credential is the right path forward,<sup>4</sup> especially because teachers who work with children younger than five earn woefully low wages. Low earnings inhibit a teacher's ability to afford the cost of a degree and benefit economically from this investment.

Although college affordability is not a problem unique to those who work in early childhood

education, the issue is exacerbated when teachers graduate from bachelor's degree programs with loans and go to work in low-wage jobs. Some states and districts are working toward addressing this problem by creating grant and scholarship programs tailored to meet the needs of the early education workforce. There is increased interest among policymakers at all levels in unifying the field through effective practice, credentialing, and pay.

## WHY ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMS MIGHT HELP

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Individuals in the early childhood workforce who go back to school to attain higher credentials are commonly referred to as nontraditional students because they commute and often juggle family and employment obligations with school.<sup>5</sup> Online degree programs have emerged as one way to create a more flexible and accessible pathway for these individuals to obtain a degree, since they can complete coursework from anywhere, which eliminates the time and money spent on commuting and makes programs accessible for those without an institution near them. Classes can be completed asynchronously, which allows teachers to fit college coursework into their schedules while maintaining work and family obligations. Online classes also provide an avenue for students to enroll in the classes they need each semester, which can help to prevent delays in degree completion. Only about 21 percent of part-time students, according

to the National Student Clearinghouse, complete a bachelor's degree in six years.<sup>6</sup> The lack of access to courses that comes with traditional in-person models is one reason students do not finish or take longer to complete their programs.

Online programs can also help lessen academic barriers that lead educators face. For instance, some teachers are going back to school for the first time after a long hiatus and often need to take remedial classes before taking credit-bearing courses, which can delay degree completion. Online programs can help students to complete remedial coursework at their own pace in order to fill gaps in their knowledge more efficiently than taking a full semester of a particular remedial class.<sup>7</sup> Some online programs also allow teachers to take these remedial classes at the same time as credit-bearing classes, which also helps to decrease the time it takes to complete the degree.

## Debunking Myths around Online Degree Programs

For those new to online learning, it sounds incongruous to prepare a person for teaching young children by having her sit in front of a computer and take an online course. But with the arrival of new methods for communicating online, like the use of interactive chats and video (including video playback of teachers working with children in pre-K classrooms), designers of these courses say they can help build a strong knowledge base and provide opportunities for introspection about students' own teaching methods. A study out of the University of Virginia<sup>8</sup> and a *Young Children* article by Chip Donohue, Selena Fox, and Debra Torrence<sup>9</sup> showed that online learning is a feasible option for early childhood teachers when the programs are properly designed and allow for professors to implement high-quality coursework. In my interviews, faculty members with years of experience in online and distance learning programs provided the following responses to some popular perceptions of online learning:

Perception	Reality
The quality of online degree programs for early childhood teachers is always lower than in-person programs.	Studies show that students in online courses demonstrate the same or better content knowledge gains as their counterparts in traditional in-person programs.
You cannot build relationships in an online program or have models in which cohorts of students get to know each other by going through their classes simultaneously.	Early educators want to build relationships. Online programs can still use the cohort model and can create virtual communities. One professor said, "I have better relationships with my online students than my in-person students."
Early educators have a hard time learning how to use new technology to access information in an online program.	Quality online programs take time to teach their students how to use the technology and access the material.

**Source:** Phone interviews with Chip Donohue, Gail Joseph, and Kathy Neesen in July 2017.

## Community College Online



For more information about online degree programs, read *Community College Online*. The report is available at <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/community-college-online/>.



# COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY AND THE COMPENSATION PROBLEM

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Unlike in nursing or medicine, there is no universally agreed-upon path to becoming a professional in early childhood education, nor is there any minimum bar for salaries and benefits. Instead, the field is fractured into various qualification requirements and levels of compensation for different early childhood programs, lead educators of various age groups, and settings (home-, center-, community-, or school-based).<sup>10</sup> But for the most part, teachers serving pre-K children three to five years old have more education under their belts than those serving children under three. In addition to the 35 state programs that require pre-K teachers to hold at least a bachelor's degree, Head Start requires 50 percent of lead teachers in center-based programs to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related major.<sup>11</sup> As of 2012, almost half of center-based pre-K teachers held a bachelor's degree or higher and over three-quarters of Head Start lead teachers had a bachelor's degree, according to the initial finding from the National Survey of Early Care and Education.<sup>12</sup>

Still, simply raising credential requirements cannot be the only action policymakers take to increase the skills of the workforce serving our youngest learners. Early childhood educators often face many barriers to obtaining a bachelor's degree,

and policymakers need to address these barriers if they are going to ask for enhanced credentials.<sup>13</sup> There are often unintended consequences that harm teachers directly and children indirectly if policymakers set unrealistic deadlines and raise the qualifications required without setting up supportive programs, such as allowances for time off and grants or loan forgiveness to defray tuition.

Currently, the average hourly wage for a pre-K teacher, according to *Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages*, a landmark report on the state of the workforce, is \$15.11.<sup>14</sup> One of the first difficulties teachers encounter when looking for a bachelor's degree program is figuring out how to pay for it. Four-year degree programs cost \$43,000 total on average.<sup>15</sup> In addition, pre-K teachers are mostly women and often bear the responsibility of caring for their own children. With such low wages, it can be almost impossible for teachers to pay for child care while attending classes. And, as for nontraditional students, unexpected life events, like a sick parent or a broken-down car, can often derail a teacher's efforts to enter and complete a program.<sup>16</sup>

What is more, wages have not been significantly increased to correspond with the bachelor's degree credential.<sup>17</sup> For instance, the *Worthy Work* report

showed pre-K teachers in school settings with bachelor's degrees earn, on average, three-quarters of the compensation of comparably educated women in the civilian labor force.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, many early childhood educators need financial support to attend bachelor's degree programs. Federal aid is one avenue. Individuals who go back to school can take out federal loans (i.e., Direct and Perkins Loan programs), apply for federal grants (Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants [SEOG], Iraq and Afghanistan Service Grants, and TEACH Grants), and file for tax benefits (i.e., tax-free status for scholarship income).<sup>19</sup>

But these programs rarely cover the full cost of the degrees. If teachers are not careful, they can rack up large loan debts. More promising—though only available in 23 states—are the Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Scholarships,\* which cover close to 90 percent of the cost of attaining a bachelor's degree. T.E.A.C.H. began in 1990 as a way to attract and retain teachers who wanted to obtain college degrees. The program partners with centers and early childhood teachers and fully funds degree programs while providing wage increases to incentivize teachers to complete their college degrees. Funded through private and state public dollars, T.E.A.C.H. has provided over \$433 million in scholarships between its inception and 2016.<sup>20</sup>

\*The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship program should not be confused with the federally funded Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) grant. Students who apply for TEACH grants are eligible to earn up to \$16,000, receiving a total of \$4,000 per year. After receiving the grant, students are required to work in low-income schools and high-needs fields. If teachers stop working in a qualifying school, their grant becomes a loan. For more on TEACH grants see, Tamara Hiler and Lanae Erickson Hatafsky, "TEACH Grant Trap: Program to Encourage Young People to Teach Falls Short," Third Way, January 13, 2015, <http://www.thirdway.org/memo/teach-grant-trap-program-to-encourage-young-people-to-teach-falls-short>.

## Affordable Broadband and Device Access

When raising credentials, policymakers should consider ways to ensure that early childhood teachers have access to up-to-date computers and affordable broadband to complete online degree programs. Although nearly three-quarters of Americans have access to broadband service at home, access decreases based on educational attainment, household income, geographic location, and racial and ethnic background. In addition, 12 percent of Americans report to Pew Research Center that they are smartphone dependent, meaning they could only access the Internet through their smartphones. Young adults, nonwhites, and those with relatively low household incomes are most affected.

These statistics are particularly troubling in this context, since early childhood educators are often women of color from low-income households. Similar to the digital divide<sup>22</sup> that needs to be reduced for many students, early childhood educators need access to affordable broadband and an up-to-date computer in order to fully access the curriculum and content in an online degree program. Teachers who have limited access to broadband or are smartphone dependent will be unable to fully access the program. Some programs, like the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship, offer students additional funding to ensure that they have adequate access to broadband to complete their coursework.

**Source:** Aaron Smith, "Record Shares of Americans Now Own Smartphones, Have Home Broadband," Pew Research Center Fact Tank, January 12, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/12/evolution-of-technology/>.

In addition to these options, some states and localities have developed their own scholarship programs to prevent low-income early childhood educators from taking on overly burdensome debt when going back to school. In Oklahoma, for example, a loan-forgiveness program funded by the George Kaiser Family Foundation defrays the cost of a bachelor's degree when students start at Tulsa Community College and complete their degree at the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa. In Pennsylvania, early childhood leaders are piloting an apprenticeship program in Philadelphia in tandem with pathways to credentials and increased compensation.<sup>21</sup>

### **Poor Compensation in Early Childhood Education Reduces the Availability of Online Bachelor's Degree Programs**

Over the past few years, the lack of well-paying jobs in early childhood education, coupled with regulations to weed out degree programs that do not lead graduates to earn enough to pay off their loans, have started to reduce the number of online degree programs designed for early childhood teachers. Institutions of higher education are wary of programs that place students in serious debt because this debt can negatively affect the school's ability to offer federal financial aid.

For instance, Western Governors University (WGU), a non-profit institution, started offering an online degree in early childhood in 2009, geared toward teachers. The degree was competency-based, meaning students were awarded credit based on demonstrated learning and mastery of skills, rather than time spent in the classroom.<sup>23</sup> The program was unusual because it allowed for the completion of a bachelor's degree in less than four years if students could master the competencies more quickly. A representative of WGU told us in e-mail that its early childhood program ended in February of 2013 due to lack of available jobs and low wages.

WGU is not the only institution to question the benefits of offering online early childhood bachelor's degrees. In a recent New America report entitled *Off Limits: More to Learn Before Congress Allows Colleges to Restrict Student Borrowing*, Ben Barrett and Amy Laitinen highlight the online institution Rasmussen College, which chose, under a federally sponsored loan limit experiment, to limit loans going to students pursuing degrees in early childhood education.<sup>24</sup> This decision was made for the same reason WGU decided to end its program: early childhood educators were graduating without the ability to pay back their student loans, which harms the standing of the institution.

# A DEARTH OF INFORMATION ABOUT ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAMS

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Teachers often encounter barriers to enrolling in early childhood degree programs. That can be especially true when it comes to choosing an online program that meets the credentialing requirements in their state. It is hard for educators to know if they are enrolling in high-quality online programs that meet the requirements for becoming lead early childhood teachers or wasting money on low-quality programs that will not give them the skills to improve their practice.

**Teachers often encounter barriers to enrolling in early childhood degree programs. That can be especially true when it comes to choosing an online program that meets the credentialing requirements in their state.**

If policymakers want to improve access to online degree programs while also raising standards and avoiding debt burdens for students, they first need to understand what programs currently exist, what markers of quality they exhibit, how many students are enrolled and how many are completing the programs, how tuition is being paid, what level of

debt students are acquiring, and whether they are still earning low wages after graduating. Answers to these questions are extremely difficult to come by because there is little reliable information to analyze. The lack of data prohibits definitive analyses of which programs are successful and which are not.

## Gaps in Higher Education Data

A key source of information on degree programs is the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which houses survey data reported to the federal government annually from over 10,000 institutions.<sup>25</sup> These records include basic directory information for each school, as well as detailed surveys on enrollment, completion, tuition rates, faculty and staff, and more. Because these records pertain to schools rather than individual students, they are useful for analysis of specific institutions. They do not, however, allow us to analyze patterns within the institution, particularly at the program level.

The office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) also collects and makes public key information on the total dollars disbursed and the number of recipients at each school through each program it administers.

However, the data are not broken out to distinguish between programs that are primarily for distance learning (which today consists almost entirely of online programs) and those on campus for traditional in-person coursework. Although these data provide a good overview of how aid flows to institutions, little is known about the students who receive this aid. Currently, there is a congressional ban on collecting individual student records at the federal level.

With the available higher education data, it is impossible to determine the total number of online

bachelor's degree programs in early childhood education. In addition, there is no way to determine which teachers have successfully completed online degrees and are currently working as lead teachers. In other words, it is virtually impossible to link outcomes data with online degree programs. Even at for-profit institutions, which are required by law to report more data, the number of students who are enrolled in early childhood online degree programs is so small that schools do not release information on their employment (known in federal policy as "gainful employment" data) because students would be identifiable.

## ACCREDITATION AND OTHER QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVES

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Without good information about an institution's impact on the success of its graduates, policymakers and prospective students will often rely on accrediting agencies and other quality assurance initiatives tasked with holding schools accountable to educational standards and best practices. Institutions of higher education can receive different types of accreditation at the institution, school, department, and program levels. In order to access federal financial aid, the institution needs to be recognized by a Department of Education-approved accrediting agency. Without access to federal student aid, many institutions would shut down. Relying on accreditation, however, has its own set of limitations. The agencies and organizations that grant accreditation have a significant conflict of

interest because they ask institutions to pay them for these stamps of approval.

Many other specialized accrediting agencies and quality assurance organizations exist. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Center for Professional Recognition, and Quality Matters are three organizations recognized as arbiters of quality in the early childhood field and online education industry. But since colleges and universities are focused on fulfilling the U.S. Department of Education's accreditation requirements for federal financial aid, these separate quality assurance and programmatic accreditation organizations require time and funding where there may be none.



## **New Bachelor's Degree Accreditation from NAEYC**

As early childhood moves toward the bachelor's degree, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is beginning to accredit four-year programs. NAEYC has created what it is calling the Higher Ed Directory, an online site where institutions can update information on their early childhood education programs and where teachers can find bachelor's programs that NAEYC has recognized as high-quality. NAEYC also has a partnership with the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) to review early childhood degree programs. If a program meets the requirements, then it is accredited by CAEP and recognized by NAEYC as a quality program.<sup>26</sup>

NAEYC, which participated in New America's advisory group on this topic, is working to minimize some of its conflicts of interest by implementing checks and balances within the accreditation process. For instance, program reviewers are not able to evaluate programs with which they have close ties. As the professional organization for early childhood educators, NAEYC is also facilitating ways for faculty from different institutions to conduct a peer-review program evaluation in order to protect the integrity and quality of the bachelor's degree for the profession.

## **A "Gold Standard" for Institutions that Grant the CDA Credential**

The need to professionalize the early childhood field is not a new phenomenon. The Child Development Associate (CDA), started in 1971, was created as a first step for teachers to take toward attaining the core competencies and skills needed for high-quality teaching.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the development

of the CDA as a recognized credential is the precursor of the movement toward the bachelor's degree requirement. The CDA is still used as an entry point into higher education for many early childhood teachers. When teachers are working toward the CDA, they receive some college credits, and some of those CDA programs are offered online.

The Council for Professional Recognition, which also participated in New America's advisory group, is the non-profit that now oversees the administration of the CDA. It has developed what it calls a "Gold Standard" training certification to indicate if institutions of higher education and other organizations that offer the CDA are offering high-quality coursework.<sup>28</sup> Similar to a kind of accreditation, the Gold Standard was launched in 2017 to help early educators distinguish between high- and low-quality programs.

## **Quality Matters: An Organization Aiming for Improved Online Instruction**

Quality Matters (QM) is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 2003, initially funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.<sup>29</sup> The organization uses external reviewers of online and blended courses to improve the quality of instruction. QM provides faculty with resources and professional development to help them to better execute quality online courses.

The system has nearly 60,000 members and over 1,000 participating institutions. There is some evidence that undergoing QM review may be associated with improved delivery of content and student outcomes, according to an annual report from QM that cites several recent studies.<sup>30</sup>

# A SNAPSHOT OF EIGHT ONLINE BACHELOR'S DEGREE PROGRAMS

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Using IPEDS we were able to identify some institutions that offered online classes and bachelor's degrees in early childhood education or a related major. Because of the way the data is collected, there was no way to tally the total number of online degree programs available to early childhood education students.

Given the limits of higher education data, we chose to examine a small set of existing programs to get a picture of some of the options available to students. We included programs from a range of institution types and sectors.

The eight programs we selected (See **Table 1** on pages 14-15) are representative of the market options, which include private (nonprofit and for-profit) and public institutions. We also included programs that met the CAEP and NAEYC's recognition standards discussed in the previous section to help round out the sample. In lieu of ways to show data on the quality or effectiveness of a program, we looked at early childhood online degree programs that were members of the EarlyEdU Alliance, a promising new initiative borne out of a federally funded program for Head Start teachers (for more, see page 16). We looked at the cost of attendance for each institution rather

than program cost because there was too much variation across programs in how they conveyed tuition price. Some calculated cost by credit hours, others assessed tuition semester by semester, and yet others had a set price once a student reached a certain number of credits.

This snapshot shows how much variation there is for students in the higher education marketplace. Out of our sample, the 2015–16 listed tuition ranges from \$6,872 at Aspen University to \$19,459 at Brandman University. For low-income students making less than \$30,000, the average net tuition (minus grant aid) ranges from \$5,353 at Aspen University to \$29,141 at Ball State University. There are large differences in the total number of graduates coming out of these teacher preparation programs. From 2014–15, Aspen University had the lowest number of graduates, according to IPEDS, totaling 4, while Ashford University had the highest number of graduates, 1,168. Three of the programs (Brandman University, National Louis University, and University of Washington) were members of the EarlyEdU Alliance. Only two of the programs (Ball State University and National Louis University) received national recognition through the partnership between NAEYC and CAEP.

**Table 1** | A Snapshot of Eight Online Bachelor's Degree Programs

Institution	School Type and Sector	Degree[s] Offered	Programs Offered Completely Online?	Institution Tuition and Fees for 2015-16
<b>Ashford University</b>	Four-year, private [for-profit]	BA in child development BA in early childhood education administration	No	\$7,766
<b>Aspen University</b>	Four-year, private [for-profit]	BS in early childhood education	Yes	\$6,872
<b>Ball State University</b>	Four-year, public	BS in early childhood education	No	\$12,075
<b>Brandman University</b>	Four-year, private [nonprofit]	BA in early childhood education	No	\$19,459
<b>California State University, Sacramento</b>	Four-year, public	BA in early development, care, and education	No	\$10,617
<b>Kendall College</b>	Four-year, private [for-profit]	BA in early childhood education	No	\$9,498
<b>National Louis University</b>	Four-year, private [nonprofit]	BA in early childhood practice BA in early childhood education	No	\$10,720
<b>University of Washington</b>	Four-year, public	BA in early childhood and family studies	No	\$11,967**

\* Under \$30,000 income

\*\* Average taken from all campuses

#### Sources:

Aspen University, "2017 Course Catalog," [http://catalog.aspen.edu/academics/school-of-education/#Bachelor\\_of\\_Science\\_in\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Education](http://catalog.aspen.edu/academics/school-of-education/#Bachelor_of_Science_in_Early_Childhood_Education).

Ashford University, "Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Education," <https://www.ashford.edu/online-degrees/education/bachelor-of-arts-early-childhood-education>.

Ball State University, "Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education," <http://cms.bsu.edu/academics/collegesanddepartments/online/academic-programs/bachelors/earlychildhood>.

Brandman University, "Early Childhood Education Program," <https://www.brandman.edu/education/ba-early-childhood-education#description>.

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\$13,614	1,168	No	No
\$5,363	4	No	No
\$29,141	22	No	Yes
\$26,471	111	Yes	No
\$12,869	258	No	No
\$8,671	120	No	No
\$17,311	7	Yes	Yes
\$8,102**	Did not report	Yes	No

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# INNOVATIONS THAT COULD LEAD TO CHANGE IN HIGHER ED

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There is little incentive for institutions of higher education to shift their policies to serve new groups of students unless they can benefit financially or at least not lose money while they continue to maintain good standing with the U.S. Department of Education. Grant and scholarship programs used to meet the specific needs of the early childhood workforce can push programs in higher education to develop workarounds for the many barriers early childhood teachers face when trying to attain a degree. Two innovations that we came across in our research are the EarlyEdU Alliance and T.E.A.C.H. Indiana's work with online programs.

## EarlyEdU Alliance

During Head Start's last reauthorization in 2007, Congress instituted new regulations focused on quality to improve the program's efficacy nationally. These regulations included a new requirement for half of lead teachers in center-based programs to have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field.

With the new credential requirement in place, Head Start set out to find experts who could develop effective ways to help its workforce attain these degrees. In 2008, the Office of Head Start awarded the National Center on Quality Teaching and

Learning grant to the University of Washington Haring Center<sup>31</sup> in collaboration with the University of Virginia, Vanderbilt University, Iowa State University, University of South Florida, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Susan Sandall and Gail Joseph of the University of Washington oversaw the \$40 million, five-year grant,<sup>32</sup> which brought together nationally recognized experts in the fields of early care and education, early childhood special education, and early intervention to think about how to develop what Joseph called “cutting-edge coursework,” which would help close the gap between early learning theory and practice. The group also sought to solve the lack of affordable higher education programs for Head Start teachers, and eventually for the entire field.

The grant led to the creation of Head Start University, a program that developed comprehensive, research-based college courses that could be offered online and in-person. This program was modeled after the U. S. Air Force's Air University, which has a workforce with similar hurdles to early educators. The Air Force enlists members with disparate educational backgrounds, from those with high school diplomas trying to



finish community college and eventually earn four-year degrees to generals who may already have advanced degrees but need leadership development courses. Enlisted members, like early educators, are often place-bound and may not have easy access to higher education programs. Air University, an alliance of institutions of higher education, both brick and mortar and online, was created to address the educational needs of all Air Force members by allowing them to easily access courses. Head Start University worked to achieve the same goal.

Head Start University evolved into what is called the EarlyEdU Alliance and now serves the entire early education field, offering two-year and four-year programs as well as advanced degrees. Joseph describes the EarlyEdU Alliance as a program designed to address the challenges facing this particular workforce through the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are needed in high-quality early learning professionals.

The program originated at the University of Washington to increase access to affordable bachelor's degrees in early childhood education through effective in-person and online degree programs for people already working in the field. Although program costs vary by institution, programs that are members of the Alliance are delivering high-quality content and adhere to around 80 percent of the EarlyEdU curriculum. In addition, institutions in the Alliance use an application called a "coaching companion," which enables video sharing and allows students to receive feedback from peers and coaching from instructors on their own teaching practices. It can be used with or without being enrolled in a course.<sup>33</sup> Fifty-two institutions of higher education have piloted the program since 2015, and membership is currently free.<sup>34</sup> The EarlyEdU Alliance completed its second national pilot in June to continue to improve the program.<sup>35</sup>

### **Indiana and T.E.A.C.H.**

The Head Start bachelor's degree requirement for lead teachers spurred the development of an online bachelor's degree program in early childhood

education at Ball State University. Ball State worked with members of the early childhood field and T.E.A.C.H. Indiana, a member of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship program, to offer this bachelor's program to meet the needs of early childhood educators. The program started in August of 2013 and not only serves Head Start teachers, but the entire early childhood workforce.<sup>36</sup>

At least half of the teachers in Ball State's program are a part of T.E.A.C.H. Indiana and able to finish the program debt-free because the scholarship program covers around 90 percent of their cost of attendance.<sup>37</sup> Iva Sumwalt, a recent graduate and a Head Start teacher, said that affordability was key in choosing the online degree program. Ball State's four-year degree costs \$32,000 on average, but the scholarship took the sting out of that price tag. Sumwalt said she also appreciated the way "the program allows you to do your classroom observations and practicum at your own site, so you don't lose work, time, or money."<sup>38</sup>

Before the Ball State program started, Indiana Wesleyan University, a private institution, offered the only online early childhood bachelor's degree program in the state. But the cost of Indiana Wesleyan's degree exceeded the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship tuition rate maximums, meaning that T.E.A.C.H. was unable to offer scholarships. This limited access to online bachelor's degrees for early childhood teachers in Indiana.

T.E.A.C.H. Indiana was able to leverage its ability to purchase student tuition en masse to encourage Ball State to offer a degree with a more competitive tuition.<sup>39</sup> Then, T.E.A.C.H. had Indiana Wesleyan sign an agreement to provide a tuition rate comparable to the public university tuition. These two online programs show that although institutions can be slow to make changes, they do respond to market forces. When programs are able to rely on a steady stream of tuition funding from scholarships like T.E.A.C.H., they are able to adapt to meet the needs of early childhood teachers.

# SEVEN KEY TAKEAWAYS

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Our review shows that many challenges remain before online degree programs are seen as viable pathways for lead educators. While promising approaches are emerging, education leaders and policymakers will need to be more alert to the barriers that current and future pre-k teachers face, and work to improve data in higher education. Below are seven insights and takeaways that emerged from our analysis. The first five takeaways apply to in-person, hybrid, and online programs; the last two are particularly important for developers of online programs and policymakers focused on creating a pathway that takes advantage of online learning.

- 1. Early childhood teachers must overcome significant financial barriers to benefit economically from a bachelor's degree. Without scholarship and grant programs, along with improved compensation, teachers will continue to have difficulty acquiring a bachelor's degree.** Institutions may choose not to offer early childhood degree programs because they fear too many students will default on their loans. Policymakers in higher education and early childhood education must address these challenges to ensure that everyone in the field has access to a bachelor's degree program.
- 2. More comprehensive higher education data and research are needed to better understand the online degree landscape as well as to distinguish between quality and sub-par programs.** One way to ensure that we have better data is to use a student-level data network.<sup>40</sup> This network would hold higher education data that is stripped of personally identifiable information to help professors, administrators, policymakers, and researchers understand program, institutional, state, or national trends in college outcomes. With better data, we will better understand how long it is taking to complete online degree programs for early childhood teachers, how many teachers are defaulting on their loans, and how students of particular demographics fare in these programs.
- 3. Early childhood teachers need advisors who can help them navigate the many pathways to a bachelor's degree.** Many teachers need more information on how to maneuver through the higher education system. Advisors can help teachers to better understand their financial aid options, provide information about high-quality programs, and offer emotional support along the way.

4. **New approaches to monitoring and evaluating the quality of early childhood programs deserve attention and review.** Accrediting bodies should aim for full transparency to avoid conflicts of interest. Teachers should be able to easily navigate websites to quickly discover whether programs to which they are applying are accredited.

5. **Programs must be tailored to meet the needs of the workforce in order to leverage its current skills and expertise.** The workforce is already teaching young children. Successful programs will recognize and build upon these skills in order to help teachers improve their practice and learn more effective ways to work with their young students.

Policymakers also must be sensitive to the fact that when they change the requirements for the lead teacher role to a bachelor's degree, the workforce needs time to obtain this new credential. Many teachers will continue working while they work toward their degree and will likely need more than four years to graduate.

6. **Early childhood educators need access to broadband service and up-to-date computers, not just smartphones, to be successful in online programs.** Promising programs have emerged in the form of EarlyEdU and other non-traditional programs that take advantage of online tools. Along with a concerted effort to help educators find these programs, they need access to the Internet and updated hardware and software.
7. **More research is needed about the nature of online degree programs in the early childhood context.** Government and philanthropies should invest in pilot projects that gather data on effective methods as well as on-the-ground reporting on how pre-K teachers are finding and completing their degrees. Results from those studies are needed to build consensus on how to design, disseminate, and teach online programs that help teachers provide even more high-quality experiences in their pre-K classrooms.

# CONCLUSION

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Online bachelor's degree programs have the potential to help build the skills and core competencies of lead early childhood educators if policymakers and program developers help teachers to overcome the many barriers to accessing an affordable, high-quality degree. These barriers, such as the need for greater teacher compensation and access to broadband, must be addressed in an equitable way to ensure that every member of the field has the opportunity to attain a quality degree.

New America will continue to examine, and write about, the varying pathways toward a bachelor's degree for the current early childhood workforce and those new to the field, recognizing that one approach will not work for everyone, but that ensuring access to quality bachelor's degrees for early childhood educators will eventually enable programs to better serve young children and their families.

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