ILLINOIS EDUCATION RESEARCH COUNCIL

The Early Childhood Educator Preparation Innovation Grants: Lessons from Initial Implementation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) sought to evaluate the implementation of the Early Childhood Educator Preparation Program Innovation (EPPI) grant. The grantees consisted of partnerships that included community colleges, four-year institutions, and in some cases community-based entities or schools, such as Head Start programs. The four-year institution in the partnership was required to be the fiscal agent for the grant and had to be accredited with a currently approved early childhood educator preparation program. These grants were competitive and the proposals required that the potential grantees demonstrate the extent to which their grant-related activities furthered the work of the Illinois Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge.

In 2012 and 2013, the state of Illinois was awarded a total of $52.4 million in federal funds through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. These funds were used to strengthen the training and support of early learning personnel, create and implement the ExceleRate Illinois Quality Rating and Improvement System, and align all early care and education programs with high-quality early learning and development standards. The Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD), IBHE, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning, in conjunction with the Illinois Early Learning Council's subcommittee on

Higher Education Learning and Professional Development, collaborated to develop the Early Childhood Educator Preparation Program Innovation (EPPI) Grant. Further, a committee called Higher Education Learning and Professional Development (HELP) initially developed the broad ideas that evolved into the EPPI grant. The first grant application opportunity was offered in 2013 for work done by institutional partners—the EPPI grant recipients—during 2014.

In summary, the overarching goals of the EPPI grant were to: a) develop models of effective early childhood educator preparation; b) foster the creation or further development of partnerships between two- and four-year preparation programs and other community-based organizations such as preschools; c) promote articulation and alignment of curriculum between two- and four-year programs; d) support early childhood educator preparation programs in designing curriculum to incorporate new state standards and program requirements, such the requirements for becoming Gateways entitled;[1] e) build capacity in key areas of need, such as early math learning; and f) create opportunities for innovation in program implementation. The EPPI grantees, or the partnerships, were able to use grant funds to advance one or more goals of the grant and address the specific challenges/opportunities for their respective programs and partnerships.

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[1] The Gateways credentials are standards of professional and educational achievement. Institutions become entitled by aligning their coursework with certain state and national benchmarks. In order for individuals to become entitled, they need to fulfill a combination of credit hours, content areas, hours of supervised experience, and professional contributions. http://www.ilgateways.com/en/entitled-institutions

The purpose of the grant was reflected in the aims and goals of this implementation study of the individual partnerships and in aggregate the grant itself. The main goals of this study were to: a) examine how the grant recipients were implementing the changes set forth in their grant proposals; b) identify initial barriers to implementation of grant activities; c) identify catalysts that aided in goal attainment and/or partnership development; and d) consider the sustainability of the impact of the grant-related activities. Through structured telephone interviews, the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) solicited a brief description of major activities associated with the grant; catalysts and/or levers enhancing grant activities; barriers inhibiting implementation of grant activities; and successful strategies utilized to overcome barriers. There was also a specific emphasis on articulation activities within the partnerships. Articulation was considered a foundational component of the EPPI grants.

Complexity of Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Before we describe the methods we thought it would be important to briefly mention the early childhood (EC) landscape. As described by Nelson, Main, and Kushto-Hoban (2012) and Whitebrook (2014) there is high degree of complexity regarding early childhood education itself, as well as in the preparation of early childhood teachers. Early childhood education is inclusive of a wide array of roles and responsibilities within myriad of public and private settings, both in and out of schools. Adding to the complexity is the fact that depending upon an early childhood educator's role(s) and responsibilities, there could be multiple degree, licensing, and/or credentialing requirements from one or more agencies, not only for workforce entry, but also continued employment in the given ECE setting (Whitebrook, 2014). Relatedly, there are numerous entry points into the early childhood workforce that result in a wide-range of jobs, such as child care workers, caregivers, educational administrators, preschool teachers, teacher's aides and assistants, to name a few. Institutions of higher education preparing early childhood educators are impacted by these complexities in that they must design programs that address the myriad state and national professional standards and licensing requirements relative to workforce roles and requirements.

Overview of Methods

Working with IBHE staff and the principal investigators associated with each individual grant, we obtained the contact information for up to six individuals within each partnership. These individuals were generally early childhood faculty and/or program leaders from either the four-year college or the partnering community college(s), or representatives from community-based organizations or schools. In total, 45 individuals were interviewed from the 12 partnerships. Of the 12 grant holders, six were from public four-year institutions and six were from private four-year institutions, with one located in Iowa, but partnering with a Illinois community college and Illinois-based Head Start program. There was a total of 19 individual community colleges associated with one or more of the individual grants, representing 17 different Illinois community college districts.

We summarized the information collected via the interviews, provided the interviewees the summaries for validation, and analyzed the qualitative information from the validated summaries, identifying themes and subtopics within the responses.

Based on the interview responses, we identified six themes (see Figure 1), each with two or more subtopics.

1. **Institutional Barriers** – centered on the amount of time, energy, and effort it takes to receive approval for programmatic changes at the various administrative levels required by one's respective institution. This theme included the subtopics of: a) bureaucratic treading; b) past issues with articulation; c) issues with advising; and d) major institutional change.

2. **Systemic Barriers** – relative to institutional barriers, systemic barriers were identified as being more global in scope, impacting the field of early childhood as a whole, such as the number of new initiatives and program requirements. This theme included sub-topics such as: logistical difficulties; b) initiative overload; c) characteristics of EC students; d) institutional bias; and e) complexity of EC education.
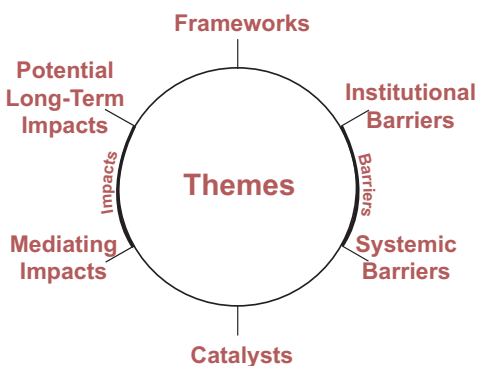

Figure 1. Final themes emerging from the qualitative analysis

3. **Catalysts** – were defined as activities that resulted in grant-related goal attainment, or the movement towards such goal-attainment. The following sub-topics were included within the catalysts theme: a) shared values; b) capacity for cooperation; c) grant provided impetus; d) innovative steps; e) use of technology; and f) integral player. Some of the sub-topics were adapted directly from McQuaid's (2009) description of success factors in the theory of organizational partnerships.

4. **Potential Long-Term Impacts** – involved a recognition that grant-related activity had implications beyond making programmatic improvements and smoothing the transition for transfer students, such as the role of early childhood in society. Most of these impacts would be realized outside the timeframe of the current grant. The potential long-term impacts theme included the following sub-topics: a) professionalizing the EC workforce; b) pathways; c) enrollment; and d) societal/systemic improvement.

5. **Mediating Impacts** – were identified as changes that would 'pave the way' for long-term impacts to be achieved. Mediating impacts included the following sub-topics: a) programmatic improvement; b) partnership development; and c) enhanced articulation/seamless transition.

6. **Frameworks** – was developed to describe the interwoven nature of grant-related activities and emerging standards and program requirements within Early Childhood Education and included the sub-topics of: a) considering new program requirements; and b) new ECE program redesign. The responses within this theme tended to be neutral.

Partnership Development Theory

After sharing the coding structure and emerging themes with an IBHE representative and receiving input during a presentation at St. Xavier, we decided to use partnership development theory as an additional lens through which we analyzed the results. We found that many of the themes and subtopics paralleled the benefits, challenges, and success factors identified in McQuaid's (2009) description of partnership development theory. Although McQuaid's (2009) study focused on the development of partnerships among job placement agencies, we felt that many of his arguments were directly applicable to the community college and four-year partnerships that were an integral part of this overall grant. For instance, he uses the term mutualism to describe building effective partnerships through established networks of communication. We found that many of the grantees used such networks and previous relationships to frame their partnerships.

Findings

Reasons for Participating in Grant

Before addressing the major findings relative to the overarching goals of the EPPI grant, we provide a brief summary of what motivated institutions to participate in the grant. Not surprisingly, the most cited reason was to improve articulation between community colleges and four-year institutions. This was a foundational aspect of the grants. Participants discussed different avenues for articulation efforts including improving the quality of instruction, developing standardized processes for advising and transferring, increasing and coordinating field experiences, and addressing the evolving early childhood standards, including the Gateways credentialing framework.

Another often cited motivation to participate in the grant was to build partnerships and networks among community colleges and four-year programs. Participants expressed the desire for these collaborations to result in improved communication and shared resources (e.g., course materials, advising guides, up-to-date information about changes in the field). Four-year partners also discussed the potential for increased recruitment of transfer students, as well as an increase in diversity of their early childhood students. Community college and four-year institution participants also mentioned improving degree completion of transferring students as a desired outcome of the collaborations and grant activities.

The last major area for reasons for grant participation involved meeting students' needs. Responses relating to this area included: 1) ensuring a smooth transition to decrease credit loss and increase affordability for students; 2) providing support to pass the Test of Academic Proficiency (TAP), which replaced the Basic Skills Test, and met the requisite cuts scores on the ACT;[2] 3) creating opportunities to provide secondary ESL endorsements;[3] 4) developing support structures to help students succeed after the transfer; 5) increasing marketability among graduates; and, 6) providing professional development for current practitioners. Overall, all participating grantees cited multiple reasons for participating in the grant depending on the needs and circumstances of their particular institution.

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[2] Defined as a minimum composite score of 22 and minimum combined English/Writing score of 19. http://www.isbe.net/licensure/html/testing.htm#scores

[3] The ESL endorsement requirements include: ESL clinical experience equal to 100 clock hours or three months teaching experience with ESL students and credits totaling 18 semester hours distributed among the following course areas: linguistics; theoretical foundations of teaching ESL; assessment of the bilingual students; methods and materials for teaching ESL; cross-cultural studies for teaching limited-English-proficient students; and an elective (an additional bilingual or ESL course). http://www.isbe.net/licensure/html/esl_endorsement.htm

Major Findings

Our qualitative analyses generally revealed that most of the partnerships were moving towards achieving their grant-related goals with some variation based on the circumstances surrounding the given partnership. For instance, there were a couple of partnerships in which the current principal investigator was not the original author of the grant and this discordance served as somewhat of a barrier to goal attainment. However, as a whole, the interviewees believed that the grants had a fairly large positive impact, particularly in terms of partnership development, but more specifically, in enhancing articulation pathways between the partners, and allowing the partners to better integrate the Gateways Credentials into their own programs and into the transfer process.

We also found that some of the themes and sub-topics that were established in analyzing the interview responses were directly related to key ideas within partnership development theory, as described by McQuaid (2009). For instance, the most frequently mentioned sub-topic within the catalysts theme was establishing a shared philosophy between the partner institutions. This was directly related to McQuaid's (2009) shared values and involves the idea of making the work relevant for each partner associated with the grant, regardless of the institution.

It should be noted that views regarding the grant system and the partnerships were not universally positive. A strongly stated viewpoint from a few of the community college partners (not all) was that the grant system perpetuated existing biases that place four-year institutions higher on the educational hierarchy. The short timeframe of the grant itself, and in the period leading up to the grant after it was announced were sometimes viewed in a negative light. A couple of the interviewees provided positive feedback regarding the overall grant structure and the partnership, but suggested developing a stronger system of checks to ensure each partner was meeting their grant-related obligations. Another interviewee mentioned that although the partnership in question has traditionally been and continues to be strong, the grant did not lead to significant change, either positive or negative, within the partnership.

We tended to find that the identified barriers were often wedded to a catalyst that allowed the partnership to overcome, or at least set up the structure for overcoming, the given barrier in the intermediate future. In other words, it was fairly rare that a barrier was mentioned without noting what was being done to deal with it and in many instances the barriers were mentioned in sort of a historical context. Several times, the grant, or grant-related activities were identified as the catalyst allowing the partnership to move past a given barrier.

Next Steps/Additional Work to be Done

One of the final questions of the interview protocol centered on the participants' plans for continuing the grant-related work after the grant period ends. We felt that this information was extremely important due to the short time-frame of the grant which provided only limited opportunity to experience intermediate and long-term impacts, such as increasing or diversifying program enrollments. Responses to this question were generally positive. In fact, many of the participants mentioned a willingness to continue grant-related work even if additional grant funding was not obtained.

The most frequently mentioned topic was the desire to maintain the partnership that was developed during the grant period. Continued collaboration included work on new projects and working towards being inclusive of other community colleges and four-year institutions. Finally, another common topic was the desire to apply for an extension to complete the current grant's activities or seeking additional funding to take the next step in terms of new programming or articulation work between the four-year institutions and community colleges. Grantees' responses focused on how an extension would help them overcome the barriers of limited time and financial resources. It would be beneficial to follow up with these EPPI grant recipients to determine the extent to which such activities have continued past the grant cycle.

The nature of the responses was usually based on how far along the given partnership was in getting formal approval for articulation agreements. Partnerships that were further along in the formal approval process, seemed to be eager to test the agreement with a pilot program or implementing student-centered support like bridge programs or scholarship funding. Such partners also discussed the importance of getting articulation information in the hands of advisors and potential students. One participant even discussed that they need to be recruiting transfer students for the fall 2016 semester.

Closely related to this idea was the need to monitor and evaluate the work that was completed, essentially determining the extent to which intermediate and long-term goals have been achieved. In addition to implementing changes in program design and advising processes, these participants were also interested in how these changes would affect the individual programs and the field of Early Childhood Education at large.

As discussed throughout this report, many of the articulation agreements being developed were at the mercy of the bureaucratic realities of higher education. Consequently, many participants discussed future work along the lines of formalizing agreements, and developing advising processes and materials (based on the articulation agreements). Other planned work was more institution specific and included common goals like program redesign and gaining Gateways entitlements, but also included innovative ideas like the development of online courses, creating a common data management system across partnering institutions, or professional development with an emphasis on curriculum.

Major Findings Relative to the Goals of the Overarching Grant

Develop models of effective early childhood educator preparation.

Our analysis revealed that some of the partnerships were currently in the process of developing new and innovative models of early childhood educator preparation, or determining ways to adapt a recently developed model at a four-year institution to make it better suited for community college transfer students. This does not mean that the other partnerships lacked effective early childhood programs. In fact, nearly all of the partnerships mentioned some sort of program redesign based on new standards and/or program requirements. Because of the relatively short time-frame associated with the grant (less than one year), it is too early to determine the effectiveness of the new models and the promising practices that have not yet had the opportunity to fully emerge.

Foster the creation or further development of partnerships between two- and four-year preparation programs, schools, preschools, childcare centers, and other early childhood settings for the purposes of improved educator preparation.

The analysis showed a consistent development of strong partnerships between community colleges and four-year preparation programs. Although, in our opinion, some partnerships were stronger and more authentic than others. While many of the four-year institutions and community colleges had existing, and for the most part strong, relationships with preschools and childcare centers, we found that only a few of the grantees fully integrated such schools and community-based organizations into the partnership.

Promote articulation and alignment of curriculum between two- and four-year programs.

Although articulation and alignment of curriculum across partner institutions were manifested in a variety of forms, our analysis confirms that, overall, the grant was highly successful in this regard. Due to common bureaucratic barriers, none of the interviewees were able to confirm that enhancements to articulation had been formalized and officially approved at the time of the interviews. However, it was fully evident that many of the interviewees were showing promising strides towards the attainment of this goal.

Support early childhood educator preparation programs in designing curriculum to incorporate new state standards for educator licensure, Gateways credentials, as well as what young learners should know and be able to do.

As supported by our analysis, the grant was very successful in this regard. The Gateways Credentials was probably the most heavily incorporated set of standards, with many partnerships fully integrating the credential requirements into their articulated curricula. The most prevalent framework was community college students earning Gateways Levels 2-4 at the community college and then Level 5 at their receiving four-year institution. In terms of Gateways Credentials, we also found a lot of evidence of the more experienced partners (usually a community college) assisting the less experienced partners (usually a four-year institution or another community college within the partnership) in going through the Gateways Credentials entitlement process.

Build capacity in key areas of need including but not limited to, early math learning, bilingual/English language learning, infant/toddler development, and special education.

Our analysis revealed that the implementation or adoption of these key areas were considered by most partnerships, with the bilingual/English language learning being given the most attention. This is perhaps related to the changing demographics in Illinois and the statewide ESL requirement for district-based preschools. We found the partnerships emphasizing early math learning were highly motivated and integrated dissemination into their grant-related activities, which should help in building capacity in that area..

Create opportunities for innovation in program implementation, including but not limited to, quality field experience placements, assessments to demonstrate candidate progress toward or attainment of key competencies, flexible pathways to further degree/credential attainment for the current workforce, and Gateways entitlement.

Comparison of the grantees indicated that some sites were more innovative than others in implementing programmatic changes. To a certain extent, the partnerships implementing more innovative programmatic changes could be described as stronger and arguably more authentic. In terms of assessment, some of partnerships framed a portion of their grant-related activities around providing evidence of effective teaching practices, which would help support candidate performance on the edTPA. As previously described, most of the partnerships used the Gateways Credentials as one way to frame their grant-related activities and fully integrated them into the articulated programs.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on our analysis, we would recommend the following strategies for improving partnership development. In our view, many of these suggested strategies would be fairly easy and inexpensive to accomplish.

Frame discussions and goals using a student-centric approach. Rather than starting the partnership discussions with the more technical aspects of articulation in mind (described by one interviewee as the "A" word), we recommend shifting the emphasis to how students can benefit from the institutions working collaboratively. Several participants suggested "looking at the problem through the lens of the students" to best meet their needs.

Including necessary players at the table was an important aspect of meetings that commonly came up. The responses providing this viewpoint tended to fall into two categories. The first category involved the inclusion of additional faculty and admissions staff, mostly for the purpose of providing additional perspectives and expertise. The second category tended to focus on the inclusion of administrators with decision-making authority, such as deans and department heads, for the purpose of obtaining their buy-in as the grant-related activities were occurring. It was suggested that the latter helped overcome some of the institutional barriers that were identified.

Rotating meeting sites from partner to partner and, at times, holding meetings in informal settings. Holding the meetings at different sites helps to promote parity amongst the partners, arguably allowing the partnerships to overcome the barriers associated with institutional bias. Another strategy to develop stronger partnerships is to periodically meet in an informal setting. Although there was not a high occurrence of this in the current study, it did seem to be extremely beneficial in overcoming traditional barriers to partnership development such as protecting one's turf. Meeting on a regular basis, monthly or bi-monthly, was also suggested by participants.

Integrate community-based entities into the partnership. Some of the recipients identified individuals from community-based entities, such as Head Start Programs, as grant partners. These field-based partners provided unique perspectives as both consumers (with the product being the teacher preparation programs) and current/eventual employers of early childhood education teacher candidates. These professionals are "in the trenches" and can provide a direct link to the field.

Within-institution communication. Although a greater emphasis is often placed on communication between institutions in terms of partnership development, within-institution communication should not be overlooked. This type of communication was shown to be very important in getting administrative buy-in at the institutional level, which was identified as a way to overcome some of the institutional barriers.

If geographic distance between partners is an issue, or there are time constraints, supplement traditional face-to-face meetings using more technological-based approaches. It is important to note that this should be done after partners have met face-to-face a few times. Simple and free or relatively inexpensive technologies helped many of the partnerships overcome some of the identified logistical barriers.

Collaborative technologies. Another consistently important idea related to building successful partnerships was the constant flow of information between partners. Traditional technologies like telephone conferencing and email often spurred this communication, but for more specific tasks, file share applications (e.g., Google Docs, Dropbox) helped the partners literally stay on the same page. The use of these technologies seemed to help partners better share information about their individual courses (syllabi, objectives, etc.). Web-based applications (e.g., Skype, GoToMeeting) provided a platform for meetings. Lastly, one participant suggested setting grant funds aside for technology use.

Final Thoughts

Based on many of the responses, we found that the grant was extremely important in moving the partnerships past many of the identified barriers, such as historical issues associated with articulation and advising. Further, the grant provided the structure from which many of the partnerships developed curricular and programmatic enhancements to the ways in which early childhood educators are prepared. The grant itself necessitated accountability from a couple of different perspectives. By default, the individual entities associated with each EPPI grant received money and were therefore accountable to the funding agency. But more importantly, the individual entities forming these partnerships were also accountable to each other. A great deal of innovative work began as a result of the grant that arguably would have not been started without it. In essence, the grant and the structure associated with it provided the momentum to move the partnerships forward, without being overly rigid or prescriptive. As highlighted in the quote below, the grant was viewed by some of the interviewees as flexible and non-linear, much like traditional descriptions of the pathways into the early childhood workforce.

> *"Most grants are pretty linear and restrictive. This one was not. I felt like we were given a lot of autonomy, it was loose and flexible. That flexibility let us be creative."*

IERC

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