

ACTION FOR BOSTON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, INC.

**CREATING A PROFESSIONAL CHILDCARE WORKFORCE:
INTRODUCING A COLLEGE COURSE INTO THE FIRST
STEPS INTO CHILDCARE CAREERS PROGRAM**



BayStateWorks Promising Practice Case Study

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"If I had known what it would be like to enroll and take college classes, I would have done it much sooner."

"Taking Child Growth and Development has made me a much better parent. Now I understand stages of development; I know why my son acts the way he does."

"I didn't know college would be this easy; I didn't think I was smart enough."

"Now that I am a college student, my [twelve-year old] son plans to go to college as well."

Program Graduates

1 The Need

The First Steps into Childcare Careers (*FSCC*) program was created in 1998 by ABCD LearningWorks in response to welfare reform and the welfare-to-work model. At that time, ABCD was only allowed to work with people who did not have a high school credential. The training model was based on the existing minimal requirements to become an Assistant Teacher or Assistant Teacher Trainee in a daycare setting. This case study details a promising practice: the addition of a three-credit college course on child development to the original FSCC program.

The program had difficulty finding employment for the early graduates. Although the internship component of the training provided the "hands-on" experience desirable to employers, the lack of a high school credential worked against the graduates and prevented them from taking the next steps towards obtaining teacher status. In addition, changing federal regulations made Head Start employment even more difficult to obtain than work in other childcare setting. Head Start has higher academic requirements as well as a higher rates of pay and a generous benefits package. Head Start had the most coveted positions. Federal regulations that will affect all childcare workers will go into effect in the next few years. These regulations require that teachers must have an associate's degree by 2010 and a bachelor's degree by 2017.

A combination of changes in welfare-to-work eligibility regulations and employer feedback allowed and encouraged program staff to examine solutions to this problem.

The following questions guided FSCC program staff to the root of the need:

- How could the program best respond to the increasing professionalization of the childcare industry?
- How could FSCC help the clients to see themselves as professionals on a career path rather than welfare recipients getting a job?

- How could FSCC encourage the clients to see themselves as “college material” and to pursue the education necessary to advance in their careers?

2 The Solution

FSCC program leaders decided to include a three-credit college course, Child Growth and Development, as an integral part of the training. This move addressed several of the needs revealed by the questions above. Specifically, the rationale for adding this course was as follows:

- The two requirements for becoming a Department of Early Education and Care (DEEC) certified teacher is completion of Child Growth and Development and nine months of experience. With the addition of the course to the FSCC program, graduates would be entering the job market with the course completed and at least three and one half months of experience from their internship. Program staff anticipated that it would be easier for graduates to obtain employment if they were within six months of teacher certification.
- FSCC program leaders believed that graduates would be more likely to continue taking college courses once they had experienced college success within the supportive, nurturing environment of the training program. Successful course completion demonstrates to both the graduate and the new employer the ability of the employee to succeed on a career track and to pursue the associate’s degree as new regulations would soon require.
- Employment opportunities would also improve since the graduate could demonstrate the acquisition of theoretical knowledge of children’s development and the ability to lead age-appropriate activities. The graduate would also be perceived as someone with higher literacy and writing skills than an applicant who had not taken the course. Both the employers’ and the daycare parents’ confidence in and respect for the program graduate would increase.
- The chances for a successful college experience and, therefore, increased self-esteem, empowerment, and hope for the future, would be enhanced by the existing program components such as peer support, role modeling, academic support, tutoring, a resource-rich environment, career-related academic advising, existing motivation and commitment to the program, access to computers, and opportunities to share and support in academic problem-solving. The chance of success in college while in the FSCC training is heightened because of the components listed that support the participants.

FSCC program staff defined the following outcome measures in order to determine the success of the inclusion of the college course in the training program:

1. Seventy-five percent (75%) of participants will complete Child Growth and Development with a passing grade.
2. Seventy-five percent (75%) of those who complete the course will take additional higher education courses within one year of program completion.
3. Seventy-five percent (75%) of participants will apply for DEEC certification within one year.
4. Graduates who find employment will experience promotion/advancement and wage increases once certification is obtained.

3 Implementation

The FSCC program began the implementation process by communicating with The Urban College of Boston (UCB) to form a collaboration to provide the course to program participants. UCB was initially created by ABCD to serve the educational needs of childcare workers, a situation which eased the collaborative process.

Specifically, the FSCC program leaders requested:

- daytime, on-site instruction by a professor who would be sensitive to the needs of the population;
- that the college class be offered in accordance with the FSCC training schedule;
- on-site registration for and administration of college eligibility testing, ranging from a writing sample to a computer-based test;
- assistance with access to other college services, such as tutoring and counseling, for program participants and graduates; and
- exploration of possible collaborations between FSCC and UCB to identify resources for childcare workers to continue their educations.

All of these requests were met by UCB.

The goal of introducing the college course into the FSCC curriculum was to make it a seamless part of the existing training model. To that end, all activities were conducted at the training site and assessment activities were made part of the regular program eligibility screening. As a result participants who may never have expected to attend college were screened and registered without the accompanying anxiety. College was brought to the participants, rather than the participants being expected to go to college.

At that time, FSCC was still working with a number of participants who lacked a high school credential and/or the skills to be successful in college. The program therefore continued to offer a basic childcare course for those who could not take advantage of the college-level class. The different employment results for the two groups served to reinforce the program leaders' belief that the college course was key to increased employment opportunities. The non-college participants themselves began to realize the limitations placed upon their job prospects by the lack of the college credits and gradually began to demand the college course. Eventually, due in part to funding shifts and employer demands, the program leaders limited program eligibility to those who were able to successfully participate in the college course.

One major adjustment that occurred several years into the implementation process was a change in the way college eligibility screening was done. Participants were initially required to submit a writing sample, a method that allowed for a certain degree of subjectivity in scoring. For example, the motivation of the applicant could be considered as a factor in her potential success in the program.

The screening was then changed to a standardized, computer-based test, which allows for no flexibility in scoring. Even though testing was on-site, the anxiety caused by the use of computers was considerable. It became obvious that the participants' failure rate was sure to

climb without some sort of intervention. Program staff designed a remedial writing workshop that addressed some of the test requirements and added a component that specifically provided participants with the computer skills to navigate the test. At first, the writing workshop was optional. After observing the disparity in test results between those who took the workshop and those who did not, the workshop became a mandatory component of the program application process.

Other minor adjustments included using the schedule and syllabus of the college course to tweak the design and scheduling of other program elements. For example, program staff avoided scheduling stressful or difficult activities on the same days as college midterms or finals and were sensitive to participants' anxieties at those times. Program staff also integrated topics from the college course into other FSCC classes, such as Children's Literature and Internship Seminar.

4 Results

Relative to the outcome measures discussed in section two, the following results were achieved:

1. Goal: **75%** of participants will successfully complete Child Growth and Development with a passing grade.

Actual: **95%** have completed the course with a passing grade or better.

2. Goal: **75%** of completers will enroll in an additional course/courses within one year.

Actual: **50%** have enrolled in additional courses.

3. Goal: **75%** of participants will apply for Department of Early Education and Care (DEEC) certification within one year.

Actual: **90% of participants** have applied for (DEEC) certification.

4. Goal: Salary/status will change once certification is obtained.

Actual: Change of status to Teacher is automatic once certification is obtained. In some cases job titles and salaries did not change because "Teacher" positions were not available at a particular site at the time of certification. Seventy-five percent (75%) of participants who became certified advanced from assistant teacher to teacher along with a salary increase.

Additional information regarding the four outcome goals is provided below.

Successful Course Completion

The high percentage of participants with passing grades or higher in the college course may be attributed to the more rigorous entrance criteria and the more intensive preparation services offered. In addition, the classroom instructor includes many writing activities throughout the training program that serve to strengthen the participants' skills. Given the positive outcomes with regard to completions and grades, participant satisfaction with the college course component of the training was very high.

Subsequent College Course Enrollment

It is not completely clear why more participants have not enrolled in additional college courses within the year. In some cases this has been due to outstanding student debt, which was not a factor for students while in the training program since the costs of the class and the books were covered. In other cases the lifestyle adjustment to full-time employment may be a factor. Once program graduates are working, they lack the dedicated study-time, group support, and supportive learning environment that the FSCC program provides.

Certification

The fact that the percentage of participants who have applied for certification is higher than expected may be attributable to employer pressure to conform to upcoming education regulations set by the state. In addition, FSCC program leaders have increased the program activities related to certification application, including teaching the participants about the application process as part of the coursework.

Career Advancement after Certification

Although participants may not immediately progress in their current employment to a “Teacher” position when they receive DEEC certification, they are qualified and certified at the teacher level. In some cases, Teacher positions are not immediately available and/or have not been budgeted for the current fiscal year. **At least 75% of participants who obtained certification had a title change and/or a wage increase.**

5 Lessons

Strong relationship between program and college is key. A major lesson learned from implementing this best practice was the importance of building a strong relationship with the college. Although Urban College of Boston specializes in Early Education and would appear to be a natural partner, it took several years to build a strong and mutually beneficial relationship. Initially, FSCC program leaders rejected several professors who did not work well with the target population. FSCC and UCB finally settled on a very supportive and engaging professor who has been with the program for the past several years.

Identify program champions. In addition to teaching the class, this UCB professor attends team meetings and has become an integral part of the program. Another program champion is the college's new Director of Academic Support Services, who administers the Accuplacer test that ascertains college eligibility. He agreed to administer the test on-site and allows the classroom instructor to assist, particularly with questions regarding the use of the computers. This has increased the comfort level of the test-takers and improved test scores.

Seek opportunities for recognition and appreciation of partners. One tactic for building the relationship between the program and the college was to invite the UCB President to speak at the program graduation. She now routinely does so and offers personal career counseling sessions to the graduates. The graduations also then become publicity opportunities for both the program and the college. Both partners also seek other opportunities for mutual promotion. For example, this year a program graduate and UCB student was nominated to receive an award at the annual Job Training Alliance's Employer Appreciation Breakfast.

Investing in support services enables student success in the college course. Another lesson learned, and a concurrent challenge, is that the students require a high level of support in order to succeed in the college class. The program is also grappling with how to continue that support after graduation. As noted in the Results section above, FSCC experienced a higher-than-expected level of successful course completions. This was due, in part, to the intensive level of support from all staff members and peers. For example, specific time was allotted for the students to work on their college homework in a group setting and to receive assistance from the classroom instructor while they did so. The Internship/Job Coordinator included discussions on career advancement and the importance of working towards a college degree as part of the internship seminars. The Case Manager provided workshops on stress and time management to help the participants adjust to a higher workload and longer hours. All of these elements improve the participants' chances for success in the college component, but are difficult to replicate once the participant has graduated and entered the "real world" of the working adult attending college in the evenings. Some ideas include working with the college to provide childcare on-site in the evenings, holding regular alumni support sessions, better informing students about the support services offered by UCB, and creating a buddy or mentor system.

Course graduates were more aware of potential employers' approaches to continuing education. An interesting lesson was the effect of the college course's inclusion on the employer/employee relationship. Not surprisingly, employers were appreciative of the college component and found the applicants more job-ready and certification-ready. Employers in general had very positive feedback after interviewing graduates who had completed the college course. What was unexpected was the graduates' interest in finding employment in an education-friendly environment, particularly one that would provide tuition reimbursement benefits. During their job search activities, they also exhibited an increased awareness of the degree requirements for different positions and the educational opportunities offered by employers.

Appendix A: First Steps into Childcare Careers Outline of Individual Client Services

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