naeyc ® National Association for the Education of Young Children

From On Campus to Online
The Impact of the Pandemic on ECE Higher Education Programs
June 2020

The early childhood education (ECE) field has been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has also exacerbated long-standing challenges and inequities in early childhood education, including the ECE higher education community.

Prior to the pandemic, many early childhood education degree programs were facing enrollment challenges in part because they are preparing students for a high-skill but low-wage profession. Many ECE practitioners simply cannot afford to pursue professional preparation because their wages do not support it. And, for those who can, in many ECE degree programs, particularly at community colleges, the "non-traditional" student is the traditional student. Students are often older, working full- or part-time (often in the ECE field), and raising families. As a result, students often take longer to complete their degree programs because they are attending part-time, and the slightest changes in their employment status and wages can often result in students needing to "stop-out" or "drop-out" of programs. ECE faculty have worked hard to create programs that can meet the needs of their students, often on shoestring budgets and with limited supports, and often with institutional leaders who grapple with the rationale for offering a degree program that prepares individuals for a low-wage profession. The pandemic is intensifying these challenges and has created new ones, which need to be more fully understood.

To that end, from April 16–May 6, faculty from 43 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico participated in NAEYC's COVID-19 Impact on Early Childhood Education Degree Programs survey. The

A survey from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), conducted March 12-16, found that nearly half of child care programs would not survive a closure of more than two weeks without support. Additional NAEYC survey results from April 2-10 indicated that nearly half of respondents reported that their early learning program was closed, with an additional 17% closed to everyone except children of essential personnel.

survey was sent to over 300 programs in NAEYC's higher education accreditation system and over 250 NAEYC nationally recognized programs; 263 faculty members from 232 institutions responded. Nearly 40% of respondents are full-time higher education faculty while an additional 55% are program chairs. Missing responses have been excluded from all percentages.

- 72% of respondents were from community colleges with the remainder representing faculty at baccalaureate and graduate degree-granting institutions.
- Fewer than 3% work at online-only institutions.
- 89% work in public institutions.
- Approximately 83% of the respondents indicate that they are in urban/suburban locations, 18% are in rural locations, and 14% are from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) or Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI). *To note, an external analysis found no statistically significant differences between all survey respondents and rural or HBCU/HSI institutions.*

This brief provides a snapshot of the ECE higher education landscape in the midst of the pandemic.

You can find updated statements and recommendations on NAEYC's COVID-19 resources page and can always reach out via email at highered@NAEYC.org with questions and to share your stories.

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Transitioning to a Fully-Remote Learning Environment

The vast majority of respondents (92%) indicated that their institution shifted classes from face-to-face to online for the spring semester. Some programs indicated that classes which could not be delivered online, such as lab classes, were canceled. This shift to a fully-remote environment, while unquestionably challenging, was made easier by the fact that most early childhood faculty (87%) had some experience teaching online classes prior to the pandemic, and most programs previously included some online courses (see Figure 1). Among the respondents, 56% had to make significant modifications to ECE course content for online learning, while 40% have been able to do so with few to no modifications.

Institutional support was also critical to making the quick pivot to solely online learning (see Figure 2). Given the experience with online learning pre-pandemic, more than 65% of respondents said their institution already had the technology and infrastructure in place to accommodate online learning for both faculty and students. Additionally, many respondents indicated that they felt "extremely supported" by their institution with regard to professional development (63%), resources for moving face-to-face classes online (77%), and the level and clarity of institutional communication (76%).

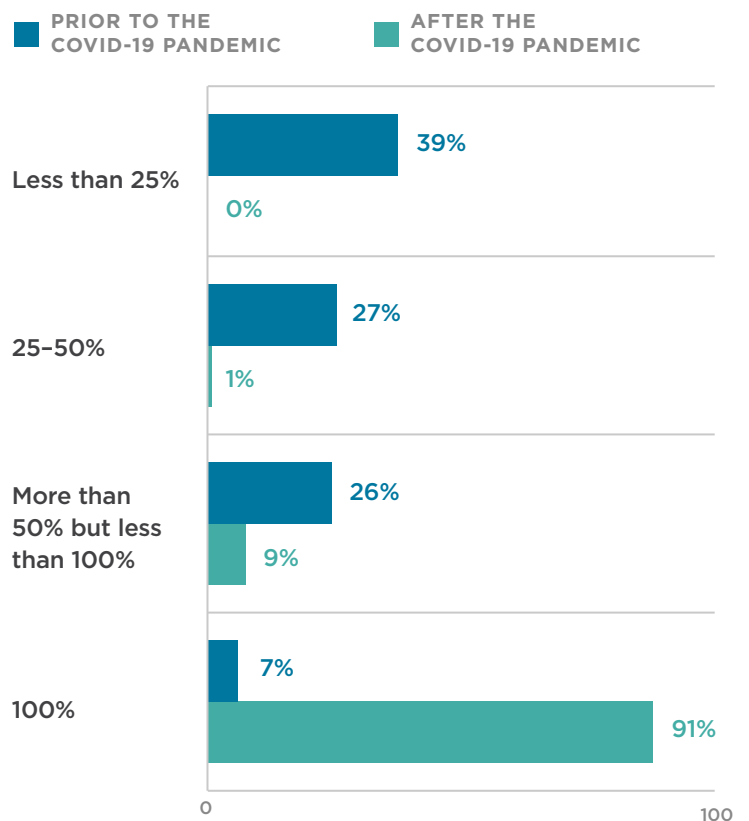## What percent of classes in your ECE program are offered online?

PRIOR TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC **AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Less than 25%: 39% / 0%
25–50%: 27% / 1%
More than 50% but less than 100%: 26% / 9%
100%: 7% / 91%

How supported have you felt by your institution this semester with regards to the following?

N/A **NOT AT ALL SUPPORTED** **MODERATELY SUPPORTED** **EXTREMELY SUPPORTED**

Professional Development: 29% / 63% — N/A: 4%
Resources for Moving Face-to-Face Classes Online: 22% / 77% — N/A: 1%
Level and Clarity of Communication: 22% / 76% — N/A: 0%
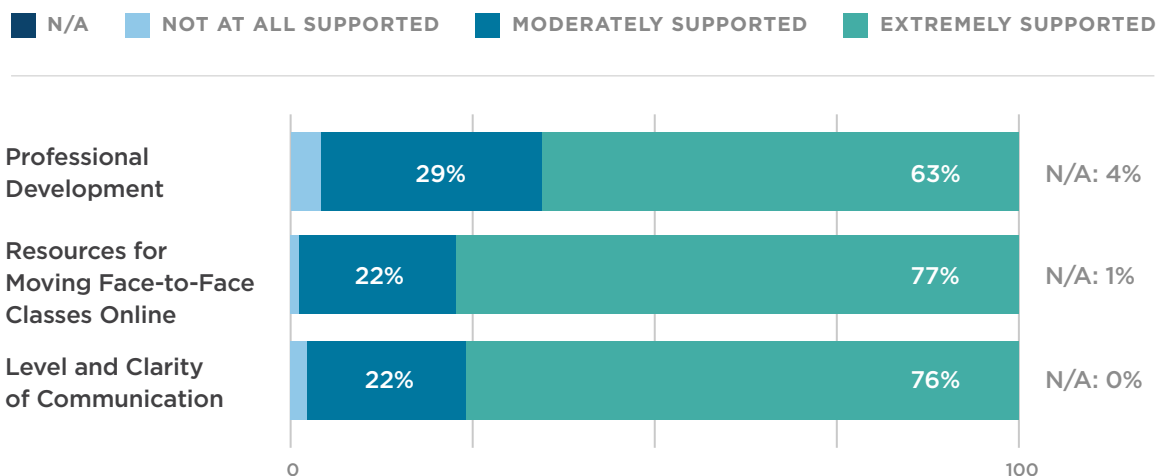
Key COVID-19 Challenges for Early Childhood Education Degree Programs

Amidst the relative success of the transition to a fully online learning environment, the survey responses revealed three significant challenges relating to: (1) student attrition and emotional health; (2) field experiences;[1] and (3) key assessments.[2]
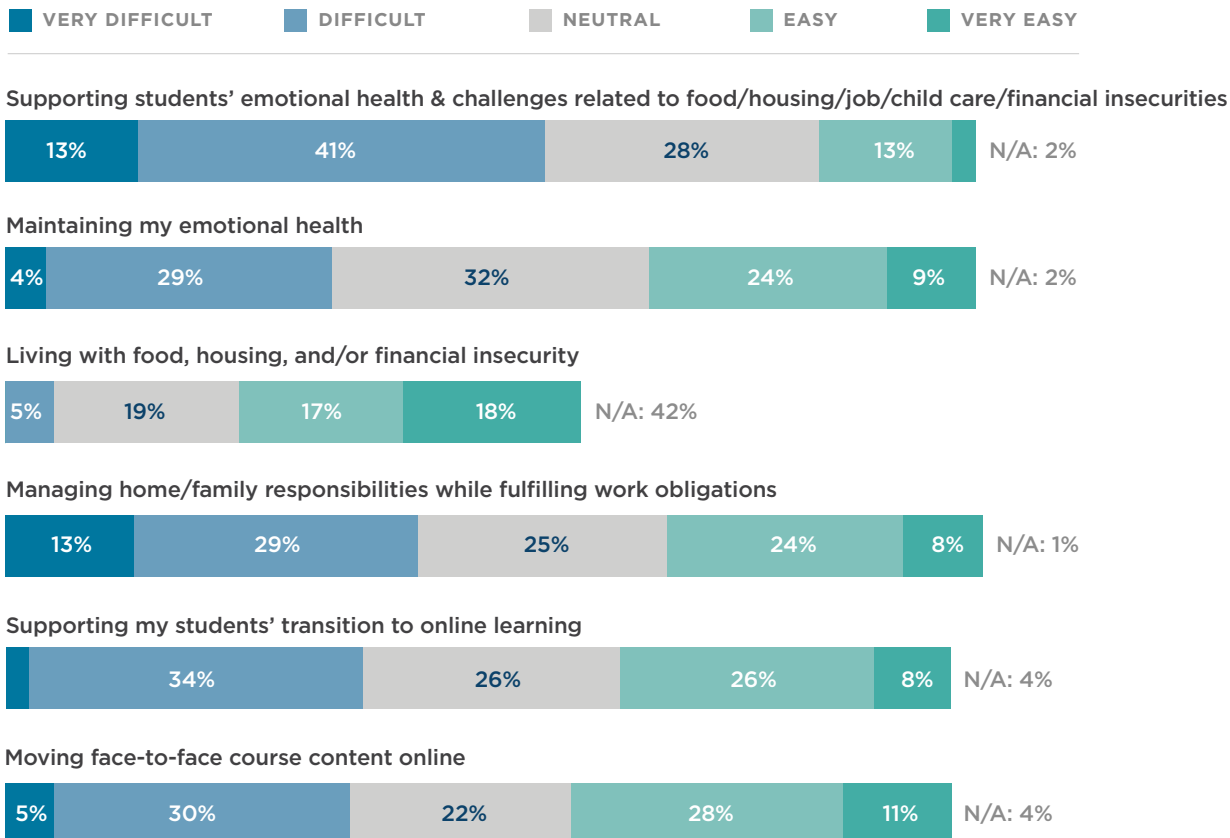
Student Attrition and Emotional Health

Like early childhood education programs, professional preparation programs have had to quickly adapt and rethink strategies to support those they serve during these difficult times. The pandemic is taking a toll on both student and faculty engagement and emotional health (see Figure 3). For example, nearly 90% of respondents indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased student attrition, with 30% reporting a decline in students' graduating. In addition:

- More than 50% of those surveyed said it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to support their students' emotional health and their challenges related to food, housing, job, child care, and financial insecurities.

- 36% indicated that it was difficult supporting their students' transition to online learning (despite the institutional support for doing so).

- 42% cited difficulty managing their own home/family responsibilities while fulfilling work obligations.

- 33% cited challenges maintaining their own emotional health.

- 5%, or one in twenty faculty members, cited challenges related to their own food, housing, and/or financial insecurity.

FIGURE 3
How difficult have the following aspects been this summer (due to the COVID-19 Pandemic)?

Legend: VERY DIFFICULT · DIFFICULT · NEUTRAL · EASY · VERY EASY

Supporting students' emotional health & challenges related to food/housing/job/child care/financial insecurities
13% · 41% · 28% · 13% · N/A: 2%

Maintaining my emotional health
4% · 29% · 32% · 24% · 9% · N/A: 2%

Living with food, housing, and/or financial insecurity
5% · 19% · 17% · 18% · N/A: 42%

Managing home/family responsibilities while fulfilling work obligations
13% · 29% · 25% · 24% · 8% · N/A: 1%

Supporting my students' transition to online learning
34% · 26% · 26% · 8% · N/A: 4%

Moving face-to-face course content online
5% · 30% · 22% · 28% · 11% · N/A: 4%

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[1] Includes informal and formal opportunities for field observations, fieldwork, practica, student teaching, and other clinical practice experiences such as home visiting. A planned sequence of these experiences supports candidate development of understanding, competence, and dispositions in a specialized area of practice.

[2] Key assessments are comprehensive assessments that, collectively, measure candidate proficiency on Standards 1-6 of NAEYC's 2010 Professional Preparation Standards.

- "50% of students withdrew from their courses this semester. We will have reduced [faculty] contracts this summer and may be facing furloughs."

- "I worry the most about students that simply disappeared and are not responding to repeated outreach efforts. Will they ever be able to return?"

- "I feel very physically and emotionally tired, exhausted and worn out. My health has [been] affected due to hours and hours in front of the computer… My sleep hours are distorted and my family relationships are deteriorating. My family can't understand that I spend so much time working."

- "Our service community was also hit hard with recent tornadoes leaving many families without homes and large portions of our community with no power or internet access for days/weeks. Our rural community did not have sufficient internet coverage to sustain the high demands of whole communities working and learning from home."

- "Many of our students did not have internet access or quality internet access to complete assignments. Also, several students did not have a laptop to use to complete assignments and readings if the course used an ebook and/or web-based assignments."

Field Experience

The hands-on knowledge gained from field experiences is an invaluable aspect of professional preparation. However, with the closures of early learning programs during the pandemic, most professional preparation programs were not able to offer full field experiences to students.

- Only 3% of those surveyed said that all of their students were able to participate in field experiences this past spring.

- 56% responded that some of their students were able to participate in field experiences.

- 41% of respondents say that none of their students were able to participate in field experiences.

In response to the limited access to traditional field experiences this spring, faculty has found a multitude of ways to supplement opportunities for students to observe and practice core skills needed for effective early childhood education practice (see Figure 4).
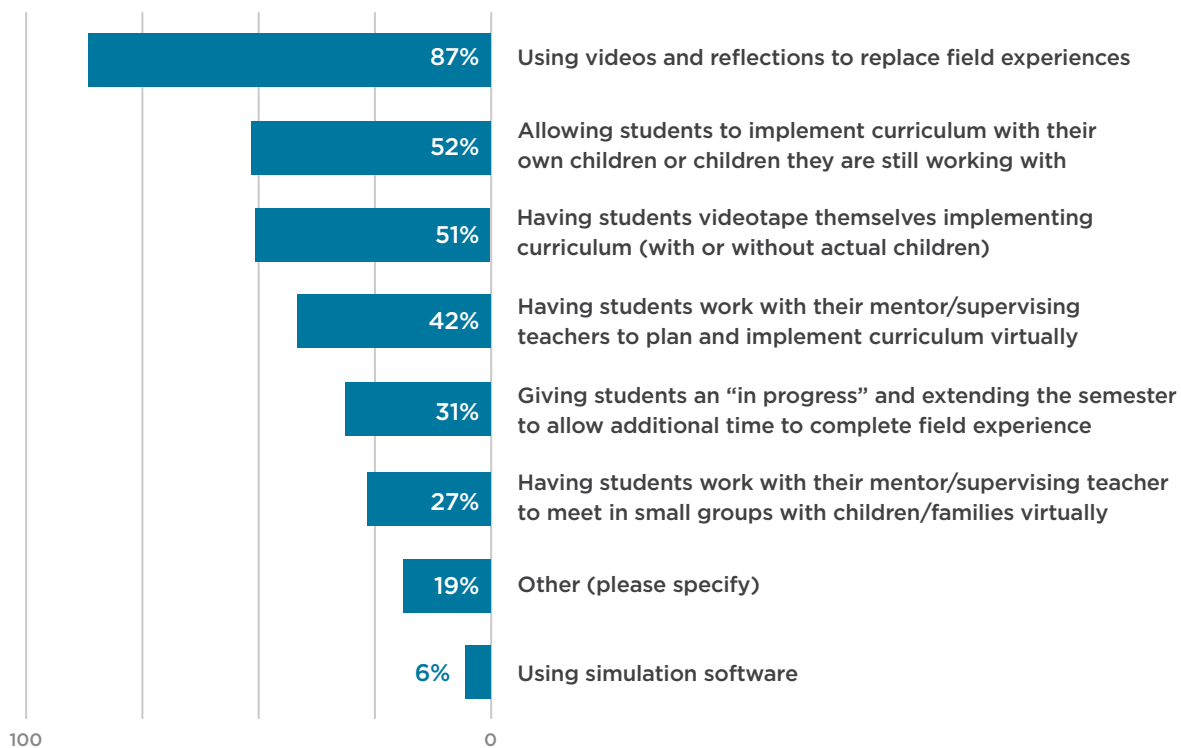
The most frequently cited method of supplementing field experiences was using videos and reflections (87%), followed by having students videotape themselves implementing curriculum with or without actual children (51%) and allowing students to implement curriculum with their own children or children they are still working with (52%). Other techniques included modifying requirements as well as replacement activities and individualized plans.

- "Students are doing weekly Google meetings with their lab instructors where they 'perform' their activities and lab instructors ask 'what if' questions using children the students previously worked with in the lab."

- "Our students had completed half of their field experiences and referred to those for assessment information; for activities and lead teaching our students have turned in plans and responded to possible scenarios from their practicum teachers in place of implementation."

- "The major issues will be for summer courses. Our spring semester lab hours had already begun and had been approximately 80% completed by the time of shutdowns. We modified requirements and counted the hours spent observing and practicing as sufficient to pass course demands."

FIGURE 4

How are you managing and supplementing field experiences this semester? Select all that apply.

- 87% — Using videos and reflections to replace field experiences
- 52% — Allowing students to implement curriculum with their own children or children they are still working with
- 51% — Having students videotape themselves implementing curriculum (with or without actual children)
- 42% — Having students work with their mentor/supervising teachers to plan and implement curriculum virtually
- 31% — Giving students an "in progress" and extending the semester to allow additional time to complete field experience
- 27% — Having students work with their mentor/supervising teacher to meet in small groups with children/families virtually
- 19% — Other (please specify)
- 6% — Using simulation software

Key Assessments

In the process of becoming accredited and/or recognized, preparation programs submit 5-6 key assessments that, collectively, measure candidate proficiency on professional preparation standards and competencies. Respondents have had varying degrees of success with transitioning key assessments to be operational online (respondents were asked to select all that apply).

- 41% of respondents indicated that they were able to offer all key assessments online.

- One third of respondents reported they had to make significant modifications to their key assessments and another third required few to no modifications.

- Given the challenges with field experiences, many respondents noted that they were unable to offer key assessments that required students to participate in field experiences.

- Additionally, key assessments that addressed implementing teaching strategies (Standard 4: Using Developmentally Appropriate Practice) and curriculum (Standard 5: Using Content Knowledge to Build Meaningful Curriculum) were deemed most challenging to offer online.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

- "One key assessment requires three classroom observations and practice. Since [early learning] programs closed, students were not able to complete their observations. While we found online videos to teach the concepts, we did not think this provided enough to assess the students and get accurate data."

- "It was not so much shifting them [key assessments] to online that has caused significant modifications as it has been the lack of ability for our students to complete observations and field experiences which are needed in order to complete the Key Assessments."

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

As of the close of the survey (May 6), a majority of respondents (62%) indicated that their institution had not decided yet when and how the institution will reopen. Although this decision making process is ongoing, many uncertainties remain given the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early learning and higher education programs. Quantitative and qualitative results in this survey have shown that some of the biggest hurdles faced by early childhood education degree programs include:

1) field placement and classroom observations,
2) student and faculty familiarity with technology,
3) student access to Wi-Fi,
4) student financial concerns, and
5) faculty and student emotional health while trying to juggle competing priorities. Faculty have been innovative in responding to these challenges to make sure students still have meaningful learning experiences and feel supported. There have been many lessons learned, including:

Staying Connected

- "We are working to have families share video clips documenting specific responses and activities with their child. We hope to collect these and to create a simulated infant/toddler observation for a practicum experience. This will also allow students to complete their case study on an individual child's development over a span of weekly 'visits.'"

- "I have a private Facebook group for all of my students. I share college and community resources daily, resources for their virtual teaching (if they are doing this with their employers), games, funny memes, offer support, laughs, and virtual hugs. It is just a place for them to stay connected with each other. I have also had graduates looking to stay connected. Some have been guest speakers in virtual classes, some have been part of virtual panels, and one is providing weekly lunch-time chats about life after graduation."

Adapting to Meet Needs

- "Stepping up understanding of trauma-informed practice in the department but also the college as a whole."

- "Using COVID-19 as a teachable moment. Having students identify resources, creating developmentally appropriate online activities, creating activities for parents using common household items."

Setting Expectations for Technological Fluency

- "Faculty often resist attempts to learn new technology, and most rarely attend training sessions. As an Ed Tech professional, I have always found technology important. Now that technology is forced upon them, they must learn it. It is imperative that faculty be REQUIRED to do professional development or continuing education in the technology area. Like other professions, skills should be required to be honed."

- "ALL of our students need to be exposed to online learning as an expectation of their professional training. This has not been required of them before."

While much of the country has begun reopening, it is likely that early childhood education professional preparation programs will continue to face the key challenges they identified, including limited access to field experiences for their students at least through the fall; decreased student enrollment; and increased student challenges related to emotional and physical health and wellbeing. Yet in a time of so much devastation, it is inspiring to see the transformation and resilience displayed by these programs and the lessons learned that they are taking with them moving forward. In the coming months, NAEYC will continue to share learnings from the ECE higher education community to support students in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective practitioners and to support faculty in navigating these unprecedented and challenging times.