



Transform Early Educator Lead Teacher Preparation Programs Grant

A program report prepared for the Early Educator Investment Collaborative

Prepared by
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This narrative report details the activities to date of the RESPECT Across Nebraska project, funded by the Early Investment Collaborative and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. Questions about this report may be directed to Julia Torquati (jtorquati@unl.edu) or Lisa Knoche (lknoche2@unl.edu).

I. Strategic Programmatic Implementation

The RESPECT Across Nebraska project has made significant headway in addressing our three key strategies to design a responsive and equitable system for preparing early childhood teachers.

- Aim 1: Develop a shared competency-based framework defining common expectations for educator preparation, credentialing, and licensing across all early childhood settings.
- Aim 2: Cultivate authentic community partnerships to ensure contextually grounded and culturally sustaining implementation of competency-based curriculum and accessible pathways.
- Aim 3: Develop accessible pathways and support mechanisms to ensure equitable education and certification opportunities for all members of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce.

Aim 1: Develop a Shared Competency-Based Framework

In the current reporting period, we have focused primarily on the first objective for accomplishing this strategy. That is, to define a common set of core professional competencies for early childhood educators working with children birth through grade 3 that can be demonstrated through completion of coursework or direct assessment. This objective is the key foundation for all the subsequent work to follow—specifically, to design common assessments for institutions of higher education (IHEs) and competency-based education that is financially supported and aligned with teacher certification, followed by designing “stackable” programs and credentials.

The following timeline of achievements have been accomplished toward this end:

- Organize a Competency workgroup *Fall 2022*
 - Gather interested partners
 - Identify co-leads
 - Establish regular meeting schedule (monthly, or as needed)
 - Define common goals & objectives to meet project aims
 - Report regularly to the Steering Committee (occurs monthly)
- Create a competency matrix/crosswalk *(Anticipated Completion: Summer 2023)*
 - Gather relevant frameworks and combine into shared data source *Fall 2022*
 - Sources relevant/specific to Nebraska
 - Sources from other states relevant to our aims
 - Sources from organizations that address specific competencies (e.g., trauma-informed practiced)
 - Workgroup members identify and share frameworks for inclusion *Fall 2022*
 - Workgroup members review framework content and provide feedback on commonalities, missing frameworks *Fall 2022*
 - Identify where existing professional competencies align/overlap *Fall 2022*
 - Use workgroup feedback to integrate missing frameworks, missing content, and make necessary adjustments *Spring 2023*
 - Identify superordinate domains in matrix *Spring 2023*
 - Identify coding strategy and methodology to organize competency framework content *Spring 2023*
 - Code competency frameworks using superordinate domains *Spring 2023*
 - Identify other key areas for coding (e.g., skill levels, age range) *Spring 2023*
- Acquire knowledge from other states’ competency-based systems *(Ongoing)*
 - Examine other state models *Spring 2023*
 - Invite experts to present at competency workgroup meetings *Spring 2023*

Although the work identified above primarily supports the first objective of this aim, the Competency workgroup has laid extensive groundwork in preparation for subsequent work. For instance, the anticipation of designing valid, reliable, and culturally-informed assessment methods that can be commonly shared across IHEs (objectives 2 and 3) has specifically guided the process of cross-cutting competency frameworks and coding strategies. Extensive planning and discussion have also occurred in anticipation of objective 5—aligning competencies with teacher certification. Furthermore, the ultimate objective of designing a competency framework that can be leveled in program implementation for “stackable” credentials has guided the coding and synthesizing process.

One challenge that we have encountered is the vast complexity of this undertaking—that is, the extensiveness of applicable frameworks to be synthesized and redesigned into a single competency framework that addresses all relevant qualifications while ensuring flexibility and adaptability to promote equitable and accessible pathways. We were surprised to discover areas that have been neglected in current competency frameworks while at the same time identifying creative ways to integrate key priorities of this project, such as culturally sustaining practices.

There are also important adjustments to future activities that have been identified as we’ve learned from concurrent endeavors toward Aims 2 and 3. For instance, we’ve identified opportunities to acquire feedback on the development of a new competency framework through relationship building, community engagement work, and interactions with current students and early childhood educators in the field.

Currently, we are in the preparation and planning stages for the following next steps:

- Complete preliminary model of competency framework Summer 2023
 - Review coded outcomes
 - Design preliminary model illustrating crossover themes

Aim 2: Cultivate Authentic Community Partnerships to Ensure Contextually Grounded and Culturally Sustaining Implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum and Accessible Pathways.

Cultivating community partnerships has required a significant time investment for this project, but we are pleased with the strong network that is in formation and the momentum and excitement demonstrated by our partners and community members. To accomplish Aim 2, we have been extensively involved during the last year in designing a community-based participatory action research plan, engaging in relationship building with local communities, and strengthening partnerships across the multiple institutions and organizations involved in this project. This work has been accomplished in effort to meet the primary objectives outlined in our proposal—namely, *to engage communities in participatory action research to ensure shared power with those affected by system-wide changes, to understand culture and assets related to early childhood educators and early childhood development, and to institutionalize community engagement through regular feedback loops and information exchange toward program development.*

We have made significant headway toward our aim, and we are excited to be in the early stages of documenting input, viewpoints, and funds of knowledge from local communities—including parents, teachers, elders, leaders, and community members—that will strategically inform the work of this project in designing equitable and culturally-sustaining pathways for early childhood teacher preparation. In the process leading up to this point, we have made important adjustments and improvements to our original plan. In lieu of implementing “cultural literacy roundtables” to encourage community sharing about the care and education of young children, we have found that engaging our communities requires much more groundwork and sensitivity. We have further realized that documenting these conversations through intentional and co-constructed methods of inquiry is imperative to ensuring that information shared is

strategically incorporated into the ongoing work of this project. We therefore refined and elaborated our initial plans for collaborative inquiry to incorporate a co-constructed research protocol that is undergirded by the strength and self-determined actions of community members. This includes procedures such as PhotoVoice, domain analysis, focus groups, and interviews where Community Partner Researchers are identified from our local communities, trained, and compensated for their work. As they work alongside the guidance of our research partners—those associated with both the grant and in institutions directly servicing these communities—Community Partner Researchers will decide among their community participants how they want to provide input on the project and share reflections from the process within their communities.

This approach has received high positive input from our communities and has been developed concurrently with our efforts in relationship building. In collaboration with partners in this project, our leadership and investigative team have made personal visits to our Tribal Nations, for instance, to make connections and meet community members and leaders involved in the early childhood field. This has resulted in positive and meaningful conversations, identification of community research partners, asset identification, and increasing understanding of cultural knowledge and preferences related to early childhood education and care.

The following specific objectives have been achieved toward Aim 2:

- Organize a Community Engagement workgroup *Fall 2022*
 - Gather interested partners
 - Identify co-leads
 - Establish regular meeting schedule (*monthly, or as needed*)
 - Define common goals & objectives to meet project aims
 - Report regularly to the Steering Committee (*occurs monthly*)

- Design plans and protocol for engaging with target communities *Spring 2023*
 - Gather relevant resources to guide community work *Fall 2022*
 - Decide on information gathering methods & methodologies *Fall 2022*
 - Identify key questions for communities *Fall 2022*
 - Acquire inquiry methods training (e.g., PhotoVoice) *Spring 2023*
 - Construct protocol for all research processes *Spring 2023*
 - Obtain IRB from all necessary partner institutions and Tribal Nations *Spring 2023*
 - Determine compensation for partners and participants *Spring 2023*
 - Determine process for identifying, onboarding, and training Community Partner Researchers *Spring 2023*

- Form partnerships through relationship building. *Fall 2022/Spring 2023*
 - Schedule visits with local partners and community members in target communities
 - Build relationships of trust via listening and learning
 - Identify community members to serve as partners in research process

In reflection, the work we have done up to this point to cultivate authentic community partnerships has resulted in some very positive and very rewarding experiences, but has also required much patience. We have learned that to do this well, we need to be flexible in our timelines and come to the table with a humble approach and an openness to learning from new ideas. This has allowed us to approach this aspect of our work in a respectful, sensitive way, and to be responsive to our partners and communities. In addition to these lessons learned, we've also experienced some barriers in the logistical undertaking of ensuring ethical research inquiry through IRB processes across multiple institutions and governing nations.

Bringing together multiple partners to construct the research process has required stretching our timeline, but it has also resulted in a well-informed and thoughtfully structured research process.

As we embark on the next phase of this work, we are currently involved and looking forward to the following:

- Begin formal community-based research inquiry Summer 2023
 - Identify Community Partner Researchers from prior engagements/relationship building and invite to participate
 - Provide clear information on the research process and opportunities to align with local community needs and interests
 - Provide training and certification for ethical research inquiry
 - Identify needs for childcare and technology during data collection
 - Clarify roles and responsibilities as partners are onboarded
 - Identify best process for Community Research Partners to obtain and share data from within their own community, with support from RESPECT research partners
 - Determine a data sharing plan with communities

Aim 3: Develop Accessible Pathways and Support Mechanisms to Ensure Equitable Education and Certification Opportunities for All Members of Nebraska’s Early Childhood Workforce.

Designing accessible pathways for equitable education and certification opportunities has made some exciting headway this last year. Achieving this aim requires strategic focus in many different areas, as outlined in our associated objectives—*designing “grow your own” pathways to equitably address underserved and underrepresented populations in the early childhood workforce; institutionalizing structures and processes and creating sustainable mechanism to support student completions and early childhood career pathways; and building a robust apprenticeship model.* The workgroups and partnerships in this project are enthusiastically engaged in this process and have structured a strong platform for this work through our Student Experiences and Supports workgroup and our Apprenticeship workgroup.

Fundamental to this aspect of the project is establishing strong partnerships across institutions and organizations that hold weight in constructing and designing these pathways, as well as with those who are impacted by such pathways. To address this, we have established a Steering Committee consisting of our partners involved in this grant—including individuals representing institutes of higher education (IHEs), state departments (i.e., Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Health and Human Services), and partner organizations (i.e., The Buffett Early Childhood Institute, Nebraska NEAYC). Through our Steering Committee we have brought together key participants who can enact systemic and sustainable changes to achieve Aim 3, and we have intentionally fostered these partnerships through our co-involvement and teamwork in workgroup activities, the development of a monthly Learning Community session featuring relevant presentations and roundtable discussions, and intentional organizational communication to ensure cohesive dissemination of project activities. This committee is undergirded by our Advisory Board—a team of individuals with diverse experiences and backgrounds in early childhood from across the state. Our Advisory Board is invited to collaborate and participate in our workgroup activities and regularly invited to Steering Committee gatherings to provide input and feedback on the work of this project.

To specifically address the objectives toward designing accessible pathways and support mechanisms for equitable opportunities, it is imperative to understand the barriers and support mechanisms that impede or

facilitate teacher preparation pathways. Our Student Experiences and Supports workgroup has prioritized this focus over the last year via research methods involving multiple layers of inquiry. An online survey in both English and Spanish was designed to identify these barriers and supports among early childhood educators and students from diverse backgrounds, provider types, years of education, and years of experience and was distributed through multiple channels to recruit a wide and diverse sample. Early childhood professional organizations shared the invitation and link to the survey across their networks, recruitment invitations were shared digitally and in welcome packets of early childhood education conferences, early care and education leaders in Spanish-speaking communities shared the invitation with their networks, and members of the Steering Committee shared the invitation with their networks. To ensure we were reaching target populations and communities—that is, those that have been historically underserved and underrepresented in the early childhood field—a second wave of survey recruitment was made via postcards to reach early childhood educators in counties with high populations of Native American, Black, and Hispanic families, as well as counties with low response rates (e.g., rural communities).

The survey response data collected by the Student Experiences and Supports workgroup has facilitated a second phase of information gathering—interviews and focus groups—which will add another critical layer for identifying necessary factors for designing equitable and accessible pathways. Nearly half of our respondents (76 of 169) indicated interest in learning more about the RESPECT project, sharing more information, and/or becoming involved as a contributing participant. We've received very positive responses from our recent informational webinar for survey respondents, building strong momentum for successful interactions and relationship building among early childhood educators. These relationships and connections will lay the groundwork for ongoing feedback groups and involvement—contributing to the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of the teacher preparation pathways and systems change resulting from this work.

Another exciting achievement supporting Aim 3 has been the formation of our Apprenticeship workgroup. This workgroup has garnered interest and support from many of our partners involved in the project as well as several members from our Advisory Board and additional early childhood organizations and community colleges, bringing wide representation and much enthusiasm to this work. Although just recently established, this workgroup is busily engaged in designing an apprenticeship program in collaboration with other entities and regulatory bodies for both degree seeking and non-degree seeking pathways to certification and licensing via workplace experiences. To accomplish this, the workgroup members are currently engaged in sub-committee work to identify needs and opportunities in these four key areas: employer involvement, on the job learning, related coursework, and costs associated with an apprenticeship model and potential funding.

Specific achievements toward Aim 3 are listed below with completion dates:

- Establish Steering Committee Fall 2022
 - Establish regular meeting schedule (*monthly, or as needed*)
 - Define common goals & objectives to meet project aims
 - Form an Advisory Board including early childhood experts with diverse backgrounds and experiences
 - Design a system of communication including access to all files and resources relevant to the dissemination of project activities
 - Initiate a Learning Community to disseminate and discuss evidence-based information relevant to the project (*occurs monthly during Steering Committee meetings*)

- Establish Student Experiences and Support workgroup *Fall 2022*
 - Gather interested partners
 - Identify co-leads
 - Establish regular meeting schedule (*monthly, or as needed*)
 - Define common goals & objectives to meet project aims
 - Report regularly to the Steering Committee (*occurs monthly*)

- Gather informative data about student experiences & needed support *Fall 2022/Spring 2023*
 - Determine research protocol for information gathering *Fall 2022*
 - Construct protocol for survey (Phase I)
 - Construct protocol for interviews (Phase II)
 - Acquire IRB approval
 - Distribute survey to early childhood educators (Phase I) *Fall 2022/Spring 2023*
 - Identify survey questions and modify
 - Generate survey via Qualtrics
 - Translate into Spanish
 - Distribute across partnerships
 - Determine regions of state with low response rates
 - Follow-up waves of survey distribution via conferences and recruitment postcards in underrepresented regions
 - Conduct interviews (Phase II) *Spring/Summer 2023*
 - Identify potential participants via survey responses
 - Identify interview participants via maximum variation sampling
 - Hold informational webinar for interested survey participants

- Establish an apprenticeship workgroup *Spring 2023*
 - Gather interested partners
 - Identify co-leads
 - Establish regular meeting schedule (*monthly, or as needed*)
 - Define common goals & objectives to meet project aims
 - Report regularly to the Steering Committee (*occurs monthly*)

Achieving objectives toward Aim 3 has necessitated strong partnerships and connections with those involved in the early childhood field—among decision-makers and our workforce. While we’ve experienced much success in this area, we encountered surprising challenges in the logistical procedures of designing information platforms and systems of communication to keep everyone informed and connected. Although technology has granted unprecedented opportunities for collaboration that are resilient to geographical and time constraints, we’ve encountered many unforeseen barriers in facilitating equitable access and participation while maintaining organizational data security systems (e.g., firewalls). We’ve learned that building these partnerships requires additional partnerships with other teams and systems (e.g., information technology systems). We’ve also found that designing an organizational structure that ensures equitable voices and input from all partners requires more than breaking down hierarchical leadership; we have learned that clarification of roles and responsibilities is also a critical component for designing systems of shared power and to provide tangible opportunities for contribution from all rights holders. Engaging in this structural process is at the forefront of our work as we embark on Year 2.

While much of the information we’ve acquired from early childhood students and educators thus far has been expected—time and money being the most significant barriers to degree completion—we were somewhat surprised to learn what was *not* identified as barriers in our survey responses. Specifically, few

participants identified geographic distance, lack of transportation, technology, concern about transferring credits across institutions, or lack of knowledge about available degree programs. As we are just beginning the second phase of this inquiry process, we look forward to elaborating on the findings of the survey and identifying areas of needed support for accessible and equitable teacher preparation pathways.

Our workgroups are currently engaged in the following activities to achieve Aim 3:

- Continue information gathering on student experiences & support Summer 2023
 - Interview participants identified through maximum variation sampling (per Phase I)
 - Invite interested survey respondents (early childhood educators) to participate in workgroups and/or advisory board

- Undergird partner relationships and ensure equitable opportunities to participate and contribute in ongoing work Summer 2023
 - Collaboratively identify roles and responsibilities
 - Check in with partners on meeting times and schedules and ensure that communication platforms and methods are optimal for Year 2

- Identify relevant opportunities and challenges for building a strong Apprenticeship model for the state Summer 2023
 - Clarify purpose and goals in collaboration with the needs and interests of rights holders and involved institutions and organizations
 - Subgroups to investigate the following key areas:
 - Employer Involvement
 - On the Job Learning
 - Related Course Work
 - Cost associated with apprenticeship model and potential sources of funding
 - Identify additional opportunities and challenges relevant to the model

1. Describe how project strategies, such as courses and field experiences, are designed to prepare students to achieve mastery of strong ECE lead teacher competencies, including related to working with diverse populations and dual language learners.

We have not offered courses and field experiences in our work to date. We are currently creating a competencies framework that can be aligned with curriculum, assessment, and certification requirements. We are using a “top-down” and “grassroots” approach in creating the framework to ensure that the competencies are rigorous, accountable, and culturally-sustaining. The “top-down” approach has involved creating a “crosswalk” of eight sets of early childhood competencies to identify common superordinate categories. We are using MAXQDA software to code and organize the eight sets of competencies into one framework that is applicable across diverse types of settings (e.g., family child care, center-based care, pre-K) with demarcations for specific age groups (i.e., infants and toddlers, preschoolers, kindergarteners, primary grades). The “bottom-up” approach includes community-based participatory research aimed at learning about what community members think that adults who care for and educate young children should know, be able to do, and be like (i.e., their dispositions). The participating communities include those served by the Tribal Colleges, a predominantly Black/African American community (north Omaha), and a predominantly Hispanic community (south Omaha). This inductive approach will also be combined with focus groups in which we invite feedback on the competencies, specifically to determine whether the competencies align with community and cultural values and priorities. The framework includes competencies that are related to working with diverse populations and dual language learners, including culturally sustaining pedagogy.

2. *Describe how your grant-funded strategies support the assessment of students to demonstrate mastery of ECE lead teacher competencies.*

We have not created assessments in our work to date. The design of assessments will follow the development of the competency framework and is anticipated to be completed in Fall 2023. Assessments will be designed that can be used across settings (i.e., on-campus coursework, apprenticeship settings, and awarding credit for prior learning/experience).

3. *Describe how you are working to improve ECE curriculum design, including curricula informed by recent developmental science, and adult learning and that are culturally responsive in nature, at your institution and with partner institutions.*

We are improving ECE curriculum design via a competency-based framework that will drive curriculum, assessment, and certification. The competencies are also being informed by communities. This approach to curriculum design aims to support culturally sustaining pedagogy. In terms of developmental science, we are incorporating two specific areas of knowledge and skill. First, given the evidence that stress and trauma disrupt social-emotional development and learning and increase risk for physical and mental health challenges across the lifespan, we incorporated trauma-informed competencies into the competency framework. Including trauma-informed competencies will support ECE professionals' understanding of children's development in multiple domains and give them knowledge and skills to support healthy development and learning for children who have experienced trauma. Not incidentally, this knowledge (e.g., brain states) will also help educators to support *all* children, not only those who have experienced trauma. Notably, we understand that a significant number of ECE professionals also have a history of stress and trauma, and therefore we are considering ways to ensure that teacher educators also are well prepared to work with adult learners who are affected by such experiences.

Second, given the robust evidence that teacher social and emotional competence and well-being predict quality of interactions with children and children's social, emotional, and learning outcomes, we are centering teacher social and emotional competence and well-being in our curriculum design. The Prosocial Classroom Model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) guides our thinking in this domain.

4. *Describe the supports you have implemented to ensure lead teachers (current and aspiring) achieve a bachelor's degree, including access to high-quality, clinically based practicum experiences across a variety of ECE settings, and induction supports.*

NA to date.

5. *Describe what you have done to prepare other pre-service educators, such as Assistant Teachers and Paraprofessionals, and/or ECE leaders not seeking a bachelor's degree?*

NA to date.

6. *Describe your approach to effectively recruit and serve racially, ethnically, linguistically, or socioeconomically diverse students.*

In the current reporting period, our Student Experiences and Supports workgroup solicited the input of current and past ECE students, including the current workforce, to identify their interests and needs as well as barriers and supports to completing degrees in EC education. Our sampling strategy included targeting Spanish-speaking professionals and students by translating materials into Spanish and distributing them through Spanish-speaking ECE community leaders and a conference for Spanish-speaking ECE professionals. We sent recruitment materials (for the survey) to zip codes with high concentrations of racially and ethnically diverse ECE providers. During the current reporting period, the community engagement work group has been engaged in planning for interviews with community members to develop strategies that will support recruitment of diverse students.

7. *Describe how your grant funding is supporting increased financial assistance, remuneration, and compensation across the educational and career pathways of the students/teachers.*

We have not engaged in this work to date but the data we are collecting from the current and prospective workforce is foundational to designing financial supports that will effectively address identified barriers to degree completion and obtaining teacher certification. We will utilize evidence from the Student Experiences and Supports surveys (English & Spanish) and interviews, as well as “member-checking” with participants to ensure proposed strategies are aligned with need.

8. *Describe how you are supporting the development of a strong pipeline of racially, ethnically, and/or linguistically diverse higher education faculty to prepare ECE professionals.*

Development of a strong pipeline of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse higher education faculty is a long-term goal of this project. We are working toward this goal in several ways. First, our team includes racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse investigators, partners, and community members who are informing this process. Second, we are working in diverse communities to recruit ECE professionals early in their careers (e.g., high school career academies that can award the CDA and dual credit) and those who are currently in the field to complete degrees and certification. However, we recognize that simply increasing the number of BIPOC educators will not automatically generate a pipeline of teacher educators. Therefore, we will connect with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute Leadership Cadre, a leadership development initiative for early childhood educators, to support diverse EC professionals in developing their leadership knowledge and skills in preparation to become teacher educators.

II. Strategic Programmatic Implementation

The following responses describe the formal and substantive interdisciplinary partnerships that have been formed to achieve the goals of this project.

1. Describe the existing partnerships, in brief.

RESPECT partners consist of five institutes of higher education, including our lead IHE, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and two additional IHEs with bachelor degree programs, University of Nebraska-Kearney and University of Nebraska-Omaha, Metropolitan Community College, and our two tribal colleges—Little Priest Tribal College and Nebraska Indian Community College. Added to these are our core partner organizations—Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Buffett Early Childhood Institute, Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children (NeAEYC), Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and the Nebraska Department of Education. Augmenting the work of these core partners is the inclusion of representative participants (e.g., Advisory Board members) who are engaged in the work of this project through contributions and feedback in various ways and who bring diverse experiences and expertise to the project.

2. Describe State/Tribal leader engagement (including policymakers/tribal leaders) in the grant.

Five members of our Steering Committee hold key positions in the Nebraska Department of Education. These members also serve on project workgroups. The Steering Committee also includes leaders from each of the Tribal Colleges in Nebraska. The Education Director for the Winnebago Tribe serves as one of our Advisory Board members and is a Community Researcher Partner.

3. Have any significant changes, including leadership/staff changes, occurred in the partnership since the launch of the grant?

The Nebraska Department of Education has created a new full-time position to provide sustainable support for this project, RESPECT Project Specialist, hired in March 2023. We have had a few individuals representing our partners leave the project due to employment transfer; we are in the process of identifying new individuals to occupy those roles. One of our Steering Committee members representing one of our IHEs has stepped back temporarily on medical leave.

4. Have new partnerships been formed since the launch of this grant? If yes, please describe.

Through the ongoing work with early childhood educators (via Student Experiences & Supports), our specialized workgroups (e.g., Apprenticeships), and our Advisory Board, we have strengthened our core partnerships by including individuals representing child care settings and other early childhood organizations, including First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Early Learning Connections, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, Educare, Chadron State College, Midland Lutheran College, Midplains Community College, and Western Nebraska Community College. Our partner members have also experienced positive interactions and formed new relationships among our tribal community members—leaders and early childhood educators who are being integrated into this project via our community engagement work.

5. What are some initial indicators of success?

In the current reporting period, we have forged positive relationships across organizations and among individuals involved in this project. This is evidenced in the enthusiastic participation, motivation to engage in the work of this project and to provide feedback and input, willingness to contribute, and the collaborative culture that is shared during virtual and in-person gatherings. In addition to the tangible demonstration of strong partnerships described above, we have reinforced the prioritized aim of equitable and diverse representation among partnerships through a new website and logo,

visually representing our collaboration of partners and communities across the state (<https://www.respectacrossnebraska.org>).

6. *What are some barriers/challenges that you have experienced? How have you navigated them to date?*

Surprisingly, one of our greatest challenges has been navigating technology solutions and finding ways to equitably include everyone despite geographical distance and conflicting schedules (this is described in detail, below). We are grateful to our partnerships with IT organizations that have helped us find solutions and circumvent barriers.

7. *What has surprised you in this work?*

One area of surprise has been the willingness among our partners to set aside differing agendas to find common ground and rich solutions to achieve the aims of this project. This has generated an atmosphere of collaboration, inspiring much enthusiasm and motivation to engage in the work of this project.

8. *What are some lessons learned or takeaways?*

One key takeaway has involved navigating responsibility distribution and role clarification when applying a collaborative model of participation and leadership, and decentralizing power dynamics. We have found that creating equitable spaces and opportunities for input and contribution necessitates a new way of designing organizational structure to ensure both clarity and accountability.

III. Institutional Change

The following responses details specific institutional changes directly related to this project and our respective partner relationships.

The primary accomplishment in terms of institutional change during this reporting period relates to our Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) partner. Five NDE professionals serve on our Steering Committee and work groups, including one who was hired full time to work on this project (job title: RESPECT Project Specialist). We have NDE representatives in our Competencies and Apprenticeship workgroups, and they have communicated support for a competency-based approach to certification. This signals a significant transformation from the current certification system in Nebraska.

The RESPECT team played a significant role in this transformation through several actions. First, the grant is fully funding the NDE RESPECT Project Specialist for three years, and NDE has committed to funding the position thereafter, indicating long-term commitment to the systems changes outlined in our application. Second, ongoing dialogue has established mutual understanding and trusting relationships that have laid the foundation for the potentially more challenging work of detailed design.

Initial indicators of success include consistent and committed participation of all the partners in the work and work groups. Meetings are generative and discussions are open and creative. Team members bring resources and examples to the table for analysis and consideration.

One of the first challenges we experienced was internal: our Office of Sponsored Programs was suffering from their own success last year and it took an inordinate amount of time to get all the subaward agreements executed. We initially navigated this challenge with frequent inquiries by our PIs to the OSP but after five months we elevated it to the Dean of the College of Education and Human Sciences, who secured a commitment the next day to expedite the process.

With respect to systems change, perhaps the most surprising thing to date is the willingness of NDE to re-design the Early Childhood Education certification process. They have expressed willingness to re-write the policy to align with the competencies framework. One of the lessons learned here is that even big state institutions can be willing to change.

IV. Project Management

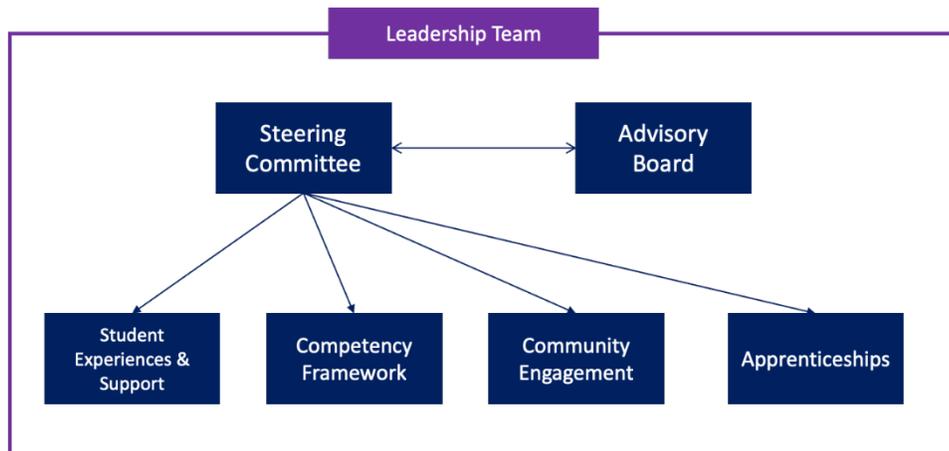
The following report explains the grant leadership and management structure for this project.

1. Describe your project management structure, in brief, including any advisory bodies that support this work.

This project is managed by two overarching leadership bodies—the Leadership Team and the Steering Committee. The Leadership Team manages all logistical processes—including personnel, budget management, organizational communication, technical support, research logistics, and meeting scheduling. The Leadership Team is comprised of the co-principal investigators and Project Manager and is housed at UNL. The Steering Committee oversees the work of the project toward accomplishing our strategic aims, including the workgroup activities that synergistically focus on specific tasks. The Steering Committee meets monthly. (See diagram below)

We have a full-time project manager who oversees all workgroup activities, maintaining organizational structure and communication across partnerships. The Leadership Team, including co-principal investigators and the project manager, meets weekly to review project progress and act on immediate needs and planning decisions. A graduate assistant provides personnel support to the leadership team and workgroup activities and meets weekly with the project manager to report on assignments.

Through recommendations made by Steering Committee members, we have formed an Advisory Board of experts in the field with diverse backgrounds and experience. The Advisory Board is included quarterly in Steering Committee meetings to provide feedback and input on the overarching work of the project. Members of the Board are additionally invited to participate and/or contribute to workgroup activities toward accomplishing the project aims.



2. Describe any management changes or developments, including staff changes since the last grant reporting period.

- Hired project manager (October 2022) and graduate assistant (January 2023)
- Full time representative (position) at Nebraska Department of Education hired for the RESPECT project (March 2023)
- As Steering Committee members have transitioned due to employment changes, other representatives from the participating agency/institution are being identified to represent their agency/institution.

3. *Describe any project management challenges or barriers you have encountered. How have you navigated them?*

Due to the unique collaborative nature of the grant, we have encountered a few surprising challenges in the logistical process of maintaining organizational communication across partnerships. For instance, many of our partner organizations maintain technical security mechanisms to protect against data security breaches, and it has required some creative work and patience on the part of our leadership team and multiple information technology services to find practical ways to share virtual spaces—including documents and files—that are necessary to facilitate and enhance the work we are doing.

Similarly, arranging meeting times that address the logistical challenges of geographical distances and diverse schedules of our partners has required innovative solutions as well. We have successfully navigated this by adapting our processes to the particulars of the situation and creating multiple communication pathways to keep our partners informed and engaged when scheduling conflicts arise (i.e., detailed notes, meeting recordings, postings via a shared Microsoft Teams site and email).

In sum, maintaining strong lines of communication and connection across partnerships has been a high priority but a logistical challenge which we have addressed through both technology platforms and forming relationships with support systems and individuals, bringing creative and workable solutions to the table.

4. *What else would be helpful to the successful management of the grant, including any specific technical assistance needs?*

None at this time.

V. Grant Metrics

The number (#) of discrete students participating in strategic programmatic implementation activities supported by grant funds (during this reporting period) by racial/ethnic breakdown following report explains the grant leadership and management structure for this project.

- I. # students supported towards MA attainment
NA to date
- II. # students supported towards BA attainment
NA to date
- III. # students supported towards AA attainment
NA to date
- IV. # students supported towards CDA attainment
NA to date
- V. #students supported towards other state-issued credential/certification
NA to date
- VI. # professionals supported towards other Professional Development attainment Please describe the professions (e.g. Principals, Center Directors, etc.)
NA to date
- VII. Number of degrees attained and degree type
NA to date
- VIII. Nature of job placements
NA to date

VI. Students' Perspectives

If you have acquired student evaluations or feedback on their experiences in the grant-funded courses and supports, please include those data as an addendum to this report.

NA to date.

VII. Other Supports

Feedback on the Learning Community and other supports from The Collaborative that would be helpful.

We have found the Learning Community, including the resources provided for the pre-work as well as the meetings, to be very informative and relevant. We have monthly Steering Committee meetings (including all our investigators and partners) and those of us who attended the Learning Community share some key points we learned followed by a facilitated discussion of how it is relevant to the work we are doing in Nebraska. We also make all the resources available on our Teams site.

In terms of other supports, we are at a point in our project when it would be very helpful if the Collaborative could facilitate a meeting between our Tribal College partners, our primary investigators, and the other Tribal College grantees to discuss our projects, network, and consider if it would be helpful to have some ongoing dialogue related to our projects and beyond. We have noted in the Learning Community meetings that we are all experiencing similar challenges and barriers and working to design solutions, and we believe that discussions among the Tribal College partners would be generative.