The College Enrollment and Completion Patterns of Gateways Credential Holders

Executive Summary

IBHE ICCB incorra Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development

The Illinois Gateways to Opportunity ® Credentials were developed to unify the experience, professional development, and formal education of pre-service and in-service early childhood practitioners. In partnership with the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), and the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) conducted a descriptive study focusing on the Gateways Credential holders (N=10,420) with one or more of the following credentials: Early Childhood Credential (ECE), the Infant/Toddler Credential (ITC), and the Illinois Director Credential (IDC). The study provides information on demographics, enrollment, award and degree completion, and persistence by drawing from enrollment and degree completion information maintained by IBHE and ICCB.

This work aligns with and was supported by Illinois' Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant. Findings from the study will help to expand the field's understanding of current education and professional development pathways for early childhood educators, which will help target efforts to increase the number of educators who receive Gateways Credentials from postsecondary institutions. Ultimately, this work will support ongoing efforts to align and increase the quality of the state of Illinois' comprehensive early childhood education system beyond the life of the grant.

Major Findings

Diversity of the Gateways Credential Holders. The current study points to promising trends in terms of the how Gateways credentialed individuals add to the overall diversity of the early childhood workforce in Illinois. Gateways credentialed individuals were not only more diverse than the overall early childhood workforce in Illinois, but the Gateways Credential holders who matched to a degree completion record were even more diverse than the larger study group of all Gateways credentialed individuals.

Degree Completion, Retention, and Persistence. Although many of the study group members who matched to a record of enrollment were continuing students and specific to the bachelor's granting institutions, many had upper division class status, a high proportion had earned awards and degrees, or were still enrolled at the end of the study. More importantly, in the case of Illinois community colleges, the rates of year two retention among matched Gateways Credential holders were comparatively higher than other community college students from that same timeframe with a similar enrollment status at the beginning of the study. This arguably contradicts commonly held perceptions about the "persistence" of individuals in early childhood working toward certificates and degrees.

Some College, No Degree with a Gateways Credential. The current study demonstrates how the Gateways Credentials could be used to better establish progress towards the 60% by 2025 goal. For example, less than half of the individuals with a Gateways ECE Credential of Level 4 who matched to community college records had earned an associate's degree, suggesting that the other half were utilizing the requirement of 60 credit hours. With current reporting mechanisms, such individuals would get counted as having some college, but no degree. However, the continued integration of the Gateways Registry into the Illinois Longitudinal Data System (ILDS) will help to ensure more of individuals with some college and no degree who also have obtained an employer recognized credential (such as the ECE Credential Level 4) are counted in the future. Also important, it can help ICCB, IBHE, and INCCRRA better understand course-taking patterns of students to better align ECE Credentials with degrees and certificates.

Enrollments and Completions in Early Childhood Programs have been Declining across Most Sectors. Since at least 2010, early childhood enrollments and degree completions have been significantly declining across all sector and levels, with the exception of community college completions at the sub-baccalaureate levels. This decline in early childhood enrollments and completions could be related to a recent Illinois Workforce Hiring Survey that found over the course of a 12-month time period, 37% of early childhood positions overseen by the hiring managers responding to the survey turned over or went unfilled (Main, Yarbrough, & Patten, 2017).

Recommendations for Further Investigation

Stackability of Credentials and Degrees. We recommend merging the IBHE, ICCB, and INCCRRA information into a unified dataset, as a way to better establish how Gateways Credential holders engage with both community colleges and other degree-granting entities falling under the purview of IBHE. The resulting analysis of such a dataset could shine a better light on the stackability of credentials and degrees within early childhood.

Do Employer Recognized Credentials Provide a Value-Add? As this line of inquiry is advanced in the future, it would be interesting to determine if Gateways credentialed individuals with degrees are provided with a labor market premium relative to similar individuals with only a degree. This could potentially be accomplished by extending the current project to include career outcomes information from the Illinois Department of Employment Security. Further inquiry could also attempt to determine if the racial and ethnic diversity of the Gateways Credential holders with a matched record of completion translates into diversifying the early childhood workforce. It remains possible that some of this increased diversity is due to educator supports provided through RTT-ELC, and the early childhood field now needs to determine whether there is a need for additional supports as these individuals transition into the field.

Making the Case for Social Utility. Current operational definitions of 'high quality' credentials rely heavily on labor-market returns, but there have been efforts to integrate another construct into the discussion by taking into consideration the social utility associated with the given credential. Social utility focuses on the good of the given credential to the state or the region, as well as the value that it adds to the life of the credential holder. The field of early childhood would feature prominently in such an assessment of social utility and would shed light on the non-economic returns for early childhood education.

Analyzing the Broader Spectrum of Gateways Credentials. As the current study was limited to Gateways Credential holders with ECE and ITC Credentials of Level 2 or higher, it would be beneficial to expand the scope of future studies to include individuals with the ECE Credential Level 1. Also, as more individuals attain some of the newer Gateways Credential types, such as Family Child Care (FCC) Credential, School-Age and Youth Development (SAYD) Credential, or the Family Specialist Credential, it would be extremely useful to integrate that information into additional analyses on the intersection of Gateways Credential attainment and college enrollment and degree completion. It would also be useful to determine the interaction of teacher licensure (through the Illinois State Board of Education), Gateways Credential attainment, and degree/certificate attainment in early childhood education teacher preparation programs in future studies.

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