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Higher Education Frequently Asked Questions

In today's early childhood environment, having a credential or degree can help you achieve your career goals. Below are some of the commonly asked questions to help you make the best choices for your future.

What should I look for when considering enrolling in an early childhood degree program?

Things to consider when looking for a quality early childhood teacher preparation program are:

- Program accreditation
- Characteristics and qualifications of the staff (are their own degrees in early childhood and child development or are they in "related" fields)
- The kinds of courses and degrees offered
- The kinds of practicum or student teaching experiences provided
- Support and guidance for non-traditional students
- Does the school offer a variety of course delivery options? How accessible are the programs to students?
- Does the program cover the full range of early childhood (Birth through age 8 / 3rd grade)
- Does the school have partnerships or articulation agreements with other colleges so you can transfer your credits?

What is accreditation?

Today, higher education programs are offered in a variety of ways – traditional classroom on and off campus, online, or what is called "hybrid" which is a combination of face-to-face and online instruction. It's difficult to determine which programs are legitimate. This is why it's extremely important to know if the program you're looking at is accredited before you enroll. Accreditation ensures that the programs of study offered meet standards for quality higher education. An accrediting organization reviews colleges, universities, and other higher education institutions in order to guarantee their effectiveness, quality, and improvement efforts.

An institution that is accredited has undergone a review of its structure and the nature of its program to ensure that it complies with established standards. By accepting accreditation status, an institution agrees to undergo a review on a rotating basis every few years. Accreditation organizations are held accountable for the institutions to which they grant accreditation. The U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) also review accreditation organizations to ensure that they are using effective accrediting practices. Be sure the school you are thinking of attending is regionally accredited before you enroll.

How can I tell if the college I'm considering is accredited or not?

To be sure that the program you are considering is accredited by a legitimate accreditation organization, visit either www.UCEAdirectory.org or the Department of Education website at www.ed.gov. Some schools will tell you their programs are accredited though this may only be true of one of the school's locations or programs. Ask the school what organization has accredited them and if the accreditation is for the specific program and location you are interested in attending. Then contact the accrediting organization to verify and for more information.

What should I be looking for in the characteristics and qualifications of the faculty in early childhood preparation programs?

Faculty members should themselves have degrees in early childhood education or child development. Instructors at 2-year schools often have more direct employment experience working with children ages birth to preschool and must have at least a Bachelors degree to serve as instructor. Higher education faculty at most 2- and 4-year should have a Masters degree or higher in early childhood education or child development. Some schools say that their instructors have degrees in “related fields.” This is not optimal. Early childhood is a unique developmental period in the human lifespan and there is a specialized body of knowledge that defines the field. Knowledge and skills from other fields such as Elementary Education or Nursing do not directly apply to the field of early care and education. Instructors in early childhood preparatory programs need to be experts in early childhood development and practice.

What’s the difference between an AAS degree and AA or AS degree?

AAS degrees are designed to prepare students for careers that do not require advanced degrees. An AAS degree is considered a “terminal” degree because usually the credits completed for the degree do not transfer to 4-year institutions whereas the credits completed for an AA or AS degree will transfer and students will enter the 4-year program at the junior level.

Can I go on to obtain a Bachelors degree in Early Childhood Education if I graduated with an AAS degree?

Yes, it is possible. Depending on the 4-year institution and the degree program you are enrolled in, you may have to repeat some or all of the general education courses that you took to obtain your AAS degree. It’s also likely that the specific early childhood courses you took for your AAS degree may only be accepted as general education or elective credits at the 4-year institution. This means that it may take you longer to graduate with a Bachelors degree. There is also the additional expense of repeating courses.

What are some things I should be looking for in course content areas in an early childhood or child development program?

You should consider the following questions:

- Does the program align its curriculum with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) 4-Year Teacher Professional Preparation Standards?
- How many completed courses in the different content areas are required?
- Do the curriculum and methods focus on children in the early childhood developmental period of birth to age 8 (or Grade 3)?
- Is play strongly emphasized in the methods courses?
- Will you have opportunities to work in inclusive early care and education settings, and in settings caring for children of various ages?
- Does the program have an early intervention special needs component?
- How relevant and adequate are diversity, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic competencies to the program?

What age range do Early Education and Child Development programs cover?

Most of the degrees in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Child Development (CD) in early childhood programs cover the age range from birth to eight, though some go beyond to include information on children in the elementary years.

What if the program has an online option? What are the characteristics of a good online program?

Online learning can be rewarding and is a way to access a program you might not otherwise be able to attend. However, online college coursework is not for everyone. There are also many questionable online programs that promise certificates and degrees, but are not accredited or are wildly expensive. You may pay a lot of money and end up with a worthless piece of paper that is not accepted as a qualification for a job in the field. Before you make a costly mistake, do the following:

- Think about whether you have the personal discipline to handle the freedom and independence offered through online courses. Can you keep yourself on track, manage assignments, and meet deadlines without the structure of face-to-face class time?
- Consider your own learning style. Do you like to be independent, work alone, and manage your own time? Or do you prefer being with people and working in collaboration?
- Successful online students have:
 - Ability to manage time effectively
 - Excellent reading and writing skills
 - Ability to work independently
 - Access to computer with internet connection
 - Ability to troubleshoot technical problems
- Investigate the online program for quality. You will need to find out the same kinds of things that you want to know about a traditional school – the quality of the class offerings, the qualifications of the instructors, accreditation status, degrees that are available, and so on.

Where can I find financial aid to help me with the high cost of college education?

College coursework is expensive. Most colleges and universities have financial aid programs available for students who are enrolled at least half-time. There is rarely financial aid available if you wish to take just one or two courses without being enrolled in a degree program.