

Accrediting Associate Degree Programs

NAEYC Launches a New System to Recognize Excellence

Marilou Hyson and Mary Duru

Almost 7,000 students graduate from early childhood associate degree programs each year, and this number is expected to grow rapidly in the coming years. Associate degree programs, housed in community colleges, technical colleges, and other colleges and universities, have become an essential feature of early childhood professional preparation.

To increase the visibility and impact of associate degree early childhood education programs, NAEYC is beginning a new system to accredit programs that meet its national standards for high-quality teacher preparation. Below are some questions and answers about the system; more information is available on NAEYC's Web site, www.naeyc.org.

What are associate degree programs?

Associate degree programs grant AA (Associate of Arts), AS (Associate of Sciences), and AAS (Associate in Applied Science) degrees to students who successfully complete a two-year postsecondary program (part-time students may take longer than two years to complete the degree). More than 2,500 institutions of higher education award associate degrees; approximately 1,100 of these

award degrees in child development or early childhood education.

Why are early childhood associate degree programs getting so much attention?

A report of the National Research Council (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001) shows the value of early childhood teachers' formal education and specialized training. In light of this and other research, Head Start mandates that at least half of all lead teachers must have a minimum of an associate's degree. Congressional reauthorization of Head Start in the coming year is likely to raise expectations for teachers' education. States are increasing the requirements for the education and training of staff in prekindergarten and other programs, as well as for paraeducators or teacher assistants in public schools. In the future, child care and other early childhood programs seeking NAEYC Accreditation will need to meet higher teacher qualifications, among other anticipated changes to the program standards and accreditation performance criteria.

Associate degree programs make important contributions toward meeting these goals. They are the gateway to higher education for many adults who are working in the early childhood field and for students still exploring career options. Upon completing associate degrees, some students will transfer immediately into baccalaureate degree programs, while others gain

The ever increasing role that associate degree programs play in the preparation of early childhood teachers makes this initiative a next logical step. As a teacher educator I welcome a system that promotes the highest standards of quality for teachers of young children and their families.

—*Josué Cruz, Jr.*
Dean, School of Education and
Human Development,
Bowling Green State University

a credential to enhance their current work and perhaps at a later time go on for a bachelor's degree.

Associate degree programs in community colleges and other institutions attract a higher percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse students than do four-year institutions, thus helping to ensure a more diverse and well-prepared early childhood workforce. In addition, community colleges frequently offer more flexible course schedules, online instruction, and other options tailored to the needs of working adult students.

What will be the benefits of associate degree program accreditation for the early childhood field and for the degree programs?

If teachers' formal education is to produce better outcomes for young children, the quality of their degree

Marilou Hyson, PhD, is NAEYC's associate executive director for professional development.

Mary Duru, PhD, is a professional development specialist at NAEYC.

programs must be high. The content and delivery of associate degree and other programs need to reflect current research and best practices in early childhood education—practices that are appropriate and effective for all children and families served.

Associate degree programs that are NAEYC accredited will have demonstrated that they meet national standards. These standards describe what well-prepared graduates know and are able to do in areas including promoting child development and learning; building family and community relationships; observing, documenting, and assessing young children; teaching and learning; and becoming a professional (see “Resources and References” for more information about NAEYC higher education standards). Because of the resulting national recognition, students may be especially attracted to institutions that have accredited teacher preparation programs. Transfer or articulation between two- and four-year programs may be easier if two-year programs are nationally accredited.

Community colleges play an increasingly critical role in the development of the pre-K–12 teacher workforce. Twenty percent of America’s current teachers started their education at community colleges. Today 37 percent of all higher education students are enrolled in community colleges, including more than half of all Hispanic and African American students. Associate degree accreditation can support students’ successful teaching careers and help us build the well-qualified and diverse early childhood teaching workforce that our nation needs.

— Alison Lutton
President, ACCESS/
American Associate Degree Early
Childhood Educators

Source: Data from RNT 2002.

How would an associate degree program become accredited by NAEYC?

An interested program first will need to meet eligibility criteria (such as being part of a regionally accredited institution of higher education). The program will begin the accreditation process by engaging in self-study to assess its current strengths and need for improvement in relation to NAEYC’s standards.

Following the self-study, the program will submit a report to NAEYC describing the program’s mission, context, and conceptual framework and presenting evidence that its graduates have acquired the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions represented in the standards. Next a team of trained NAEYC reviewers will visit the program, interviewing faculty, administrators, students, and other stakeholders and reviewing documentation. An independent commission will review reports from programs and review teams and make accreditation decisions.

When will the system begin operation?

To ensure a well-designed, operational system, NAEYC will gradually phase in program accreditation, beginning in fall 2004. A small cohort of associate degree programs located in six states—Arkansas, Illinois (the City Colleges of Chicago), Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and South Carolina—will participate in the launch. At the same time, associate degree program accreditation information will be disseminated nationally. Within the next year, field-tested self-study materials will be available to associate degree programs that are interested in applying for accreditation.

How can institutions obtain more information about associate degree program accreditation?

See “Resources and References” for online links to NAEYC’s standards for associate degree programs. Additional information is posted on

With T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship programs supporting more than 16,000 students attending over 400 community colleges this year, it is critical that the education that students receive be of the highest quality. If the current and future workforce receives a good foundation in early childhood education, our investment will pay off for the children whom they teach. Accreditation is a tool to help make that happen.

— Sue Russell
Executive Director, Child Care
Services Association

NAEYC’s Web site and in the book *Preparing Early Childhood Professionals: NAEYC’s Standards for Programs* (Hyson 2003). NAEYC plans to host a series of Web seminars and conference sessions, including a seminar at the NAEYC 2004 Annual Conference, to inform community colleges and others about this initiative.

Resources and references

- AACTE (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education). 2002. The community college role in teacher education: A case for collaboration. An issue paper of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Washington, DC: Author. Online: www.aacte.org/Membership_Governance/community_colleges.pdf.
- Bowman, B.T., M.S. Donovan, & M.S. Burns, eds. 2001. *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. National Research Council, Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Career encounters: Early childhood education*. 1994. Video. Narberth, PA: Davis Gray.
- Early, D.M., & P. Winton. 2001. Preparing the workforce: Early childhood teacher preparation at two- and four-year institutions of higher education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 16: 285–306.
- Hyson, M., ed. 2003. *Preparing early childhood professionals: NAEYC’s standards for programs*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

NAEYC. 2003. *Careers in early childhood education*. Brochure. Washington, DC: Author.

NAEYC. 2003. NAEYC standards for early childhood professional preparation: Associate degree programs. Online: www.naeyc.org/profdev/prep_review/2003.pdf.

RNT (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc.). 2002. *Tapping potential: Community college students and America's teacher recruitment challenge*. Belmont, MA: Author.

Townsend, B.K., & J.M. Ignash, eds. 2003. *The role of the community college in teacher education*. New Directions for Community Colleges, no. 121. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Copyright © 2004 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/resources/journal.

Supporting the System

NAEYC intends to develop a self-sustaining national system for associate degree program accreditation. However, significant support is required to bridge the period from planning and launch to a stage when enough programs are participating to make the system self-supporting. The following groups have provided essential start-up funds and other support for staffing, development and refinement of materials and procedures, advisory committee and other meetings, and design of

an ongoing, comprehensive evaluation of the new system:

American Associate Degree Early Childhood Educators (ACCESS)
Annie E. Casey Foundation
The Joyce Foundation
A.L. Mailman Family Foundation
NAEYC Governing Board
Ohio Coalition of Associate Degree Early Childhood Programs

Collaborating groups in the following states: Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and South Carolina