

Struggles, Successes, and Silver Linings: The Impact of the Pandemic on ECE Postsecondary Programs

September 2021

In early spring 2020, college campuses across the country had to quickly shift all of their in-person classes online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For programs preparing graduates for clinical professions, such as early childhood education (ECE), this was particularly challenging given that field experiences are central to the curriculum. The quick pivot required faculty to find creative ways to supplement classroom observations and field experiences and to implement and expand necessary supports for students.

In an effort to better understand the ECE higher education landscape during the initial period of the pandemic, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conducted a survey with respondents from 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Between April 16 and May 6, 2020, the survey was sent to over 300 programs in NAEYC's higher education accreditation system and to over 250 NAEYC nationally recognized programs. In all, 263 faculty members from 232 institutions responded.

According to that survey, the vast majority of respondents (92 percent) indicated that their institutions had shifted classes from in-person to online for the spring semester. Additionally, **56%** of respondents reported they had to make significant modifications to ECE course content for online learning, while **40%** were able to move online with few to no modifications. Increases in student attrition coupled with a decline in the number of students graduating created difficulties for program faculty and staff. Last, but certainly not least, respondents found it

difficult to maintain their own as well as their students' emotional health, especially when navigating the challenges associated with online learning.

As of September 2021, we are approximately 18 months into the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout, NAEYC has carefully monitored, assessed, and reported on the pandemic's impact on the ECE field. As part of this work, from April 9 to May 3, 2021, NAEYC conducted a follow-up survey asking ECE faculty and ECE higher education administrators about the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their institutions, their early childhood education programs, their students, and themselves. The findings from this survey, as reflected in the broader early childhood field, reveal significant devastation and challenges as well as silver linings and many positive lessons learned. This brief provides a snapshot of the ECE higher education landscape heading into a third academic year in which programs, faculty, and students will feel the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ <https://www.naeyc.org/pandemic-surveys>

Early childhood higher education programs remain the primary pipeline in preparing an effective ECE workforce, but many of them are vulnerable because of the long-standing challenge of preparing graduates for a low-wage, high-skill profession within a higher education system that is being held accountable to ensure that their graduates are able to make a living wage. Programs are also vulnerable because of the effects of the pandemic on the field; candidates have limited to no access to field sites. In addition, many who were already working in the field have and continue to experience pandemic-fueled employment, housing, food, and financial insecurities. As a result of these and other challenges, low enrollment in programs has been exacerbated.

Overview of Respondent Characteristics

The survey was sent to subscribers of NAEYC's monthly higher education newsletter (approximately 11,000 people); 646 faculty members from over 400 institutions responded from 49 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. At the time of the survey, approximately **50%** of respondents were full-time higher education faculty, while an additional **27%** were program chairs. Among those answering the survey:

- Nearly **50%** of respondents were from solely associate-degree granting institutions. The remainder represented faculty at baccalaureate- and graduate degree-granting institutions.
- Fewer than **3%** worked at online-only institutions.
- **64%** worked in public institutions.

Approximately **37%** of respondents indicated that they were in urban/suburban locations, **18%** were in rural locations, and **15%** were from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HIS), or Tribal Institutions.

A full description of survey respondents can be found in *Appendix A*.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Budget, Staffing, Enrollment and Graduation

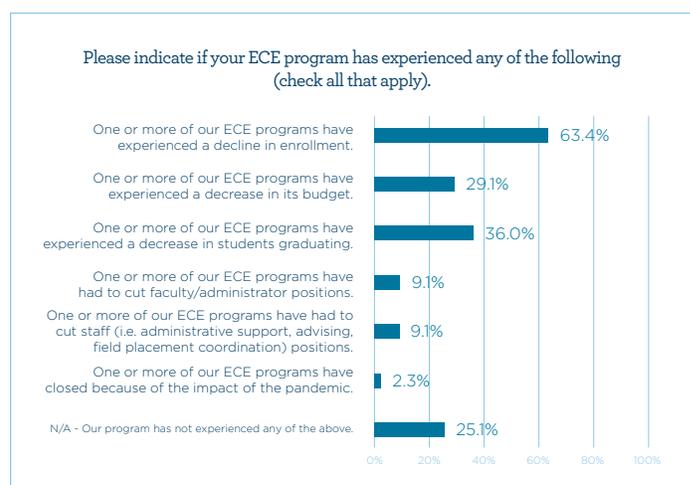
In the semester prior to the pandemic (Fall 2019), half of respondents indicated their ECE program's delivery modality was a mixture of in-person and online courses (**55%**), while **22%** had mostly in-person course offerings with some online. For the spring 2021 semester, **35%** of programs remained fully online, and an additional **31%** were primarily online with a few courses being offered on-campus.

Figure 1 shows how ECE programs' budgets, staffing, enrollments, and graduation rates have been impacted during the pandemic:

- **63%** have experienced a decline in enrollment in one or more of their ECE degree programs.
- **29%** have experienced a decrease in their budgets.
- **36%** have experienced a decrease in students graduating.
- **18%** have had to cut faculty, administrator, or staff positions.

25% have not experienced any of the above, and **2%** of ECE degree programs have had to close permanently because of the pandemic.

Figure 1



² Statistical significance tests were performed for 5-point Likert scale data comparing solely associate-degree granting institutions and those that offer baccalaureate and graduate degrees as well, with only significant results being reported. Missing responses have been excluded from all percentages.

Table 1 shows the estimated number of students enrolled in ECE programs as reported by program chairs/administrators, as well as further information about how the pandemic has impacted enrollment. At the time of the survey, approximately **57%** of programs had 100 or fewer students enrolled, while **43%** had more than 100. **Additionally, 59% of programs experienced a decrease in enrollment compared to fall 2019.** Among those that experienced a decline in enrollment, **73%** saw enrollment decline by **25%** or less, while **24%** saw declines of **26%** or more.

Table 1

Please estimate the total number of students currently enrolled in your ECE program(s).	N	%
Less than 10 students.	5	2.9%
Between 11-25 students.	22	12.6%
Between 26-50 students.	26	14.9%
Between 51-100 students.	46	26.3%
Between 101-200 students.	41	23.4%
Between 201-400 students.	23	13.1%
More than 400 students.	12	6.9%
TOTAL	175	100%
How has the pandemic impacted enrollment in your ECE program(s)?		
	N	%
Overall, enrollment is close to the same as it was at the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester (prior to the pandemic beginning in March 2020).	55	31.4%
Overall, enrollment has decreased since Fall 2019.	104	59.4%
Overall, enrollment has increased since Fall 2019.	16	9.1%
TOTAL	175	100%
If you indicated the enrollment in the ECE program(s) has declined, please estimate the level of decline. (Select N/A if enrollment has not declined.)		
	N	%
Enrollment has declined by 25% or less.	76	73.1%
Enrollment has declined between 26%-50%.	21	20.2%
Enrollment has declined by 51% or more.	4	3.8%
Unsure.	3	2.9%
TOTAL	104	100%

Approximately **42%** of respondents experienced a decrease in the number of students graduating from their ECE higher education programs during the pandemic, while nearly **40%** saw no changes in their graduation numbers.

ECE programs' budgets and staffing are intricately tied to enrollment. For **51%** of respondents, and with support from COVID relief funds, COVID-19 has essentially had no impact on their ECE program budgets. While **15%** are unsure, **33%** of respondents have seen their ECE programs' budgets decrease since the pandemic. Among those that experienced budget decreases

- **60%** had decreases of **20%** or less.
- **27%** had decreases of **21** to **40%**.
- **12%** had decreases of **41%** or more.

The majority of programs reported either no impact on staffing or experienced a staffing increase since the pandemic (**73%**). However, a small percentage of programs have seen increases in faculty or staff retirements as well as the elimination of faculty or staff positions.

Two percent of program administrators reported that their programs closed during the pandemic; their programs served approximately 114 to 234 students in total. When program chairs/administrators were asked if they were concerned that their programs may be in danger of closing in the next 12 to 18 months almost a quarter of respondents indicated "yes" (**13%**) or "unsure" (**9%**). This would represent a loss of another 2,329 to 4,253 students preparing to obtain or advance their postsecondary credentials as early childhood educators.

"Our enrollment college-wide has decreased by **23%**. Our college has been going through a process to determine which programs should be reduced or eliminated. While we made it past this first round, the process will continue again next year. With the low enrollment of the ECE program, we will likely be a program that is considered for elimination." – Faculty respondent

³ The survey asked programs to estimate their current enrollment numbers as of Spring 2021 in ranges (see Table 1), thus the 114-234 students and 2,329-4,253 students reported in this paragraph represent the lowest and highest possible number of students impacted by program closures or potential program closures. In addition, the Spring 2021 enrollment numbers reported for many programs already represented a decline in enrollment from Spring 2020.

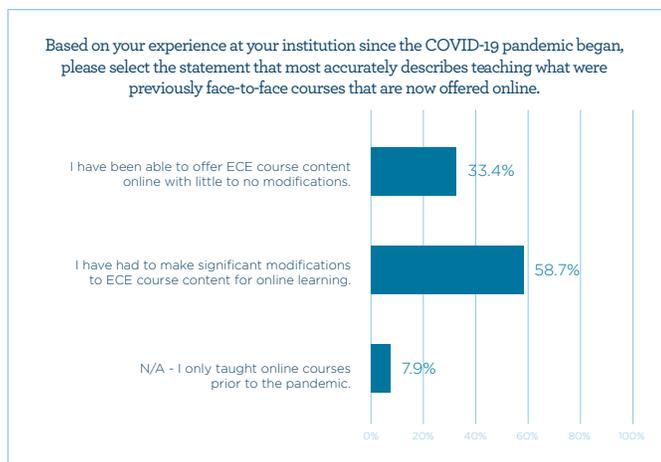
Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Faculty Well-Being in ECE Programs

While teaching during the pandemic has been challenging for faculty, they also report feeling supported during this trying year, particularly in regard to technology. When asked how well they think their institution supported them during the pandemic, at least **55%** of respondents pointed to strengths in communication. Their institutions, they said, clearly and consistently communicated expectations for teaching online as well as about the availability of resources. Additionally, nearly **54%** stated that their institutions already had technology and infrastructure in place to accommodate online learning for both faculty and students.

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, **78%** of respondents had taught at least one online class. Additionally

- **97%** of survey respondents said they have access to the hardware and software they need to teach classes online.
- **94%** have reliable access to the internet.
- **91%** have easy access to campus technology support to help with technological challenges associated with online teaching.
- However, as noted in *Figure 2*, nearly **59%** of respondents had to make significant modifications to ECE course content for online learning.

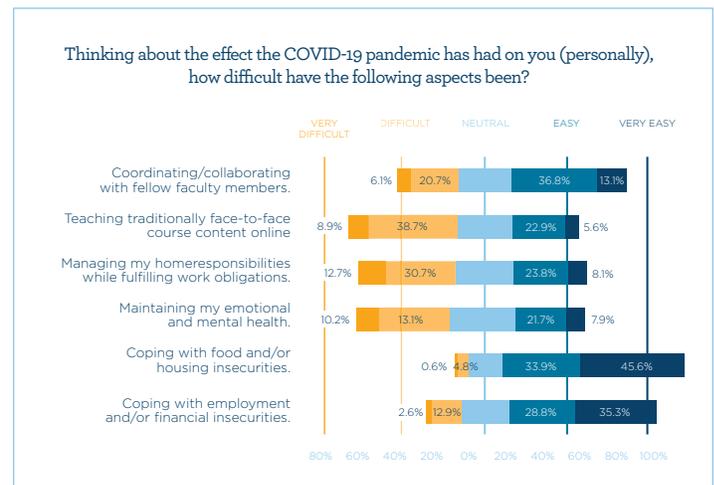
Figure 2: Teaching Previously Face-to-Face Courses that Are now Offered Online



In addition to asking about the ease of transitioning courses to an online format, the survey also asked respondents how difficult certain aspects of working in the field have become since the COVID-19 pandemic began (*Figure 3*). The most difficult aspects appear to be

- teaching traditionally face-to-face course content online (**47%** responded this was difficult or very difficult)
- managing their home/family responsibilities while fulfilling work obligations (**43%** of respondents found this to be difficult or very difficult)
- maintaining their emotional and mental health (**41%** indicated this was difficult or very difficult)
- Also, approximately **20%** of ECE faculty have experienced food, housing, employment, and/or financial insecurities during the pandemic.
- Unfortunately, the stressful aspects of teaching may result in faculty/staff attrition. When asked whether they had plans to retire or switch careers in the next three years, **one in every four** respondents said they did, while **11%** were unsure. However, **61%** indicated they had no plans to retire or switch careers.

Figure 3: The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Faculty



Juggling work and home responsibilities has been difficult for many workers in the US and around the world during the pandemic. However, it has been especially difficult in professions such as education, where educators are additionally concerned about the well-being and educational success of their students. This survey not only asked faculty about how difficult COVID-19 has been for them, it also asked how difficult it has been for them to support their students. ECE students are often older, working, and raising families. During the pandemic, supporting online learning needs was the least difficult aspect of assisting students: only **37%** of faculty said it was difficult or very difficult (*Figure 4*). However, supporting students' emotional and mental health or challenges related to food, housing, employment, child care, and financial insecurities was difficult or very difficult

for more than half of all respondents.

The distribution of responses differed significantly among solely associate degree-granting institutions and those that offer baccalaureate and graduate degrees. While the median value for both groups was 2.0 (difficult), more respondents from solely associate-degree granting institutions found supporting students' comprehensive needs to be easy or very easy. This finding suggests that more faculty at baccalaureate and graduate degree-granting institutions find it difficult to support their students with these resources as compared to solely associate-degree granting institutions. This may be partially due to larger program size and limited availability of wraparound supports for students at baccalaureate institutions, as compared to associate-degree granting institutions.

“Students are struggling financially because they have either lost their own jobs or have had to stay home due to schools still being closed, and they have no one to teach their children. I’ve had students struggling with depression due to the pandemic. They are overwhelmed wanting to care for their own child’s academic needs and still wanting to stay in college.” – ECE faculty member

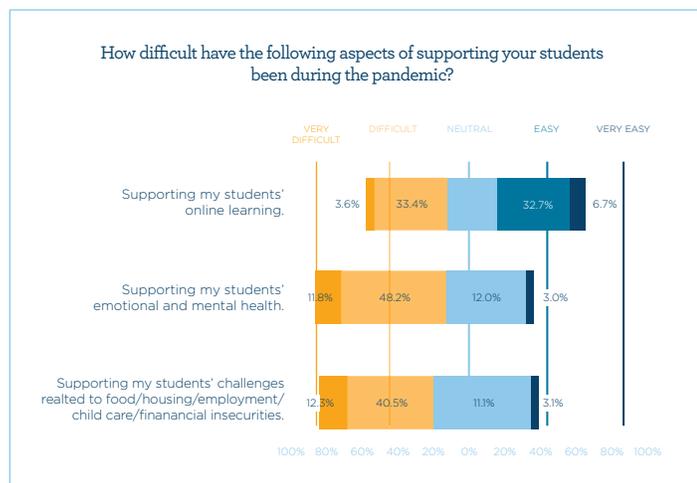
From the perspective of faculty, the shift to solely or primarily online learning has been challenging for students. Most notably, when asked how they would describe their students' ability to access the technology necessary for online instruction, **30%** of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their students had reliable

access to the internet (*Figure 5 on page 6*). This is especially an issue for ECE higher education programs in rural locations or those that have many students from low-income households.

The distribution of responses differed significantly among solely associate-degree granting institutions and those that offer baccalaureate and graduate degrees regarding student access to the following:

- access to hardware
- access to software
- easy access to campus tech support

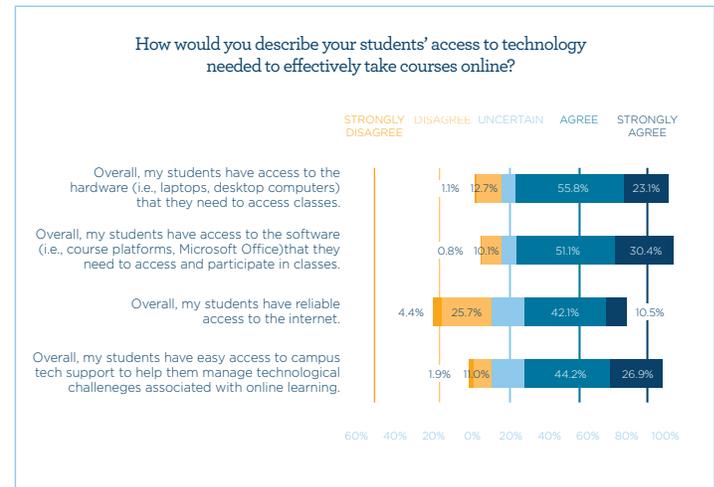
Figure 4: Difficulty Supporting Students During the Pandemic



While the median value for both groups was 4.0 (agree) for the above items, more respondents from solely associate degree-granting institutions either disagreed or strongly disagreed that students had easy access to hardware, software, and campus tech support. Additionally, the distribution also differed significantly for reliable access to the internet. Here, the median value among respondents from solely associate-degree granting institutions was 3.0 (uncertain), compared to a median value of 4.0 (agree) among those from baccalaureate- and graduate degree-granting institutions.

COVID-19 has severely impacted on-site field experiences, an integral aspect of ECE higher education programs. With many early learning programs closed or operating with restrictions in place, ECE faculty have had to be creative in finding ways to ensure that students have opportunities to observe and interact with young children. These include virtual options. Only **21%** of respondents indicated that most or all of their students were able to participate in on-site field experiences, and **17%** reported the same for virtual field experiences. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that at least some of their students were able to participate in on-site field experiences, while **21%** responded that none of their students was able to participate. With wide availability of COVID vaccines, and at the time they completed the survey in spring 2021, half of the survey respondents anticipated a significant increase in access to on-site field experience sites in fall 2021, though **35%** remained unsure. As the academic year begins, in the context of increased spread of the Delta variant, inaccessibility to vaccines for children under 12, and vaccine mandates in some institutions of higher education, it remains uncertain whether and to what extent access to on-site field experiences will increase.

Figure 5: Student Access to Technology



In Their Own Words: Challenges

When asked about the most challenging courses or topics to teach during the pandemic, an overwhelming majority of respondents identified courses on assessment and those that include field experiences such as classroom observations and practicums. Respondents said they are dismayed at the lack of placement options, dissatisfied with the virtual options regarding classroom observations, and concerned about not being able to interact face-to-face with their students. In their own words, they explained:

- “During fall 2020, it was very difficult to place students in field experiences. Quality video observation choices was extremely limited. We reached out to other institutions nationally as this was a concern for many institutions that require field experiences. The dilemma with the video options was mainly the length of the video choices. It was very difficult for participants/students to have to watch so many short--two- to three-minute--videos to reach the required number of observation hours. In our discussions with other two- and four-year institutions, we did lower the number of observation hours required.”
- “Convincing students to physically do anything [has been hard]. They were not willing to make any teaching materials like file folder games or puppets. Students had a hard time getting books or were unwilling to buy books or

materials like markers and crayons for experimentation. It was hard to convince students to watch videos [when they were experiencing] bad internet connections [at home].”

- “Most [students] are employed at an early childhood site, so they are allowed to use those hours to fulfill the required contact hours. However, the two observations done on each student while teaching their classes has had to change to Zoom observations. This is not ideal, and I feel there is a lot missed by only being able to view a small part of the classroom. Not to mention it can interrupt things when the teacher has to grab the device they are using to “take me along” when moving about the classroom.”
- “ECE practicum and methods courses have definitely been the most challenging to teach during the pandemic. We have found some great video resources that we’ve used in place of traditional practicum work, but videos can never replace the actual work of being in a classroom with young children.”
- “Activity-based courses such as creative arts, which naturally lends itself to hands-on art experiences, were very difficult [to teach]. Demonstrating on prerecorded video or in a virtual live meeting does not provide the same physical experience of the activities.”

Besides these challenges, some respondents have also found it difficult to adequately assist students with poor internet connections or to support students with families. Additionally, respondents have faced challenges in managing their own job and family responsibilities. Here are some of their comments:

- “Besides technology, internet, [and] mental health needs, I have found that students have needed more assistance with time management with the combination of virtual learning and in-person field experiences. Faculty who have not been teaching only online courses have had to spend more time learning and adapting their courses and office hours, meetings, etc. to be online. Spending many hours online, especially when working from home, has caused much longer work hours and more fatigue.”
- “Although we have been able to provide significant support to students through the CARES Act, some students continue to struggle with family, employment, and health issues as well as technology issues, such as unstable internet access. Adjunct and full-time faculty who were used to teaching face-to-face have adjusted well to Zoom classes although instructional methods have changed. Learning to use the technology effectively has been challenging for several instructors. Faculty did not receive cost-of-living increases this year due to uncertain budgets.”
- “Because of COVID, child care sites were not open for students for field experience. Some students experienced illness, hospitalization, or death of family members due to COVID. Some students who work in the field were laid off from their jobs or experienced intermittent work due to being exposed to COVID or waiting for test results, quarantining, or developing COVID themselves. Because of storms and flooding, some students experienced lack of electricity and internet services. Some students withdrew from classes due to an overload of stress due to responsibilities of educating their own children at home. Two out of seven adjunct faculty are not coming back in the fall due to the added stress, uncertainty, and responsibility of monitoring their own children’s learning from home.”
- “Faculty are experiencing burnout. Administrative responsibilities have increased without any support. With the return to normalcy, there has been no effort to acknowledge the daily pain of daily life.”

In Their Own Words: Maintaining Quality

As challenging as teaching much of the course content online has been, faculty have remained committed to maintaining quality in their programs and have found creative ways to mitigate the obstacles presented by the pandemic. Increased collaboration, constant communication, and creating virtual resources such as staff trainings have been integral aspects of maintaining program quality. Many respondents indicated they will continue these practices after the pandemic. When asked what steps their programs have taken to maintain quality during the pandemic, survey participants shared the following:

- “Each full-time faculty takes the lead for a few courses in researching and locating the best possible resources and best practices that each one then shares with all faculty involved in teaching the course. There are also numerous trainings

provided by the college to keep faculty abreast of best practices that focus on student success.”

- “Everyone has to help and support each other. Reaching out to adjunct faculty and making sure they get what they need is very important. Being a member of ACCESS has been extremely helpful because other ECE faculty members are willing to share their educational resources. I think staying closely connected to my administration, other ECE faculty, center directors/ECE programs, and staying in close communication with students has helped to maintain the quality of the program.”
- “Innovative, creative, and a variety of ideas, small and big, have been born out of the pandemic. We participate in a mental health small group to connect with others within our department. The college’s Child Development Center, a few community ECE programs, and

our department worked out a mentorship system to provide students not working in the field opportunity for virtual fieldwork with children. Our department, in collaboration with our dean, department chair, and practicum instructors, developed a formula to help our students complete their field work in such a way that quality would not be impacted, providing our students an array of options.”

- “Our program has purchased technology and application subscriptions to maintain a quality program. We have additional ATLAS subscriptions to ensure candidates can observe highly effective pedagogical practices in preschool and kindergarten. Our program utilized GoReact to observe candidates working within various virtual learning environments. We are preparing courses to ensure candidates have

access to Mursion.* The program will allow candidates to interact with avatars during simulated classroom experiences to increase practical classroom management skills.” This also allowed more students to observe at one time, not overcrowding our classroom with adults.”

- “We were able to open a live (passworded with waiting room) Zoom link into our [campus child care classroom] that allowed parents of those children in the classroom and vetted students with complete access to programming. Because of the feedback received from families (regarding their child’s independence at school and strategies they could replicate at home), we will continue this practice.

- “I often have many students who are unable to consistently make in-person classes due to their inconsistent work schedules--many work in industries such as food services, convenience stores, or retail. Having all of their classes offered online allowed them to do their class work at times that were more convenient for them. I was able to maintain my student roster with more students completing the course than in a typical semester due to having all of the courses available online.”

* Any mention of specific products does not constitute an endorsement from NAEYC

Conclusion

At the time the survey was completed, approximately **53%** of survey respondents indicated their institution had plans to resume normal operations in fall 2021, while **20%** will offer a hybrid model. All of these programs will do so armed with the knowledge gained over a year of program modifications and adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to the results gleaned from NAEYC’s from May 2020, programs still struggle with the following:

- finding field placement and classroom observations opportunities
- strengthening student and faculty facility with technology
- increasing student access to Wi-Fi
- addressing students’ financial and economic insecurities
- supporting faculty and student mental and emotional health

In addition, with **75%** of respondents’ ECE programs experiencing at least one of the following – declines in enrollment and graduation rates, budget cuts and faculty cuts – it is unknown whether

these declines are permanent or temporary. As the *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession* acknowledges, most ECE higher education programs do not have the status or resources they need, and the pandemic is exacerbating these realities. Thus, it is more critical than ever to make investments in the infrastructure of these programs to ensure the quality of the prospective and current ECE workforce.

While highlighting the challenges ECE higher education programs are currently facing, this report, though, also demonstrates the resilience, tenacity, and dedication of program faculty, staff, and students. Faculty have been relentless in finding ways to connect with and support students during the pandemic and to finding new ways of teaching and facilitating learning in a primarily virtual postsecondary environment. As an ally and leader in the field, NAEYC is committed to sharing practitioner experiences, best practices, and lessons learned to help facilitate quality educational outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Infrastructure Recommendations in the Unifying Framework

The [Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession](#) names core infrastructure investments that need to be made in ECE higher education programs in order for them to be able to effectively prepare current and prospective early childhood educators. These recommendations are organized around four areas: investments in faculty, investments in program design, investments in students, and investment from higher education leadership. See *pp. 26-29* of the *Unifying Framework for the full set of infrastructure recommendations.*

© NAEYC 2021. The primary staff author for this piece is Johnette Peyton. Additional NAEYC contributors and reviewers include Mary Harrill and Lauren Hogan. The following staff contributed to the editing and design of the report: Susan Donsky, Gillian Frank and Jennifer Heinser.

This brief is supported by a grant from the Heising-Simons Foundation. NAEYC thanks the foundation for its ongoing support of our efforts to advance the early childhood education field's knowledge about the quality of early learning programs and ECE higher education programs.

Appendix A: Survey Respondent Demographics

Which of these categories best describes your institution? (Select all that apply.)	N	%
Solely associate degree-granting institution	322	49.8%
Baccalaureate degree-granting institution	212	32.8%
Graduate degree-granting institution	186	28.8%
Online-only institution	16	2.5%
Public institution	416	64.4%
Private institution	80	12.4%
Rural institution	114	17.6%
Suburban institution	113	17.5%
Urban institution	123	19.0%
Historically Black Institution	16	2.5%
Hispanic-Serving Institution	80	12.4%
Tribal Institution	4	0.6%
Multi-campus Institution	230	35.6%
Please indicate the Early Childhood Education (ECE) certificates/degrees your institution offers. (Check all that apply.)		
	N	%
ECE certificate(s)	386	59.8%
ECE associate degree	420	65.0%
ECE baccalaureate degree leading to licensure	211	32.0%
ECE baccalaureate degree - nonlicensure	151	23.7%
ECE post-baccalaureate certificate	63	9.8%
ECE master's degree	160	24.8%
ECE doctoral degree	49	7.6%
Which of the following best describes your current role at your college/university?		
	N	%
Full-time Faculty	323	50.0%
Part-Time (Adjunct) Faculty	148	22.9%
Program Chair/Administrator (i.e. the individual who has responsibility for overseeing the ECE program)	175	27.1%
TOTAL	646	100%
Please indicate your race/ethnicity		
	N	%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	0.3%
Asian	21	0.3%
Black or African American	37	5.7%
Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin	30	4.6%
Middle Eastern or North African	2	0.3%
Multiethnic or Multiracial	23	3.6%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	0.2%
White	485	75.1%
I prefer not to answer this question	45	7.0%
TOTAL	646	100%