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Volume 16 Number 1

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ECRP Survey

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to the ECRP Editor.

Home | Journal Contents | Issue Contents

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Yes They Can: Supporting Bachelor Degree Attainment for Early Childhood Practitioners

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, the authors interviewed 73 nontraditional students regarding their perceptions of the challenges experienced and supports received as they returned to school to earn bachelor's degrees. All participants were working in the early care and education field. Interviewees perceived the cohort structure of their B.A. program as important to their academic success; this positive assessment increased over time and continued after graduation. A majority reported that program services such as financial assistance and the scheduling and location of classes were critically important throughout their participation in the degree programs. In contrast, academic and technological challenges reportedly decreased over time, and thus students' need for support such as tutoring, counseling services, and technology assistance decreased. Many students whose primary language was not English reported relying on English-language assistance throughout their school experience even when they perceived English academic work to be increasingly less challenging. These findings suggest that those who design and implement programs to assist degree attainment should invest in academic supports at the beginning of the program while other supports, including financial assistance, the schedule and location of classes, and the cohort itself, are critical throughout students' educational experience.

Introduction

Early care and education (ECE) teachers in the 21st century are charged with facilitating children's learning and readiness for kindergarten and preparing them to succeed in school and throughout their lives. They are expected to narrow the educational gap between predominately low-income children of color, many of whom are dual language learners, and their more economically advantaged, predominantly white English-speaking peers (Foundation for Child Development, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In addition to supporting young children's social and emotional development, teachers of preschoolers are now expected to provide them with instructional support in literacy, math, and science (Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Dickenson & Brady, 2005; Ginsburg et al., 2005; Shore, 2009). Such demands require considerable formal education and ongoing professional development to build the complex knowledge and skills considered necessary to promote positive child outcomes (Barnett, 2003; Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2005; Whitebook, 2003).

Indeed, in the United States the links between teacher preparation, high-quality ECE environments, and children's school readiness (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002) have led to requiring teachers in Head Start and most publicly funded PreK programs to hold bachelor's (B.A.) degrees and, in some cases, additional teacher certification. As of 2013, nationwide at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers and all Head Start education coordinators must hold a B.A. (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007). Similarly, 29 states now require bachelor degrees for public prekindergarten teachers (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). In addition, reform initiatives such as quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) for early care and education programs that operate in at least 26 states often provide scholarships and financial incentives for degree attainment (Schaack, Tarrant, Boller, & Tout, 2012).

Early Childhood Practitioners: Nontraditional Students

New teacher qualification policies at the state and federal levels, combined with benefits such as higher compensation and career advancement associated with college degree attainment, have prompted many ECE teachers to return to school. These teachers are representative of the increasingly nontraditional college and university student population (Brock, 2010) that is defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) as having at least *one* of the following characteristics: (1) delayed college entry after high school, (2) part-time college enrollment, (3) part- or full-time employment, (4) financial independence, (5) responsibility for dependents, (6) single parenthood, and/or (7) no high school diploma. The majority of college and university students studying early childhood work full time, typically in low-wage child care positions, and many juggle the demands of raising a family. Highly nontraditional adult students are at-risk for dropping out of school and not reaching their educational goals (Brock, 2010). In fact, approximately 50 percent of nontraditional students across disciplines drop out of school within three years and only 11 percent of highly nontraditional students graduate within five years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). In addition, many adults pursuing degrees in ECE are transfer students. A recent report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education found that only 12 percent of community college transfer students complete their four-year degrees (National Center for Public Policy and Education, 2011).

Combining school, work, and family responsibilities makes accessing and completing a degree very challenging as it limits the number and variety of classes that can be taken and the amount of time that can be devoted to schoolwork. In addition, many nontraditional students, including those working in early care and education, are underprepared academically for the demands of college coursework (Dukakis, Bellm, Seer, & Lee, 2007). A sizeable proportion speaks English as a second language and faces substantial challenges in pursuing college-level work in English. For these reasons, early care and education students, like all nontraditional students, are at greater risk of leaving school or failing to attain a degree (Brock, 2010; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2002).

Five categories of student support offered by institutions of higher education show particular promise in lowering attrition and increasing success among working adult students: (1) learning communities, such as cohort programs; (2) access-based support, such as classes or services at nontraditional hours or in more accessible locations; (3) financial support; (4) academic advising and counseling; and (5) skill-based support, such as tutoring or computer training (Dukakis et al., 2007).

Cohort Learning

Cohort programs in higher education are typically defined as a group of about 10–25 students who begin a program of study together and advance through coursework as a group. Cohort programs emerged in response to the frustrations that adult learners faced participating in courses with younger, inexperienced college students (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011).

By grouping adult learners together, cohorts can focus on content most relevant to practitioners and connected to their work in classrooms. Consequently, the adult learners' frustration regarding esoteric or disconnected course content and having to take courses with students who have never taught young children can be minimized (Lei et al., 2011).

A cohort can also create a sense of group membership and belonging (Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Kegan, 1994) that enable nontraditional students to feel safer taking risks, particularly if they feel threatened by academic environments. This feeling of belonging can assist in engaging nontraditional students in their classes and connecting them with classmates and instructors in the college community, an important factor in college success (Brock, 2010).

Evaluations of cohort learning programs for students outside of the early care and education field indicate that the collaborative nature of mutual learning and task completion contributes significantly to members' preparation for professional roles (Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2005). They also have been found to have a positive impact on academic achievement, persistence, and attitudes about coursework (Buch & Spaulding, 2008; Scrivener et al., 2008). Based on this evidence, a number of policy initiatives to support degree attainment for early care and education practitioners have been developed, and cohort programs have been piloted in a number of different colleges and universities (Dukakis et al., 2007). For example, Skagit Valley College in Washington established a cohort program specifically for teachers pursuing college coursework while working in early childhood programs run by the Washington State Migrant Council, Skagit-Islands Head Start, and the Samish Indian Nation (Chu, Martínez-Griego, & Cronin, 2010). In California, tobacco-tax money targeted for early childhood services has been used to support cohort programs for early childhood practitioners seeking four-year college degrees in numerous counties across the state.

Student Supports

A major challenge facing nontraditional students across higher education is finding financial support for tuition and other expenses. One study of nontraditional students found that approximately 75 percent of working adult

students were "very" or "extremely" concerned with earning enough money to support their family while in school (Choitz & Widom, 2003). Besides tuition and similar expenses, working adult students also have other expenses typically not incurred by traditional students, such as child care costs and income lost from taking time off work. As a result, financial assistance is among the factors most likely to decrease attrition among ECE and other nontraditional students (Dukakis et al., 2007) and increase their success in higher education (Benjamin & Carroll, 1997).

Higher education programs for working adults also must be accessible in terms of location and schedule, such as evening and weekend classes and neighborhood locations with convenient parking and proximity to public transportation (Chu et al., 2010; Dukakis et al., 2007). Early childhood cohort programs often hold classes in easily accessed off-campus locations in the evening or on weekends (Dukakis et al., 2007).

Advising is another set of student services often linked to nontraditional student success. Academic advising is intended to help familiarize students with a college's or university's structure and offerings, guide them through coursework and educational paths, and direct them toward appropriate supports to help them attain their educational goals. Career advising is intended to create a bridge between academic coursework, a student's professional aspirations, and the requirements of the field. Advising has been found to improve degree persistence, grades, time to complete degrees, and graduation rates (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2007; Moore & Shulock, 2007) among all students, with an even stronger positive impact for nontraditional and academically struggling students (Bahr, 2007). Indeed, academic advising may be especially critical for nontraditional ECE students because of the varying certification requirements across the complex landscape of ECE and because students often have already taken a patchwork of classes at other institutions and need substantive advising to avoid replicating coursework and delaying degree attainment (Dukakis et al., 2007).

Many nontraditional ECE students also enter college without the skills necessary to succeed because they have been out of school for many years and/or have received poor high school or initial college preparation. While under-preparation is frequently described in terms of poor academic skills, such as writing and math, it can also encompass poor study habits, note- and test-taking skills, time management, and inexperience in setting educational goals or using modern technology. Many educators contend that these skills are as important to college success as basic academic skills (Boylan, 2002). Access to student services such as tutoring, technology support, and study-skill classes have been found to bolster nontraditional student success (Dukakis et al., 2007; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007).

While developing program features and services that help students complete their degrees, faculty and administrators—along with funders and policy makers—are eager to control costs without compromising the programs' intent. Determining whether nontraditional students' need for certain program features or supports diminishes over time could lead to more cost-effective programs and policies that support degree attainment and academic success.

This study reports on perspectives of a culturally and linguistically diverse sample of older early childhood educators who successfully completed B.A. cohort programs at four-year colleges. It examines the students' perceptions over time regarding four areas of challenges and supports: (1) the learning environment and cohort experience; (2) access to education and nonacademic program supports (e.g., financial assistance, the schedule and location of classes); (3) academic challenges and targeted services that assist students in overcoming these challenges (e.g., tutoring, counseling); and (4) technological challenges and supports.

Method

This study reports on part of a five-year longitudinal study of six California B.A. cohort programs designed to help adults working in the early care and education field achieve a bachelor's degree in ECE.

Participating Programs

Students enrolled in B.A. cohort programs at six institutions of higher education in four California counties participated in this study. To be included in the study, the B.A. programs had to (1) offer a course of study related to early childhood education; (2) provide financial, academic, and technical supports, including flexible class schedules and convenient meeting locations, to accommodate students working in early childhood settings; and (3) establish a framework for participation that fostered a learning community.

The programs varied, however, with respect to major and academic department, program duration, scope of supports, and cohort design. For example, depending on the specific B.A. program, students might complete majors in child and adolescent development; liberal studies with a concentration in child, family, and society; child development; or human development with an early childhood emphasis and a teacher education minor. Such variation is typical of the range of early childhood–related degree options for students in the state (Whitebook, Austin, et al., 2012). Three of the B.A. programs focused on children from birth to adolescence, two on children from birth to age 8, and one on children from birth to age 5. Three of the programs were housed in public universities, one in a for-profit college, and the other two in private nonprofit colleges. All participants received financial support for tuition. The amount of support (e.g., partial or full scholarship) varied by institution.

In all six institutions, cohorts were designed for students to take all their classes together. However, the cohorts varied with regard to whether students took some classes with students who were not cohort participants. Cohorts also varied with respect to whether students participated in cohort meetings in addition to their classes.

Participating Students

At the start of the study, community-based agencies funding the six B.A. cohort programs provided contact, demographic, and workplace information for each of their participating students. The sample was drawn from 111 students eligible to participate at the beginning of the first year. Seventy-three students participated in all interviews. Thirty-eight of the students who were originally contacted declined study participation, dropped out of their cohort programs, or could not be reached for follow-up interviews. These 38 students did not differ from participants with respect to demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, race and ethnicity, home language, marital status, children in the home, household income) or workplace characteristics (i.e., place of employment, hourly wage, tenure at their workplace, job title).

Data Sources

Data for this report were collected from participants within the students' first year of starting the B.A. program (Time 1), during their second year in pursuit of the degree (Time 2), and after they attained the bachelor's degree (Time 3). One brief interview and one longer interview were conducted with each of the participants during each data collection year.

Short interviews. During the fall academic semester of each school year, a short interview using closed-ended questions was conducted with each student. At Time 1, the interview queried students about personal characteristics, including gender, age, languages spoken, marital status, and whether children lived in their household. Because all participating students were simultaneously employed in ECE settings, we also asked about workplace characteristics, including the type of ECE settings in which they worked, their job titles, and their tenure in the ECE field. Time 2 and 3 short interviews focused on changes in workplace and student status.

In-depth interviews. Each year, in-depth interviews averaging about 35 minutes long were conducted during the winter/spring semester. The interviews included closed- and open-ended questions developed by research team members with experience designing interview protocol and were based on the desire of funders and administrators to learn about the experiences of early childhood educators enrolled in programs designed to help them pursue formal education. Time 1 interviews included questions about students' educational experiences such as their experiences as members of a cohort; their current skills; services they received related to academics (e.g., tutoring, advising) and technology; and their opinions about the importance of financial aid. Time 2 interviews included questions about the challenges students experienced currently and when they started the cohort program and their need for various program features and services currently and when they started the program. Time 3 interviews again asked questions about students' experiences with their cohort. Students rated challenges on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not a challenge at all) to 5 (extremely challenging). They rated the importance of services on a Likert scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important). See Appendix for interview questions.

Procedures

Initially we collected student contact information from the agencies funding the cohort programs. We sent a letter to all eligible students describing the study and soliciting participation. We contacted each student who consented to participate by telephone to conduct the initial short interview. At the conclusion of the short interview, we asked students to schedule a time for a longer, in-depth telephone interview to be conducted approximately four months later.

The interviewers were research team members (including the first three authors of this manuscript) who received extensive training on student recruitment, protecting confidentiality, data storage, interviewing techniques, and using prompts with open-ended questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by Ubiqus, and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by research team members.

Data analysis

Data analysis was completed in several steps. First, all responses to open-ended questions were inductively coded to establish recurring themes that captured the meanings expressed by participants. Individual research team members each read 10 percent of the interviews, identified themes generated from responses to open-ended questions, and then met to compare themes and settle disagreements by consensus. The team then coded the remaining interviews. When all possible responses for each question became saturated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we finalized the coding scheme for each question.

Themes generated from responses to each question were given a numerical code that was entered into a spreadsheet. These codes were the basis for analyses of open-ended interview questions. Ten percent of all

interviews were coded by two research team members to check for accuracy in assigning themes/codes.

The second step involved analyses of all responses to open- and close-ended questions using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 18.0). All coded data were entered into a spreadsheet then imported into SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed to describe subject demographic characteristics and frequencies of responses to all closed- and open-ended questions. T-tests were used to examine mean differences between students' perceptions of challenges and cohort services provided over time, which were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. All significant results are reported at a *p* value of .05 or less.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Participating Nontraditional Students

The bachelor's degree cohort programs under study were designed specifically for early care and education professionals currently working in the ECE field, and the sample reflects the characteristics of nontraditional students (see Table 1). Students were primarily women (95.9 percent). All were transfer students from local community colleges. At the start of their cohort programs, 65.6 percent were 40 years or older; 14.1 percent were less than 30 years of age. Most students were people of color. Almost one-half (43.8 percent) identified as Latino or Hispanic, 27.4 percent Caucasian, 11 percent African American, 9.6 percent multiethnic, and 8.2 percent Asian or Pacific Islander. Although all students could speak English fluently, slightly more than one-third (34.2 percent) identified their primary language spoken at home as a non-English language. At the start of their cohort programs, 69.9 percent of the participants were married or living with a partner. One-half (56.2 percent) had at least one child under age 18 living with them. Nineteen percent had at least one child under age 5 living with them.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Students (*N* = 73)

Characteristic	Percent	n
Gender		
Female	95.9	70
Male	4.1	3
Age		
Less than 30 years	14.1	9
30 to 39 years	20.3	13
40 years or older	65.6	42
Race and ethnicity		
African American	11.0	8
Caucasian	27.4	20
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.2	6
Latino/Hispanic	43.8	32
Multiethnic	9.6	7
Primary language		
English	65.8	48
Non-English language	34.2	25
Marital status		
Single	15.1	11
Married or living with a partner	69.9	51
Divorced or separated	15.1	11
Children		
At least one child under age 18 living at home	56.2	41
At least one child under age 5 living at home	19.2	14

Employment and Professional Status of Nontraditional Students

All students in the sample worked in ECE; average tenure in the field was 15 years. Most (84.9 percent) worked in center-based programs, 9.6 percent were family child care providers, 2.7 percent worked in license-exempt school-age programs, and 2.7 percent worked in a related area such providing informal or respite care. Of those who worked in center-based settings, most (76.7 percent) worked in programs serving low-income subsidized children. Among students working in licensed child care centers, most were lead or master teachers (56.9 percent). Other positions held included administrative positions such as a site supervisor or director (15.5 percent), teacher director or assistant director (10.2 percent), or some other administrative capacity (10.3 percent). Only 6.9 percent were assistant teachers.

Perceptions of Their Cohort Programs

At Time 1, 20 percent of students in this study reported they had chosen their bachelor's degree program specifically because of the cohort structure. When asked whether activities involved in being in a cohort program (e.g., taking classes together, studying together, the support and encouragement received from being in the cohort, and friendships made with other cohort members) helped them be successful in their classes, 95.9 percent of participants reported that it did.

At Time 2, we asked students to rate how important completing a B.A. with a group of students (the cohort) was when they started the program and again approximately one year into their program. Perceptions of the importance of the cohort increased over time. Initial mean rating for the importance of the cohort was 4.05 (SE = .16) when they started compared with 4.44 (SE = .11) one year into the program (t (71) = -2.95, p < .01). Seventy-three percent of participants viewed the cohort as very or extremely important when they started the program, and 86.1 percent of participants felt the same way one year into the program. One-fifth of students (20.6 percent) initially felt the cohort was not very important or not important at all, while 4.2 percent felt that way a year later.

Reflecting upon their cohort experience after completing their degrees, students continued to identify its importance to their educational success. At Time 3, we asked participants, now graduates, to rate the importance of the cohort experience to their success in attaining a B.A. degree. Eighty-five percent reported that the cohort experience was extremely important to their success in the B.A. program. Only 2.8 percent felt the cohort was not very important.

Challenges and Supports for Nontraditional Students

The students in this study confirmed that nontraditional students experience particular challenges (such as those identified by Dukakis et al., 2007) and provided additional information on changes over time in their need for support to overcome these challenges. Challenges and supports focused on three areas: nonacademic program supports, academic assistance, and computers and related technology.

Nonacademic program supports

Financial assistance. To explore how participants coped with the financial aspect of their education during their first year in the program, we asked "Is the financial assistance you are currently receiving sufficient for you to complete the program or is there additional assistance that you will need?" Students' views on the adequacy of financial help involved two related issues: the level of support they received from the institutions of higher education for tuition, books, and other fees, and the level of support they received from their employers such as time off with or without pay to pursue coursework or field placements. Although across the cohorts they received varying levels of support from their institutions and workplaces (see Table 2), most students (66.7 percent) responded that they were receiving enough financial aid to complete their B.A. programs.

Table 2
Student Financial Assistance in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs
at Public or Private Colleges or Universities

Institution of Higher Education	Costs to Students
Cohort 1 Public	Tuition is covered by local public early child care commission. Students must apply for any other financial assistance for which they are eligible. Students pay for books and parking.
Cohort 2 Private	Students pay 38 percent of tuition. Local public early child care commission supported the tuition reduction. All students must apply for any other financial assistance for which they are eligible.
Cohort 3 Public	No costs to students. All costs paid by local public early childhood commission. Those working in Head Start are paid by their employers when taking daytime classes.
Cohort 4 Private	Students pay 23 percent of tuition. Financial assistance is provided by scholarships, which are matched by the university. In addition, students receive stipends from local public dollars, which are also matched by the university.
Cohort 5 Private	Students pay 30 percent of tuition. Financial assistance is provided by scholarships and stipends provided by the local public early childhood commission.
Cohort 6 Public	No costs to students. All costs paid by local public early childhood commission.

Almost all participants rated the financial assistance provided by their program as very or extremely important both at the beginning (95.8 percent) and one year into their program (93 percent). Mean ratings for the importance of financial assistance did not significantly differ at the two points in time (see Table 3), indicating that students' view of the importance of financial assistance did not change with experience in their degree programs.

Table 3
Changes in Perceptions of the Importance of Nonacademic Program Services
by Nontraditional Students Over Time (Reported at Time 2)

	At the start of their B.A.	One year into their B.A.		

	program Mean (SE)	program Mean (SE)	*t*	*n*
Financial assistance	4.78 (.08)	4.10 (.09)	.90	71
Flexible schedule	4.78 (.06)	4.68 (.09)	1.47	72
Convenient location of classes	4.47 (.12)	4.51 (.11)	-.65	73

Flexible class schedules and convenient location. At the beginning of their cohort program, 97.2 percent of participants rated flexible class schedules and 86.3 percent rated convenient class locations as very or extremely important. These services remained important by the vast majority of students as they continued their education. At Time 2, 91.7 percent rated flexible class schedules as very or extremely important and 89.1 percent rated convenient class locations as very or extremely important. As with financial assistance, mean ratings on the importance of a flexible class schedules and convenient class locations did not significantly change over time (see Table 3).

Academic challenges and supports

Reading, writing, and math. At Time 1, participants identified academic writing, academic reading, and courses that require math, such as statistics, as particularly challenging as they returned to school. However these reported difficulties diminished significantly after the first year. Whereas 52 percent reported academic writing as very or extremely challenging when they started taking classes, only 11 percent did so one year into their program. Students also reported increasing confidence in academic reading and math. More than four times as many students (41.1 percent) felt academic reading was very or extremely challenging at the beginning of their cohort program than did so one year into the program (9.5 percent). Nearly twice as many students (54.2 percent) felt that courses requiring math were very or extremely challenging at the beginning of their cohort program compared with one year into their program (24.1 percent). Mean ratings of students' perceptions of how challenging academic writing, reading, and math were at the beginning of their program and one year into their program declined significantly (see Table 4).

Table 4
Changes in Perceptions of Academic Challenges of Nontraditional Students Over Time
(Reported at Time 2)

	At the start of their B.A. program Mean (SE)	One year into their B.A. program Mean (SE)	*t*
Academic writing	3.40 (.15)	2.40 (.12)	7.18**
Academic reading	3.16 (.14)	2.16 (.12)	7.91**
Math	3.32 (.19)	2.45 (.18)	5.98**
Implementing good study skills	3.01(.15)	2.08 (.13)	6.67**
Oral presentations	3.57 (.17)	2.21 (.15)	9.43**
English language skills*	3.21 (.26)	2.29 (.22)	4.26**
Computers and software	2.75 (.16)	1.72 (.10)	8.78**

n = 73; * *n* = 28; ** p < .01.

Many of the cohort students had not attended school for years. They found it necessary to revisit good study skills such as taking notes in class and organizing and prioritizing homework assignments; they also were not accustomed to such tasks as making oral presentations. However, these perceived challenges diminished over time (see Table 4). Thirty-eight percent of participants reported that implementing good study skills was very or extremely challenging at the beginning of the cohort program compared with only 16.4 percent one-year into the program. Similarly, 58.9 percent of students reported that making oral presentations was very or extremely challenging at the beginning of their program, compared with 16.4 percent after one year. Mean ratings for the challenges of implementing good study skills and making oral presentations significantly declined over time (see Table 4).

To get the students' perspective on supports and services geared toward easing challenges related to academics, we asked them to rate the importance of various program features when they began their cohort programs and approximately one year into their programs. There was a significant shift in their perceptions; mean ratings for academic tutoring and academic counseling significantly declined over time (see Table 5). Slightly more than one-half (53.4 percent) said they had considered academic tutoring to be very or extremely important when they started taking classes, compared with 38.6 percent one year into their programs. Initially, 72.2 percent of participants rated academic counseling as very or extremely important. This number declined to 59.7 percent one year into their program.

Table 5
Changes in Perceptions of the Importance of Academic Support Services
by Nontraditional Students Over Time (Reported at Time 2)

	At the start of their B.A. program	One year into their B.A. program		

	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)	*t*	*n*
Academic tutoring	3.41 (.18)	2.99 (.18)	3.69*	70
Academic counseling	4.07 (.13)	3.60 (.16)	3.28*	72
English language assistance	2.82 (.37)	2.77 (.37)	.29	22
Technology assistance	2.97 (.19)	2.48 (.17)	3.14*	67

* *p* < .05

English language assistance. One-third (35.6 percent) of students reported that they spoke a primary language other than English in their homes. We asked these students to assess how challenging it was to complete their classes successfully in English. There was a significant shift in mean ratings of students' perceptions (see Table 4). At the beginning of their cohort programs, 46.2 percent of these students said they considered taking classes in English to be very or extremely challenging, but only 11.5 percent did so one year later. We also asked these students to rate the services provided to assist them with completing their classes in English (see Table 5). Forty-three percent said that language assistance was very or extremely important at the beginning of the program, and 37.1 percent continued to feel this way one year into their programs. Mean rating of students' perceptions on the importance of this service did not change significantly over time.

Technological challenges and supports. At the beginning of their cohort programs, one-third (31.5 percent) of students rated using computers and software applications as very or extremely challenging. Mean ratings declined significantly over time (see Table 4), and only 2.8 percent of students rated it as very or extremely challenging after one year. There was also a significant shift in students' mean rating of the importance of technology assistance (see Table 5). Initially, computer and technology support was rated as very or extremely important by 46.3 percent of students. One year later, only 28.3 percent of students rating technology assistance as very or extremely important.

Discussion

This study explores the needs of and the challenges faced by nontraditional students participating in bachelor's degree cohort programs designed to support early childhood practitioners working in the ECE field. Financial aid, convenient class times and locations, and other supports to assist working students were purposefully built into the programs' infrastructure. Indeed, the programs in this study were highly successful in helping students attain bachelor's degrees. The overall rate of student graduation across all six cohorts was 81 percent, a rate more than double that of the typical transfer student from a two-year to four-year institution (Lederman, 2010). All 73 students participating in this study earned their bachelor's degrees. Thus their experiences of returning to school in addition to working and caring for their families are invaluable for helping administrators and other decision-makers recognize supports that enable adult learners working in ECE to attain degrees and how their need for supports change over time.

The participants in this study faced struggles and challenges similar to those encountered by nontraditional students outside of the early care and education field (see Brock, 2010; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2002; Dukakis et al., 2007). With experience in their programs, however, their perceptions of math and writing as challenges decreased, as did their reliance on academic supports such as tutoring and counseling. In contrast, over time students continued to rate financial assistance, flexible class schedules, and convenient class locations as critical to their academic success.

This study extends our understanding of the supports that are essential during different phases of students' academic pursuit and has important implications for higher education institutions and policy makers who are responsible for designing and implementing cohort programs and who want to control costs without compromising the programs' intent. Our findings suggest that dedicating resources to supports such as tutoring and academic counseling at the start of a program can generate a significant return on investment. The one exception is English language support, which a sizeable number of students reported relying on throughout their school experience, even when they perceived English academic work to be increasingly less challenging.

This study also contributes to growing evidence on the potential of cohort programs for early childhood practitioners who are working and going to school (Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Lei et al., 2011). Although most students joined their programs for reasons other than the cohort structure, they recognized the value of the cohort, and their perception of its importance increased over time and continued after graduation. These programs were designed to build a "learning community" for students, offering personal support and opportunities to deepen their understanding of the school experience. It is not surprising that participants reported forming ongoing friendships and close bonds that were a source of support both at school and in their professional lives.

One of the major challenges for students in college- and university-based ECE teacher preparation programs is the insufficiency of funds to support tuition costs and other expenses (Whitebook, Bellm, Lee, & Sakai, 2005). Financial assistance is one of five categories of student support that have been shown to decrease attrition and increase success among working adult students in higher education, such as those participating in this study (Dukakis et al., 2007). That students rated financial assistance as essential for their success throughout their time in college is not surprising; as students working in a generally very low-paying occupation, their

participation depended on these supports.

This study also provides evidence of the type of supports students need over time from the perspective of students who successfully attained their bachelor's degree. However not all students who attempt to achieve a degree do so. It was not possible to interview students who dropped out of school, but future studies should seek their views on why they left and what would have helped them stay in school. This information would further assist efforts by colleges and universities, program organizers, and policy makers to help students at risk for failing to attain a degree.

This study is also limited because it does not address the career trajectory of students, whether students are more likely to stay in the field after attaining their bachelor's degree or whether other opportunities in higher paying jobs lure them away from careers in early care and education. These are key questions facing the field and can only be answered if students are followed longitudinally.

It is also unclear whether the institution of higher educations that housed the cohort programs provided students with the skills they need to be better teachers. Higher education programs for early childhood educators vary widely. The degree programs participating in this study reflected the variations (as reported by Whitebook et al., 2012) regarding age range addressed (5 years and younger versus a broader range), content emphasized (child development versus pedagogy and teaching skills), and the objectives, structure, and intensity of clinical experiences. Future research should investigate the quality and content of courses and degree programs and their relationship to effective teaching, but this was beyond the scope of this project.

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence about services and supports that help ECE practitioners attain bachelor's degrees and whether their need for supports shifts over time. It also has implications for ways to assist nontraditional students in other fields to further their education and/or attain a college degree. Success in degree attainment is only one aspect of responding to the demand for more educated teachers. Finally, we know little about the work environments of those participating in this study. Financial assistance and academic tutoring notwithstanding, for early childhood educators to be successful not only at degree attainment but also in their workplace, they need workplace policies that support their return to school and opportunities to apply what they learn there to their work with children in their classrooms (Whitebook, Austin, et al., 2012; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011).

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

- Why did you decide to complete your B.A. degree in this program at this point in your career? (Time 1)

- We would like to know about the types of activities you do with the students in your cohort. Have these activities with your cohort helped you be successful in your classes? (Time 1)

- Looking back at the B.A. program as a graduate, could you tell me how important going through school with the same group of students, the cohort itself, was to success in the B.A. program? Overall, would you say the cohort was extremely important to your success, somewhat important, not very important or not important at all? (Time 3)

- Is the financial assistance you are currently receiving sufficient for you to complete the program or is there additional assistance that you will need? (Time 1)

- Last year, many of the students we spoke to talked about the challenges they were facing in the B.A. program. We would like to know what challenges you faced when you started the program and what challenges you are facing now. First think back several years ago when you first started taking classes at <college>. On a scale of one to five, how big a challenge was < >? One means not a challenge at all, 2 means not much of a challenge, 3 means fairly challenging, 4 means very challenging, and 5 means extremely challenging. What about now? (Time 2)

    - Academic writing

    - Academic reading

    - Courses requiring math, such as statistics

    - Implementing good study skills such as taking notes in class, organizing and prioritizing homework assignments

    - Making oral presentations

    - Using computer software applications

- We would like to ask you about some of the services provided by the B.A. cohort program. We would like to

know which services were most important to you when you began the program and which are the most important to you now. First, let's go back in time to when you began taking classes in the program. On a scale of one to five, how important was < >? One means not important at all, 2 means not very important, 3 means fairly important, 4 means very important and 5 means extremely important. What about now? (Time 2)

- Academic tutoring
- Help with computers/technology
- Academic counseling
- Financial assistance
- Completing a B.A. with a group of students—the cohort
- Flexible class schedules
- Convenient location for your classes

- Thinking back to when you first started your program, on a scale of 1–5, how big a challenge was it to successfully complete your classes because English was not your primary language? One means not important at all, 2 means not very important, 3 means fairly important, 4 means very important and 5 means extremely important. What about now?

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