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Learning Together:

A Study of Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs in Early Care and Education

Year 2 Report

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Executive Summary: Year 2 Report

Interest in expanding access to higher education has been driven by concerns about ethnic and linguistic stratification within the early childhood workforce, and building a pipeline for diversifying the early care and education (ECE) field's leadership. "Cohort" B.A. completion programs, which target small groups of adults working in ECE to pursue a course of study together and receive a variety of support services including classes scheduled at convenient times and locations, have emerged across California in recent years. This study focuses on six programs in Alameda, San Francisco, Santa Barbara and Santa Clara Counties operating at Antioch University, California State University-East Bay, Mills College, San Francisco State University, San Jose State University, and the University of La Verne.

To demonstrate the outcomes of these efforts, and to inform further policy and program development, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) is conducting a five-year study of all six student cohorts, as well as periodic examinations of institutional change at selected colleges and universities.

The Year 1 study found that cohort students participating in the study demonstrated a strong commitment to the early care and education field. Most were women and among the first generation in their families to attend college. Most were also Latino or other people of color. Nearly one-half identified their primary language spoken at home as being other than English—most often Spanish. During Year 1 of the study, students identified areas of challenge encompassing: academic skills including reading, writing, math and communicating in English; school success skills such as oral presentations, study skills and use of a computer; and balancing school, work and family responsibilities. These challenges were reiterated by the faculty members and other institutional representatives interviewed for the study.

In Year 2, from both students and faculty, the study team heard a resoundingly positive message about the success of these programs. There was also a striking congruence between the students and institutional perspectives on aspects of these programs that were working well and on the adjustments or improvements that were still needed. The Year 2 study revealed progress being made on a number of fronts:

- During Year 1 of the study, almost all of students mentioned that balancing the demands of school, work, and family life was a challenging aspect of their cohort program experience. Over time, students across all cohorts reported that balancing work and school had become less challenging as the program progressed,
- Because many of the cohort program students had not attended school for years, many found it necessary to brush up on their study skills and to improve their computer literacy. In addition, as working adults, often with families, many felt a need to become better organized in order to manage multiple demands on their time. Over time, many students reported a significant decrease in such challenges,
- In Year 2 interviews, students resoundingly saw the cohort model as having enabled them to access a B.A. level education, and to succeed in it, in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. Indeed, their sense of the importance of the cohort structure had increased over time,

- Students overwhelmingly viewed the structural features of their programs as very or extremely important. As working students in a generally very low-paying occupation, they relied on financial assistance, flexible class schedules, and convenient locations as essential to their participation, and their rating of the importance of these features barely shifted over time,
- Students and faculty members identified a number of academic concerns in Year 1. Academic writing, in particular, was seen as a challenge. Over time, however, students perceived that their academic writing challenges had diminished significantly and students reported increasing confidence in the areas of academic reading and math. While the overall demand for academic tutoring declined by the time time of the Year 2 interviews, a subset of students continued to rely on its availability, suggesting that the demand for this support may well continue throughout the duration of a cohort program,
- Among students who reported they spoke a primary language other than English in their homes, many considered completing their classes successfully in English to be very or extremely challenging when they began the cohort program. Over time, however, students reported that their challenges completing courses in English had diminished considerably. Nonetheless, fifty percent of these students said that language assistance was very or extremely important at thebeginning of the program and almost all of these students continued to feel this way in Year 2. This suggests that, depending on the population of students and their language skills, demand for this support may well continue throughout the duration of a cohort program,
- Overwhelmingly, students found their courses to be very or extremely helpful with respect to creating classroom environments and interacting positively with children. A majority of students reported that their coursework had contributed to their ability to teach children skills related to language and literacy, and social interactions. Although somewhat fewer students reported that their classes had helped them teach math and science skills, the majority found their classes to be very or extremely helpful in this regard, and
- The ability of teachers to apply the knowledge and skills they have gained in a higher education program depends largely on whether or not they have opportunities and support for ongoing learning and growth in their workplace. Certain features of the work environment can either support or hinder them: support from a supervisor; time for preparation and reflection; financial assistance for ongoing professional development; flexible work schedules; and paid time off for school-related needs. The Year 2 interviews revealed differences in students' reports of the learning environment of their workplaces.

In addition to confirming previous research findings about higher education cohort programs for "non-traditional" students, this study is also identifying important issues to consider in future planning of such programs in the ECE field, and in further investigations of this particular student population. For example, students reported that support and encouragement from family members were critical to their ability to juggle the demands of family, work and school—an important advising and counseling issue for institutions to consider when assessing students' readiness to succeed in B.A. completion programs. We also learned that students need substantial support, flexibility, and buy-in from their ECE employers.

The first two phases of this multi-year investigation of B.A. completion cohort programs have indicated the significant potential of such programs to contribute well-trained teachers and leaders to the early care and education profession. The six programs under study could well become models not only for the ECE field in California and other states, but also for other fields, helping diverse groups of working adults to gain access to and succeed in higher education.

As the study team continues to investigate the experience of beginning, mid-range, and graduating cohort students in a variety of programs; to observe cohort students' ECE classroom practice; and to chart institutional experience and change at these colleges and universities, we hope to offer a continually deeper and more nuanced understanding of the contribution of the B.A. cohort model to the entire early care and education field.

Introduction

The *Learning Together* longitudinal study focuses on four counties' efforts—with county, First 5,[1] and private foundation support—to expand bachelor's degree opportunities in early care and education (ECE) for adults currently working in the field. The student cohort model—in which small groups of ECE students with similar interests and characteristics pursue a bachelor's degree together, and receive targeted support services—has emerged in Alameda, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, and San Francisco Counties, with programs at Antioch University, California State University-East Bay (CSU-EB), Mills College, San Francisco State University (SFSU), San Jose State University (SJSU), and the University of La Verne (ULV).

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment is implementing a five-year longitudinal study of each student cohort, as well as periodic examinations of institutional change at selected colleges and universities. In Year 2 of the study, which concluded at the end of June 2009, we collected an updated list of students enrolled in each program; conducted brief in-person and telephone interviews with the students in October and November 2008; conducted longer telephone interviews with students from January to March 2009; and interviewed key stakeholders from two institutions of higher education in March 2009. The following report is a review of the Year 2 study findings from the student interviews. (Findings from the institutional interviews will appear in an upcoming policy brief available in January, 2010).

In the second year of the student portion of the study, we sought to understand the students' perspective on how the key program features and services identified as critical to their success during their first year interview contributed to their success in accessing and succeeding at the B.A. degree program. We also asked students to assess their changing skills and knowledge stemming from participation in the program and the extent to which their workplaces support their ongoing learning. Students who had completed their practicum experience were asked about its content and structure, and those who graduated were asked about changes in employment, relationships with cohort members and ongoing professional activities since graduation. Findings about these topics will appear in the Year 3 report, once all students have completed their practicum experience and graduated.

Students in the Sample

The students participating in the six cohort programs represented several populations of interest to policymakers and others who are concerned with supporting the current ECE workforce in meeting higher qualifications, while simultaneously maintaining workforce diversity, reducing ethnic and linguistic stratification by job title and education, and building a pipeline to prepare new leaders who more closely reflect the diversity of children and families in their communities.

We collected data on the students in each of the six cohorts regarding age, gender, race/ethnicity, and linguistic ability, country of origin, and family and household status. In the following tables we describe the characteristics of the students participating in the study in Winter, 2009. As shown in Table 1, 96 percent of the students were women and about three-fourths of the students were people of color, with Latinas comprising the majority of students. Most were in their thirties or forties, reflecting California's overall ECE workforce, in which 52 percent of center-based teachers are 30 to 49 years old (Whitebook et al., 2008). As shown in Table 2, the students were linguistically diverse. Approximately one-half of all interviewed students (53 percent) identified English as their only language spoken at home. Nearly one quarter of study

[1]In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 10, adding a 50-cent-per-pack cigarette tax to create First 5 California (also know as the California Children and Families Commission), which funds education, health care, child care, and other programs related to children from birth through age five. First 5 California distributes 80 percent of these funds to the state's 58 counties, all of which have created local First 5 Commissions to address local needs. The amount of funding provided to each county First 5 Commission is based upon the area's birth rate.

participants (22 percent) reported speaking both English and Spanish in their homes. More than one-third of all students (38 percent), and the majority of those attending the cohorts at two institutions reported having been born outside of the United States.

Nearly three-quarters of the students in our sample reported living with a spouse or partner. More than one-half (57 percent) reported living with at least one child under 18 years of age for 50 percent of the time or more, and 19 percent reported living with at least one child under age five. While most students' parents had not earned college degrees, a number of students with at least one sibling (96 percent of the sample) reported that one or more siblings had completed some college education, or earned an A.A. or higher degree.

The students in these cohort programs had demonstrated a commitment to the early care and education field, having worked continuously in center- or home-based settings for an average of 16 years. The majority of students in all six cohorts worked in child care centers as shown in Table 3. Among students working in licensed child care centers, the most common role was lead/master teacher, followed by an administrative position such as site supervisor, program director, or executive director. Less than 10 percent of students in each cohort were assistant teachers. While a higher percentage of students worked with preschoolers than with infants, toddlers, or school-age children, the cohorts included members with experience with children from birth through school age.

Table 1: Ethnicity, Gender and Age of Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

	Winter 2009: All Cohorts
Ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic	25%
Latino/Hispanic	53%
African American	5%
Asian American	8%
Multiethnic	9%
TOTAL	100%
N	92
Gender	
Female	96%
Male	4%
TOTAL	100%
N	101
Age (Years)	
Youngest	18
Oldest	61
Mean	43
N	96

Table 2: Country of Origin and Primary Language(s) Spoken at Home of Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

	Winter 2009: All Cohorts
Country of Origin	
USA	63%
Outside USA	37%
TOTAL	100%
N	97
Primary Language(s) Spoken at Home	
English only	53%
English & Spanish	22%
Spanish only, or Spanish & a language other than English	17%
English & a language other than Spanish	4%
Other	4%
TOTAL	100%
N	97

Table 3. Places of Employment and Job Responsibilities of Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

	Winter 2009: All Cohorts
Place of employment	
Licensed child care center	85%
Licensed family child care home	8%
License-exempt school-age care	3%
Other (informal; respite care, not working)	4%
TOTAL	100%
N	102
Job titles for center staff	
Assistant teacher	8%
Lead/master teacher	56%
Teacher/site supervisor/director	18%
Assistant director	4%
Site supervisor/program director/executive director	12%
Other	2%
TOTAL	100%
N	91

Study Design

Year 2 Survey Universe and Survey Sample

In October and November 2008, the study team collected an updated list of students enrolled in each of the six B.A. completion cohort programs, and conducted brief in-person and telephone interviews with the students. We attempted interviews with all eligible students, defined as those who were currently enrolled in one of the cohort programs, were on non-medical leave but still enrolled, or had graduated in 2008. We did not attempt interviews with any students who had left their cohort program before graduating or who were on medical leave. At the end of these Fall 2008 interviews, we scheduled appointments with each student for an in-depth interview to be completed between January and March 2009. Since Fall 2007, when the student interviews began, 12 students have left their cohort programs without graduating. (See Table 4.)

Year 2 Data Collection

The Fall 2008 interviews averaged seven minutes in length. Approximately 95 percent of the eligible students from the six programs participated, with individual program completion rates ranging from 88 to 100 percent. (See Table 5.) Of the 110 students we interviewed, five had graduated from the University of La Verne cohort, one was on non-medical leave from Mills College, one had graduated from Mills, and the rest were currently enrolled and attending their cohort classes.

During January, February, and March 2009, we conducted interviews with 102 of the 110 students we had interviewed in the fall. (See Table 6). These interviews ranged from 10 to 60 minutes, at an average of 25 minutes.

Year 2 Survey Completion and Response Rates

We compared the students responding to the Fall 2008 interview with those we had interviewed at length during the first phase of the study (Winter 2008) to assess any differences between the two samples. There were no significant demographic differences in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, country of origin, or primary languages spoken at home among students participating in the two interviews. In addition, there were no significant differences in terms of student job responsi-

Table 4. Student Retention and Attrition in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

	Students on original cohort list, Fall 2007	Students added to cohort list in Fall 2008*	Original number of students in cohort	Students who left cohort before graduation, as of March 2009	Students who had graduated as of March 2009	Students in cohort as of March 2009
California State University-East Bay	14	1	15	3	0	12
Mills College	6	0	6	0	1	5
San Francisco State University	33	1	34	1	13	20
San Jose State University	35	0	35	6	0	29
Antioch University	24	0	24	2	1	21
University of La Verne	12	0	12	0	5	7
TOTAL	124	2	126	12	20	94

*These students were part of the cohort in Fall 2007, but their names were not given to CSCCE until Fall 2008.

Table 5. Fall 2008 Survey Response Rate

	Universe for Fall 2008 interviews	Eligible for Fall 2008 interviews	Fall 2008 completed interviews	Fall 2008 response rate
California State University-East Bay	13	13	12	92%
Mills College	6	6	6	100%
San Francisco State University	33	33	29	88%
San Jose State University	30	30	30	100%
Antioch University	23	22	22	100%
University of La Verne	12	12	11	92%
TOTAL	117	116	110	95%

Table 6. Winter 2009 Survey Response Rate

	Universe for Winter 2009 interviews	Eligible for Winter 2009 interviews	Winter 2009 completed interviews	Winter 2009 response rate
California State University-East Bay	12	11	11	100%
Mills College	6	6	5	83%
San Francisco State University	29	29	25	86%
San Jose State University	30	28	28	100%
Antioch University	22	22	22	100%
University of La Verne	11	11	11	100%
TOTAL	110	107	102	95%

bilities or subsidy status of their places of employment. Finally, we also compared the small sample of students (N=8) who had left their cohorts between Fall 2008 and the Winter 2009 interviews, and found no significant differences for language, age, gender, ethnicity, or country of origin. However, due to the small size of the sample, these results should be viewed with caution.

Data Overview

As in Year 1, three sources of data inform this report: the cohort program databases, and the two telephone interviews.

The purpose of the Fall 2008 interview was to re-establish our relationships with the students and to update their employment information. The Winter 2009 interview included closed-ended questions[2], asking students to assess:

- personal and program challenges, both when they started the cohort program and currently;
- their need for various program features and services, both when they started the program and currently;
- changes in their knowledge and skills resulting from participating in the program; and

[2]As noted above, questions about the content and structure of their practicum experience, and changes in their jobs and professional life post graduation were asked of those students who had completed the practicum experience and those students (20 percent of the sample) who had matriculated. Findings related to these questions will be included in the Year 3 Report.

- the learning environment at their workplaces, including support for their professional development.

The sample sizes ("N") reported in the following tables and charts are based on the Winter 2009 interviews. Unless otherwise stated, figures and tables in the body of the report contain data for students in all six cohorts combined.

Our discussion focuses on the sample as a whole, and notes variations among the cohorts. These variations have not been tested for statistical significance because of the small number of students within each cohort; however, we did test for statistical significance for selected variables for the full samples. We provide commentary on differences when appropriate, but we caution readers to be aware of the small sample sizes of individual cohorts.

Data Analysis

Data coding and analysis were completed in several steps. First, closed-ended questions were coded based on students' responses, and coded data were entered into an Excel data file. Data from 10 percent of all interviews was entered into the computer twice to check the accuracy of our data entry procedures. Next, using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 14.0), we computed frequencies of all closed-ended questions for each individual cohort and for the entire sample. The final step involved performing inferential statistical tests (e.g., chi-square analyses) to examine trends in the data. All significant results are reported at a p value of .05 or better.

Findings

A. Students' Assessment of Their Challenges Over Time

In order to help members of the ECE workforce gain access to higher education and succeed in completing a degree, it is critical to understand the particular challenges they face, and how a program's structure and services can minimize or exacerbate these challenges.

During Year 1 of the study, students identified the following areas of challenge

- Academic skills, including
  - academic writing;
  - academic reading;
  - math; and
  - academic work in English (for students whose primary language was not English).
- School success skills, including
  - study skills;
  - presenting information orally; and
  - using computers and appropriate software.
- Personal challenges, including
  - balancing work and school; and
  - balancing family and school.

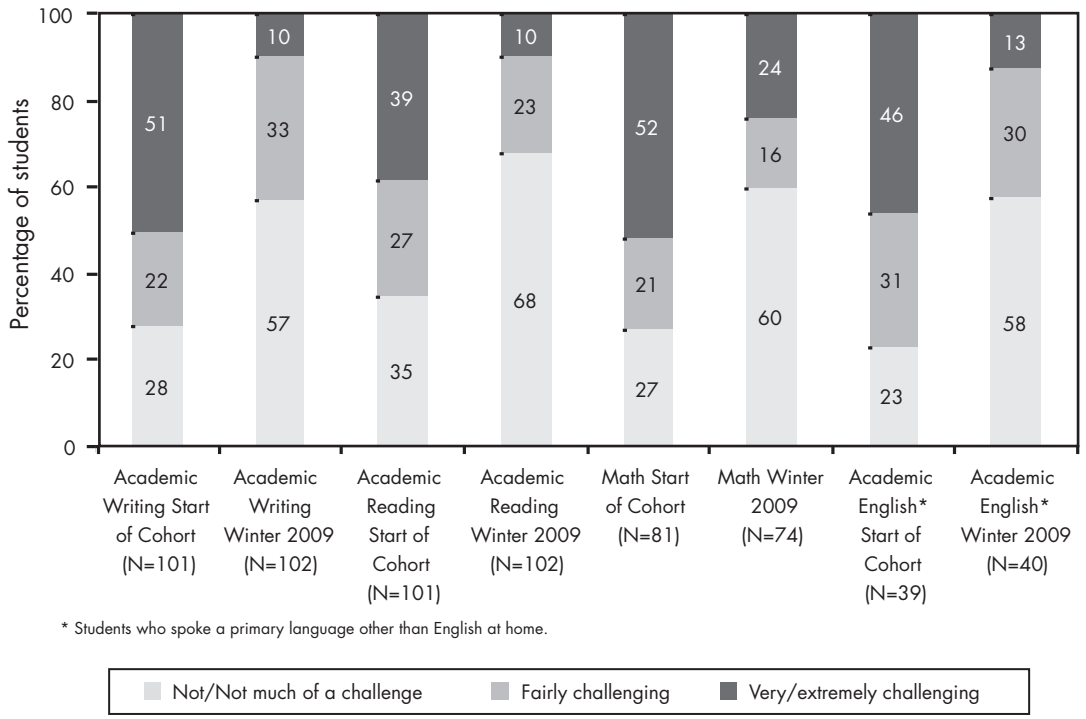
These areas of challenge were reiterated by the faculty members and other institutional representatives whom we interviewed for the study (Whitebook et al. 2008). Because cohort programs typically span at least two years, there are program design and cost implications in understanding the students' need for or reliance on various program features and supports over time. To explore these issues, we asked students to rate how they had viewed each of the following challenges when they started taking classes in the cohort program, and how they rated those same challenges at the time of the interview or, if they had graduated, during their last semester of classes. Using a Likert scale, we asked students to rate each topic from 1 (not a challenge at all) to 5 (extremely challenging).

Students and faculty members identified academic writing, in particular, as a challenge, and several programs mentioned having increased their efforts to help students improve their writing skills. As shown in Figure 1, however, students perceived that their academic writing challenges had diminished significantly after approximately two years in the program. Whereas one-half of students said they saw academic writing as very or extremely challenging when they started taking classes, only ten percent did so at the time of the interview. Across all of the programs, the percentage of students who currently viewed academic writing as no challenge, or not much of one, increased over time.

Student reports also revealed increasing confidence in the areas of academic reading and math. As shown in Figure 1, 35 percent of students said they considered academic reading no challenge or not much of a challenge when they started taking classes, but nearly twice as many (68 percent) felt this way in Winter 2009. Students across all programs, with the exception of Mills College, reported a shift toward viewing academic reading as less challenging. Because of differences in cohort program design and matriculation requirements, fewer students responded to questions about math-related challenges. (Some students completed their math requirements prior to entering the B.A. cohort program, and programs had different course requirements related to statistics and other subjects requiring math skills.) Across all institutions except one, there was a marked difference among the students who viewed math as extremely or very challenging when they started taking classes and at the time of the Winter 2009 interview.

Approximately two-fifths of the students reported that they spoke a primary language other than English in their homes. We asked these students to assess how

Figure 1: Academic Challenges at Two Points in Time, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs



challenging they felt it was to complete their classes successfully in English. As shown in Figure 1, 46 percent of these students said they considered this very or extremely challenging when they began the cohort program, but only 13 percent did so at the time of the Winter 2009 interview. Thirty percent continued to consider coursework in English fairly challenging, and 58 percent considered it to be no challenge or not much of one.

Because many of the cohort program students had not attended school for years, many found it necessary to brush up on their study skills and to improve their computer literacy when they first began their cohort program. As working adults, often with families, many felt a need to become better organized in order to manage multiple demands on their time. For those who had last attended school when typewriters, library card catalogs, and overhead projectors or poster boards were the tools of the trade, building school success skills in the computer age was sometimes a challenge. Even some who had attended school more recently, or who were already computer literate, experienced other challenges related to study skills, oral presentations, and computer use. But as shown in Figure 2, many students experienced a significant decrease in such challenges between the time they began their cohort program and the Winter 2009 interview.

During Year 1 of the study, almost all of the students mentioned that balancing the demands of school, work, and family life was a challenging aspect of their cohort program experience. While many mentioned such feelings as "never being able to give 100 percent to anything," they also talked about how the support of family members, employers and coworkers had helped make it possible to handle these new challenges. As indicated in Figure 3, nearly one-third of the students across all cohorts reported that balancing work and school had become less challenging as the program progressed, and 20 percent felt this way about balancing school and family—suggesting that after approximately two years in school, many had learned to cope with these added pressures. We explored whether students' assessments reflected dif-

Figure 2: Skills-Related Challenges at Two Points in Time, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

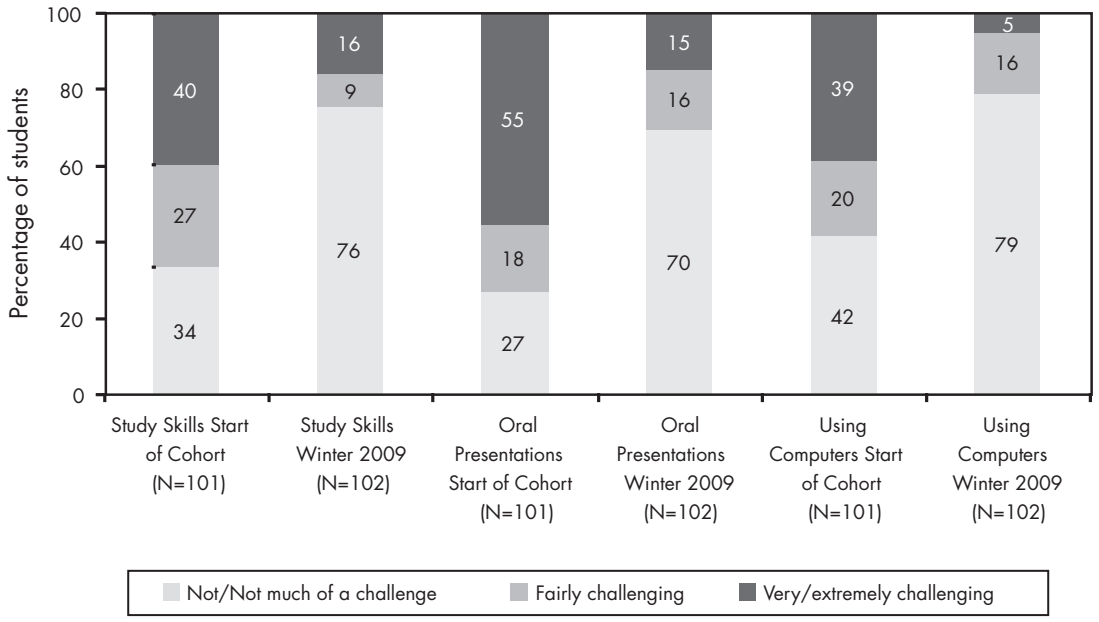


Figure 3: Personal Challenges at Two Points in Time, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

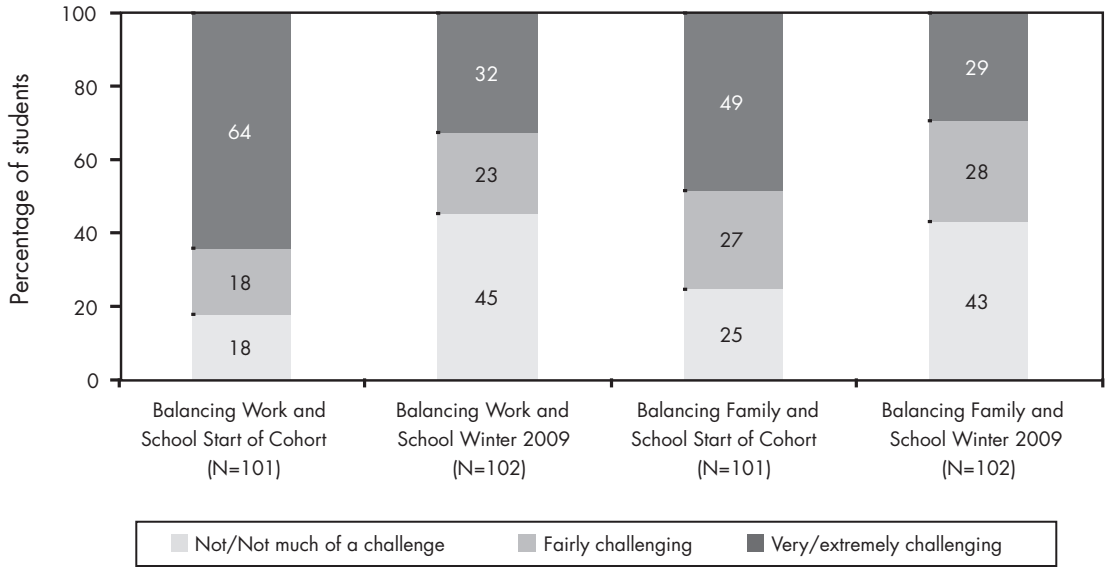
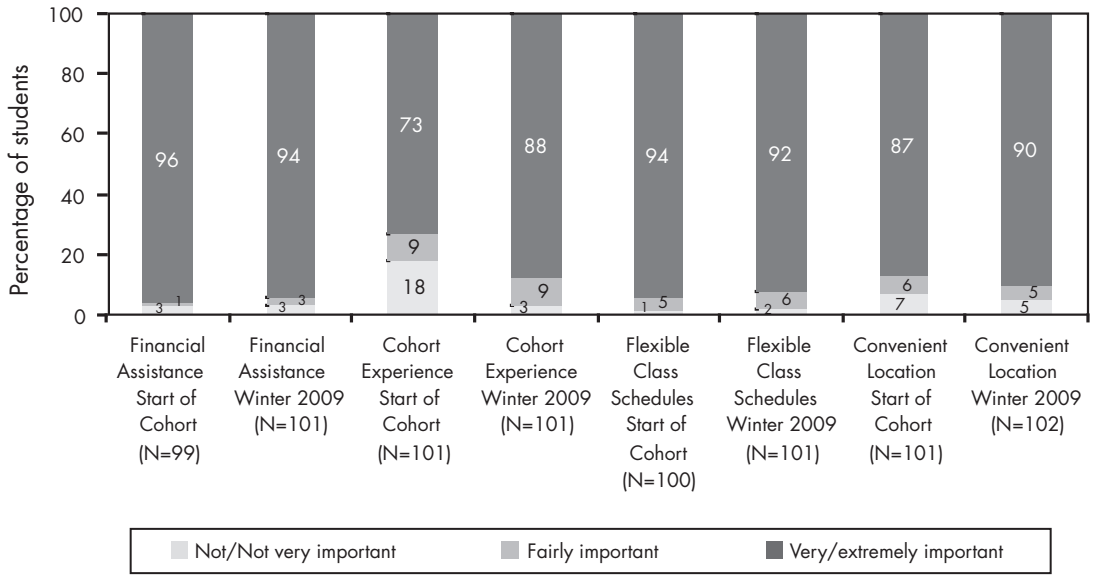


Figure 4: Importance of Cohort Program Structure at Two Points in Time, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs



ferences in course loads. Slightly more than one-half (55 percent) of students were taking three or more courses when we spoke with them. Notably, students taking fewer courses were more likely to say that balancing work and school (t (75) = 1.99, p = .05) or balancing work and family (t (75) = 3.36, $p < .01$) was very or extremely challenging. We need additional data to explore this issue.

B. Students' Assessment of Their Needs for Services Over Time

Faculty and administrators who are responsible for designing and implementing cohort programs—along with policy makers and funders—share the goals of developing the necessary program features and services to help students complete their degrees successfully. But at the same time, these stakeholders are eager to control costs without compromising the programs' intent. It therefore becomes important to determine whether cohort students might experience a diminishing need over time for certain program features or services, as participating in a degree program becomes progressively less challenging.

To explore these issues, we asked students to rate the importance of various program features when they began their cohort program, and at the time of the interview or, if they had graduated, during their last semester of classes. Students rated these features and services on a Likert scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important):

- Structural features of the cohort program
  - Financial assistance;
  - The cohort experience itself;
  - Flexible class schedules; and
  - Convenient location.
- Program services
  - Academic tutoring;
  - Computer assistance;
  - Academic counseling; and
  - English language assistance.

As indicated in Figure 4, students overwhelmingly viewed the structural features of their programs as very or extremely important. Not surprisingly, as working students in a generally very low-paying occupation, they relied on financial assistance, flexible class schedules, and convenient locations as essential

to their participation, and their rating of the importance of these features barely shifted over time.

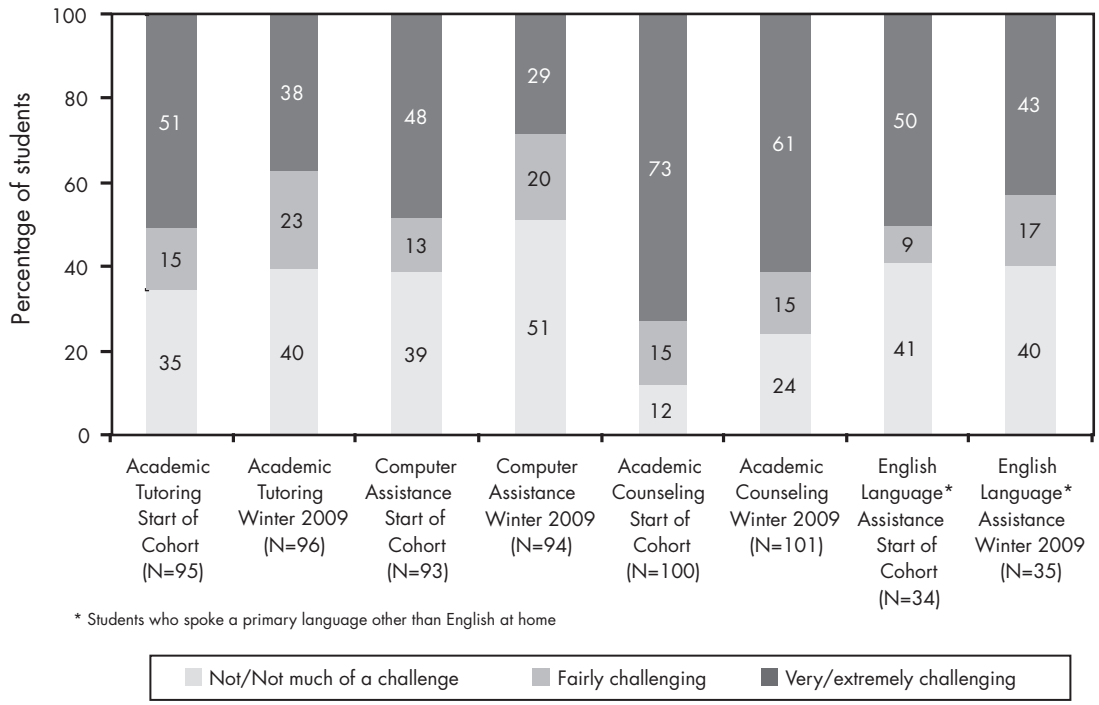
The students' perception of the importance of the cohort structure itself actually increased, from 73 percent of students saying they viewed it as very or extremely important when they started the program, to 88 percent feeling this way at the time of the interview. These programs were designed intentionally to build a "learning community" for students, offering personal support and opportunities to deepen one's understanding of the school experience through an ongoing context of discussion and reflection. It appears that students relied on or appreciated the cohort experience more as the programs progressed.

As indicated in Figure 5, students reported a shift over time in their ratings of the importance of various program services. A substantial portion of students, however, continued to consider all of the services important even after some time in the program.

The greatest shift in perception of the importance of services over the course of the program occurred for academic tutoring and computer assistance. Slightly more than one-half (51 percent) said they had considered academic tutoring to be very or extremely important when they started taking classes, compared to 38 percent at the time of the interview. Most of this change involved a shift to "fairly important," rather than "not very important" or "not important." Looking more closely at individual student responses over time, we found that of the students who reported that academic tutoring was very or extremely important when they started the program, 63 percent felt it continued to be. Ninety percent of the students who said they had viewed academic tutoring as not important at all when they started the program continued to feel that way. Thus, while the overall demand for academic tutoring may decline over time, a subset of students will likely continue to rely on its availability. This pattern was consistent across all cohorts.

Students also felt that the importance of computer and technological help had shifted over the course of their participation in the cohort programs.

Figure 5: Importance of the Cohort Program Services at Two Points in Time, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs



Nearly one-half of all students (48 percent) said that they had considered such assistance very or extremely important at the start of the program, compared to only 29 percent at the time of the interview. Slightly more than one-third of students (39 percent) who reported that computer/tech help was extremely or very important at the beginning continued to think so. This finding suggests that computer services, while remaining somewhat necessary over time, are more likely to be considered important at the beginning of the program.

Most students (73 percent) said they had considered academic counseling very or extremely important when they started the program, and 61 percent still did so at the time of the interview. Many students commented that the issues with which they needed assistance had shifted over the course of the program. At the start, their concerns centered on articulation issues, and whether they would receive credit for courses they had already completed before entering the B.A. program. At the time of the interview, students spoke of relying on counselors to help them navigate any unmet graduate requirements.

As noted earlier, two-fifths of the students in the sample spoke a primary language other than English in their homes. Some of these students relied on the tutorial assistance provided by the cohort program, or by the college or university, in order to complete their coursework in English successfully. Fifty percent of these students said that language assistance was very or extremely important at the beginning of the program and, at the time of the interview, 91 percent of these students continued to feel this way. This suggests that, depending on the population of students and their language skills, demand for this support may well continue throughout the duration of a cohort program.

C. Students' Assessment of Growth in Knowledge and Skills Over Time

During the first year of the study, nearly all students interviewed (96 percent) identified at least one positive impact that their participation in the cohort program had made on their everyday work with children and families. To further understand their assessments of their growth in knowledge and skills over time, we asked whether they had had certain academic skills when they started taking classes in their cohort program, and whether those skills had improved by the time of the interview or (if they had graduated) by their last semester of classes. Skills discussed included:

- Critical thinking, defined as the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what one is learning, to answer a question or reach a conclusion;
- The ability to evaluate the accuracy of research about child development or early childhood education; and
- The ability to apply theory to practice—i.e., to apply what one has learned in class with one's work with children and families.

Most students (81 percent) said that when they started taking classes, they felt they knew how to apply theory to practice; 64 percent felt they had critical thinking skills, and only 40 percent said they knew how to assess early childhood research. At the time of the interview, all but one or two students reported improvement across all three areas.

To gain further information about students' assessments of what they were learning, we asked them to consider all the classes they had taken to date as part of their B.A. cohort, and to assess how helpful their courses had been in helping them develop abilities in the following areas:

- Establishing a classroom environment and interactions with children
  - Creating a positive emotional environment for children;
  - Creating a positive instructional environment (one that promotes learning) for children; and
  - Developing positive interactions with children.
- Teaching skills to children
  - Language and literacy skills;
  - Social skills;
  - Math skills; and
  - Science skills.
- Working with diverse children
  - Children with challenging behaviors;
  - Children with physical disabilities;

- Children with emotional and/or learning disabilities;
- Children who are dual language learners;
- Children from cultures other than one's own;
- Children from multiple cultural backgrounds in the same classroom; and
- Children from multiple linguistic backgrounds in the same classroom.

- Working with diverse adults
  - Families from cultures other than one's own;
  - Families from a variety of cultural backgrounds in a single classroom or program;
  - Families from a variety of linguistic backgrounds in a single classroom or program; and
  - Co-workers.
- Supervision and administration skills (directors only)
  - Helping staff to improve their instructional practices; and
  - Managing and supervising staff.

Interviewers emphasized to students that they were not asking them to discuss particular courses, adding that they recognized that since students entered cohort programs with different levels of skill and knowledge, not all courses would be equally helpful to all students. Below, we report students' perspectives on what they are learning, and how helpful it has been to their work with children and families. We note, however, that in order to understand more fully how completion of a B.A. cohort program contributes to a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom, further investigation is required concerning the content of each cohort program's course of study, as well as classroom observations of students' changing practices over time.

Establishing a Classroom Environment and Interactions with Children

Overwhelmingly, students found their courses to be very or extremely helpful with respect to creating classroom environments and interacting positively with children, as shown in Figure 6. Only 10 percent or fewer reported that their classes as a whole had not contributed to their skills in these areas. We are not able to determine whether students in this latter group

Figure 6: Impact of Courses on Classroom Practice, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

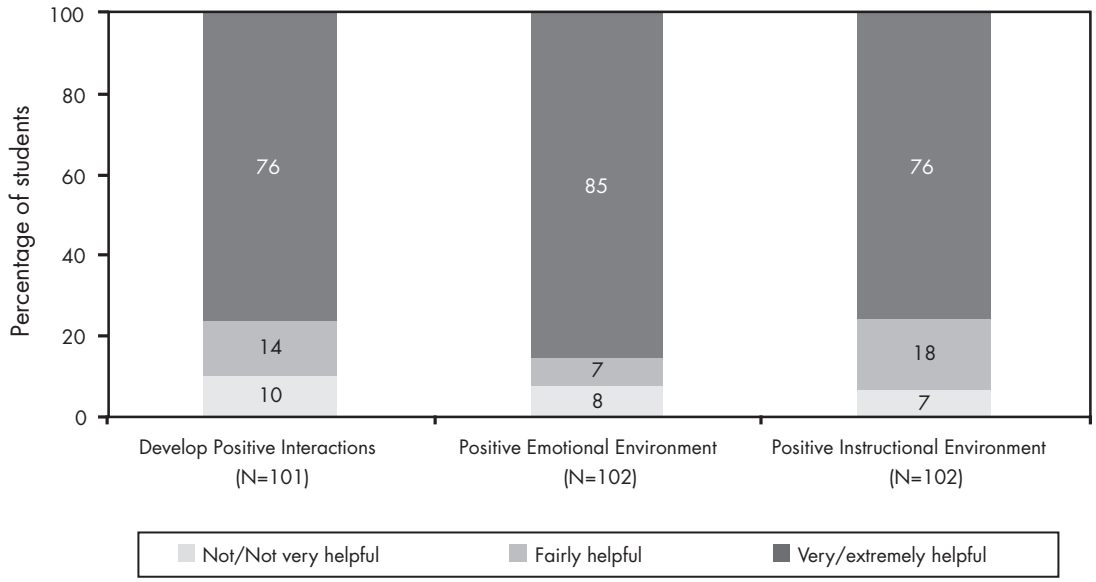


Figure 7: Impact of Courses on the Ability to Teach Skills to Children, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs

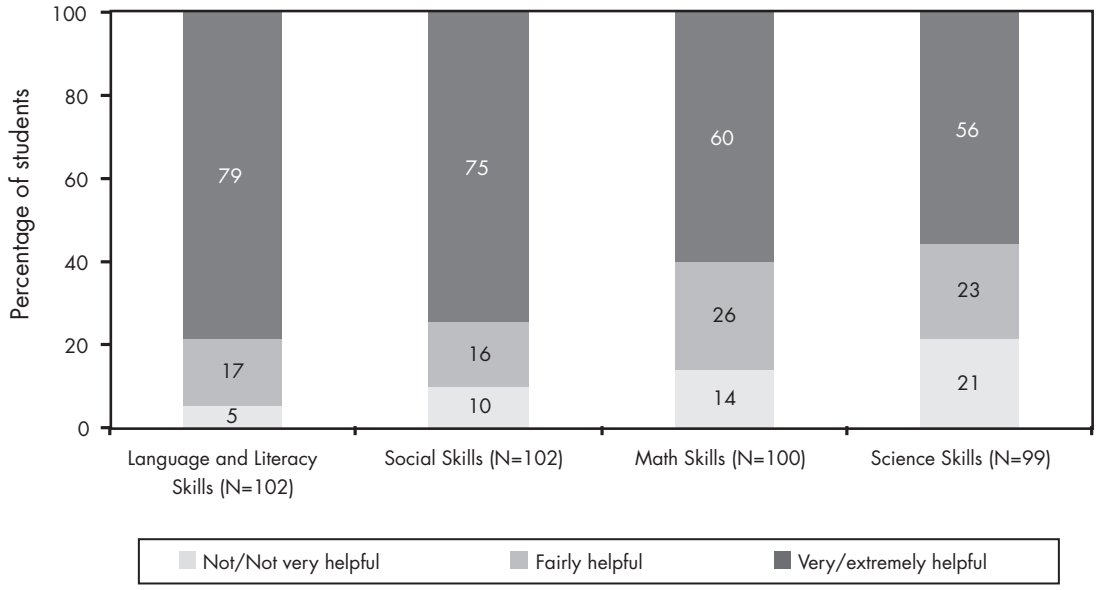
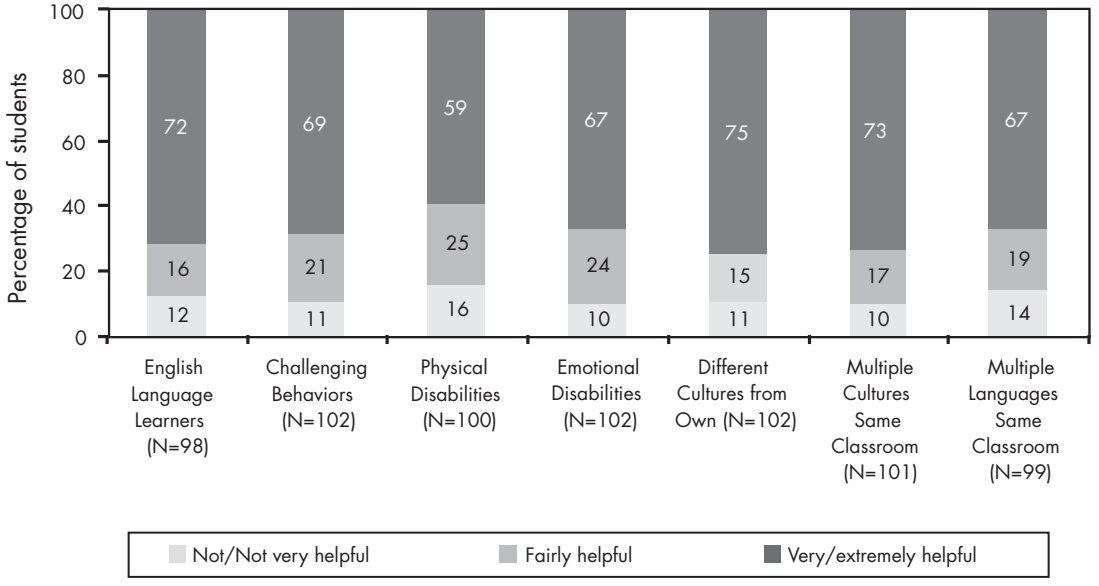


Figure 8: Impact of Courses on Working with Diverse Groups of Children, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs



felt that they already possessed the necessary skills when they began the cohort program, or felt dissatisfied in some way with the program itself.

Teaching Skills to Children

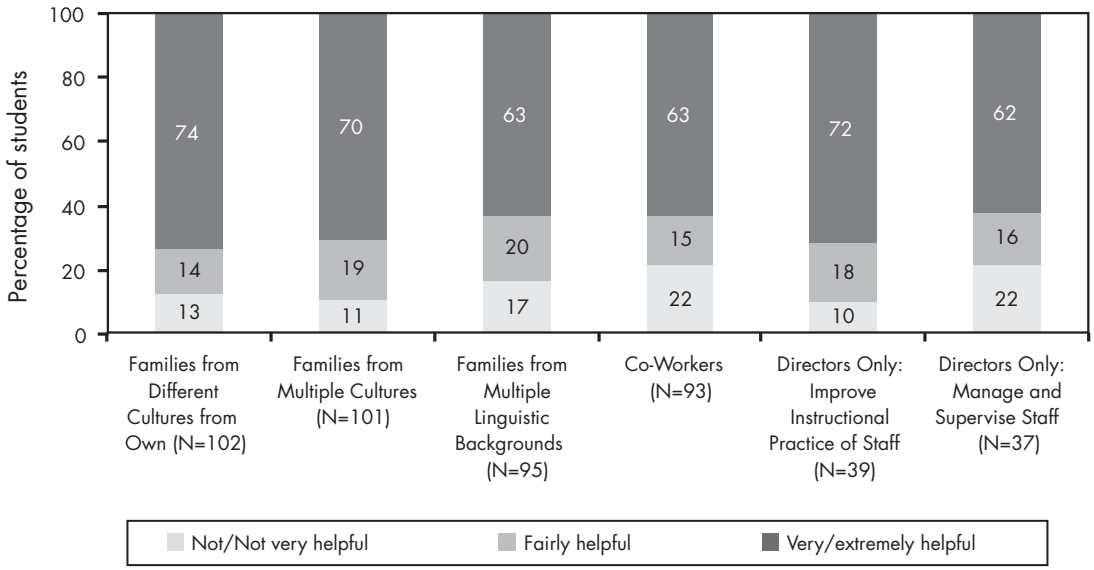
As shown in Figure 7, about three-quarters of students reported that their coursework had contributed to their ability to teach children skills related to language and literacy, and social interactions. Although somewhat fewer students reported that their classes had helped them teach math and science skills, the majority found their classes to be very or extremely helpful in this regard.

Working with Diverse Children and Adults

California's young children are developmentally, linguistically and culturally diverse, and there is considerable concern about whether teachers are being well prepared to meet the needs of all children. Students were asked to assess the impact of their classes in helping them develop skills for working with children and families with various characteristics, including linguistic and ethnic backgrounds different from the students' own. As shown in Figures 8 and 9, most students found their courses to be very or extremely helpful with respect to working with children and families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Although students reported that their classes had helped them in working with children with special needs, they generally rated their courses as somewhat less helpful in this area, compared to issues of culture and language. Most students also rated their classes as very or extremely helpful in working with families, co-workers or employees.

Figure 9: Impact of Courses on Working with Families and Staff, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs



D. Students' Assessment of Support for Ongoing Learning and Professional Development at Their Workplaces

The ability of teachers to apply the knowledge and skills they have gained in a higher education program depends largely on whether or not they have opportunities and support for ongoing learning and growth in their workplace. Certain features of the work environment can either support or hinder them. We asked students a series of questions about their workplaces to ascertain whether they believed they were receiving support in the workplace for their professional development and learning. Using a Likert scale, we asked students to rate whether various workplace supports were available to them all the time, some of the time (more often than not), once in a while, or none of the time. These included: support from a supervisor; time for preparation and reflection; financial assistance for ongoing professional development; flexible work schedules; and paid time off for school-related needs. Because these supports are more often a result of workplace polices implemented in child care centers or schools, rather than in home-based ECE programs, we asked these questions only of students working in center-based settings.

The Educational Environment of the Workplace

Fifty-nine percent of students reported that they received help from their supervisor "all of the time" to practice what they were learning in school, and almost one-quarter said they received such help some of the time or more often than not. (See Figure 10.) Most students also reported that they received, at least some of the time, paid time to prepare for their classroom activities with children and/or had a scheduled time to talk with co-workers about strategies for improving children's learning. In addition, most students received financial assistance, either all of the time (36 percent) or at least some of the time (47 percent), to attend workshops and conferences.

Assistance with Attending School

Workplace policies that support teachers' efforts to return to school, complete their classes, and earn degrees can benefit both the students and the workplace. We asked students to tell us how often they received workplace assistance while attending school. One-half of students reported being able "all of the time" to use sick, vacation and/or personal days for school-related activities such as studying or attending classes, and 27 percent said they had this option

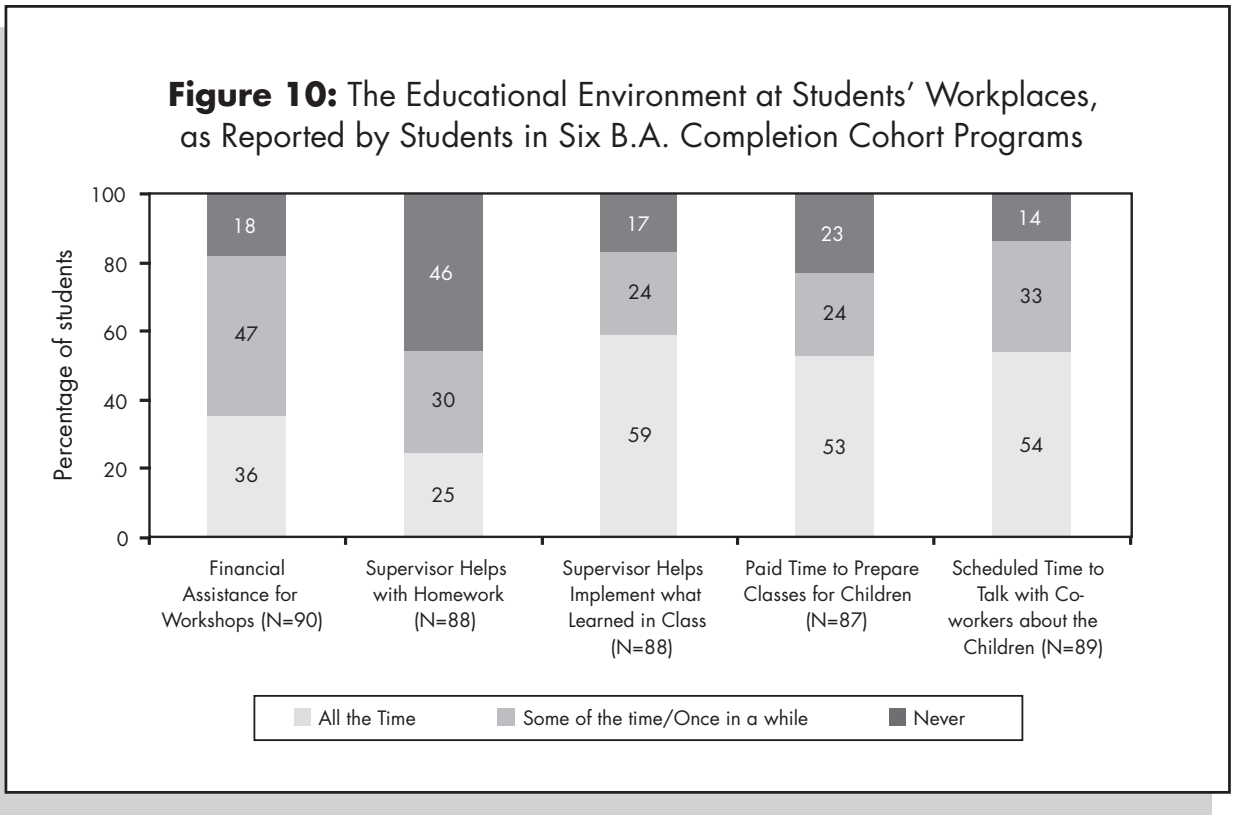
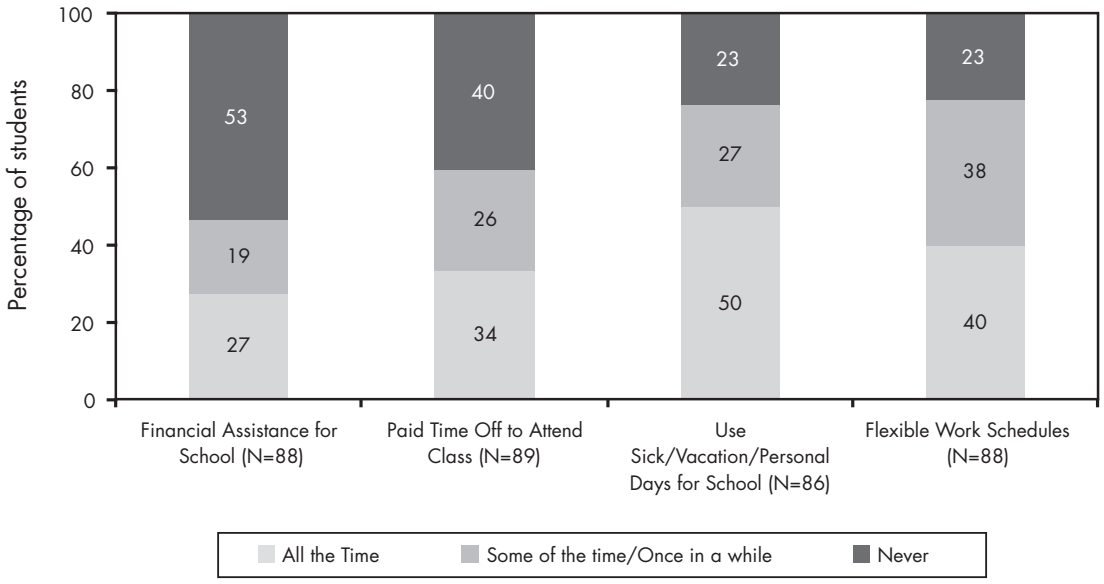


Figure 11: Workplace Assistance for Attending School, as Reported by Students in Six B.A. Completion Cohort Programs



"more often than not" or at least "once in a while." (See Figure 11.) Many students also reported having flexible schedules that allowed them, for example, to vary their work hours in order to attend classes. Forty percent said they had a flexible schedule all of the time and 38 percent did so "some of the time" or "once in a while."

A majority of students also reported having paid time off to attend classes at least some of the time. However, less than one-half of students reported receiving financial assistance from their employer at least some of the time for books, other class materials, or tuition. Sixty percent of students received paid time off to attend classes. This varied by cohort.

There were some differences in students' reports of the learning environment of their workplaces, based on the types of centers at which they worked. Sixty-one percent of students employed at Head Start centers reported receiving paid time off to attend classes "all of the time," compared with 14 percent of students employed by State Preschools or other centers contracted with the California Department of Education (CDE), most of whom received no such paid time (X^2 (4) = 17.30, $p < .01$). This finding is likely related to the 2007 Head Start Reauthorization's mandate for an increase in the number of B.A. level Head Start teachers. By contrast, one-third of students working at privately funded centers were able to receive such paid time off "all of the time." Students employed at State Preschools or centers with CDE contracts were also less likely than Head Start teachers to receive financial assistance from their employer for books, other class materials, or tuition (X^2 (4) = 28.78, $p < .001$).

Most students employed by privately funded programs (81 percent) received paid time to prepare for their classroom activities with children "all of the time," compared with 43 percent of students who worked at Head Start centers and 50 percent of students employed by centers contracted by CDE (X^2 (4) = 10.07, $p < .05$). One-third of students employed by CDE-contracted centers did not receive any paid preparation time; the remainder received such paid time "some of the time."

Perceptions of the Workplace Climate

We asked students for their perceptions regarding issues of funding, workload, staff stability and turnover, and collaboration at their workplaces. Research suggests that examining the staff learning environment in an early care and education program requires a consideration of contextual issues related to the center as

a whole and the overall health of the organization. The level of staff turnover, for example, impacts the overall educational climate of a program as well as its ability to improve and sustain quality (Whitebook & Sakai, 2004). Common stressors, such as unstable funding and isolation, may impede an agency's effectiveness in meeting its mission to provide quality services for children (Reed, Lally, & Quiett, 2008).

Students were presented with statements about the workplace and asked whether they strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, somewhat disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each statement. We were interested in their perceptions of whether their workplaces were well funded and of the impact of funding on staff members' ability to do their jobs well. Fifty-six percent of students somewhat or strongly agreed that adequate funding was a problem at their centers. Of these students, 54 percent somewhat or strongly agreed that inadequate funding affected the ability of staff to do their jobs well.

We also asked students about staff turnover and staffing changes, any feelings of being overworked, and opportunities for collaboration both at the center level and for individual staff members to collaborate with one another. Thirty-nine percent of students strongly or somewhat agreed that staff changes at their centers made it difficult for them to do their jobs well. Students employed at Head Start centers (61 percent) were more likely to somewhat or strongly agree that staffing changes presented such a difficulty, compared with students employed at CDE contracted (33 percent) or privately funded programs (25 percent; X^2 (2) = 6.34, $p < .05$).

Sixty-seven percent of students somewhat or strongly agreed that staff at their centers often felt overworked with heavy job responsibilities. Those employed at Head Start centers (77 percent) and CDE-contracted centers (81 percent) were more likely to report that they somewhat or strongly agreed about feeling overworked, compared with 38 percent of students employed at privately funded centers (X^2 (2) = 10.89, $p < .01$).

On a more positive note, however, the vast majority of students felt that individual teachers, and their centers as a whole, had opportunities to collaborate. Eighty-eight percent of students strongly or somewhat agreed that their center collaborated with other organizations in the community serving the families and children they cared for, and 88 percent of students strongly or somewhat agreed that they had the opportunities they needed to collaborate with other staff at their centers. This varied to some degree, however, by type of center. One-quarter of students employed at privately funded centers somewhat or strongly disagreed that their center collaborated with other organizations in the community, compared to only 19 percent of students employed at centers contracting with the state to serve subsidized children, , and no students working at Head Start centers (X^2 (2) = 5.91, $p = .05$).

Discussion and Conclusion

In its first two years, the *Learning Together* study of B.A. completion programs for working adult students in ECE has focused on the issues of access, student success, and institutional change—and has seen resounding evidence of the success and promise of these programs thus far. In this report, we have addressed the following questions:

- Are such programs an effective strategy to help working adults in ECE access and succeed in higher education?
- How do students perceive the impact of the cohort experience on their professional practice?

A third question – can institutions of higher education, with sufficient support, create and maintain such programs successfully? – will be addressed in our upcoming policy brief, in the Winter of 2010.

Student Access and Success

This year, our student interviewees strongly reiterated their Year 1 reports about the success of their B.A. cohort programs in allowing them access to higher education and in supporting their academic progress toward a degree. We also gained new information about the services and supports that remained necessary to them throughout their cohort experience, as well as those that became of lesser importance to some or most students as time went on.

There are multiple ways of defining and measuring "success" in a higher education effort such as these B.A. cohort programs—e.g., facilitating greater student access; increasing student retention and graduation rates; promoting and retaining the diversity of well educated members of the ECE workforce—and our findings thus far suggest a pattern of success in all these areas.

Students resoundingly saw the cohort model itself as having enabled them to access a B.A. level education, and to succeed in it, in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. Indeed, their sense of the importance of the cohort structure had increased over time, from 73 percent of students saying they viewed it as very or extremely important when they started the program, to 88 percent feeling this way at the time of the Year 2 interview. Besides the cohort nature of this model, students also assigned a very high importance to other structural features throughout their participation in the programs—namely, substantial financial aid, convenient locations of classes, and flexible scheduling that allowed them to combine school with ECE teaching jobs.

But as institutions of higher education consider the costs of maintaining such cohort programs, especially as levels of outside funding decrease, we also learned from students that it may be possible to reduce certain services over time, such as tutoring and language support, but that these nonetheless remained an ongoing need for a significant minority of students.

Students' View of the Impact of Cohort Programs on Their Professional Practice

At this stage of the study, we have gathered students' self-assessments about the role of their B.A. cohort program in improving their professional practice on the job with children and families. Future years of the study will include observations of cohort students in the classroom, which will allow for more detailed and nuanced analysis of these effects. Thus far, however, we have received highly positive self-assessments, with students overwhelmingly reporting that their cohort program coursework has helped them in their jobs.

The study team will also continue to investigate student experience at the beginning, midpoint, and post-graduation phases of cohort programs, including interviews with graduates from the six institutions. We will look more closely at student practice, with workplace observations of students from at least two

cohort programs in two counties. Finally, we will also be able to track the career trajectories of participants, gaining information about whether cohort program graduates remain and/or advance in their positions, receive increased compensation and pursue further education.

* * * * *

This second phase of our multi-year investigation of B.A. completion cohort programs for working students has strengthened our first-year findings about the potential of such programs to build a successful, well-trained, diverse cadre of teachers and leaders in early care and education. As other California communities and other states consider larger-scale approaches to the effective preparation of ECE teachers, these six programs under study have the potential to become models for the entire profession. As the study team continues to investigate the experience of beginning, mid-range, and graduating cohort students in a variety of programs; to observe cohort students' ECE classroom practice; and to chart institutional experience and change at these colleges and universities, we hope to offer a continually deeper and more nuanced understanding of the contribution of the B.A. cohort model to the entire early care and education field.

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