

Competency Based B.A. Program: National Louis University

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Governor's Office of
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Background

The Early Childhood Competency Based Baccalaureate Initiative at National Louis University (NLU) was created to support the tuition and fees for the incumbent early childhood workforce. This initiative provided a high quality, innovative, cohort based accelerated ECE B.A. program. Access and support for individuals from underserved and underrepresented communities, leading to the Illinois Professional Educator License (PEL), with an ECE endorsement, and the Gateways Level 5 ECE and Infant Toddler Credentials was offered to interested individuals.

Goals and Accomplishments

The first goal of this initiative was to recruit 50 students for the ECE competency pilot. NLU hosted three virtual information sessions over zoom between April 27th and May 15th, 2021. Outreach was conducted to participants that attended the information sessions. Over 200 attendees attended the information sessions. Prior to starting the pilot, NLU accepted 128 applications and all applicants began in an ECE program. Specifically, 62 students were admitted into the competency pilot. Prior to the start of the program, NLU had 36 students for the Chicago group and another 26 for the remote/virtual group.

One of the second goals during this time period was to support 50 students with the application process, including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and securing transcripts. NLU's enrollment specialists and student finance specialists worked with students 1:1 to successfully submit their FAFSA and secure their transcripts. There were six students that owed money to previous institutions, keeping them from getting their transcripts. The Chicago Early Childhood Workforce Partnership (ECWP) has an Employer's Council that

NLU worked closely with to design the pilot. There are 19 large childcare agencies that comprise this Council. The Council was able to secure philanthropic funding to help support the six students in paying off their existing debt so they could continue they could persist to degree completion.

The third goal during this time period was to create the schedule for the ECE Competency Pilot. In order to do this, it was first determined the number of needed sections of competency courses based on accepted students in the program and their transcript reviews. NLU staff then discussed scheduling models with enrollment representatives, the academic advisor working with students and the Employer's Council. It was decided to offer fully online courses but with a weekly one hour "competency café" requirement. Students had a choice of three day/time combinations to join a café and get support, talk with Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) coaches and receive new content as needed. The schedule was an internal system at NLU. These cafés were offered initially over Zoom with the option to add face to face sessions for Chicago-based students later, if students wanted it and Covid -related health conditions supported it.

Because of the student population at NLU, faculty would be needed and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) coaches who were bilingual in English and Spanish to work on this project. As a part of the scheduling efforts, a Professional Adjunct Lecturer (PAL) was hired, which is a part time faculty member with an elevated adjunct status. This person was an existing adjunct at NLU, with deep connections to the ECE workforce and is fluent in Spanish and English. NLU also recruited three additional new adjuncts who are bilingual in Spanish and English.

Throughout the initiative students engaged in the curricular ECE competency-based modules. Student accounts were billed accordingly, and grant monies were drawn down to pay for the coursework that contained the curriculum as specified by this grant. Any students that

received “In-Progress” or “I” grades for summer term(s) completed their outstanding work and grades were submitted.

Lessons Learned

In the end, NLU started with 54 students in the program and lost 6 students over the first two terms. Reported reasons for attrition were to pursue a traditional program at NLU (the fast pace wasn’t advantageous for two students), taking time off due to severe illness (two students are intending to join the traditional program in a future term), loss of a loved one (one student dropped out without committing to rejoining the traditional program), and failing courses without continued communication. Through this initiative it was necessary to issue more “In-Progress” (I-grades) grades than in traditional classes, due to the accelerated nature of the program and/or rigor of the modules. After the first few courses and experiences with I-grades, it was decided to change the programming to include timelines and firmer due dates. This has resulted in much more success (92%) of students completing on time and not needing I-grades.

The 48 continuing students have all been successful, passing their classes. NLU reported to have had an average of 64% attendance at weekly synchronous “Competency Coffee Shops” – which can be directly connected to those students with higher first-time competency rates in summative assessments. It was also found that, with added timelines and due dates, fewer students needed more time to complete their work. Lastly, feedback from students indicated they appreciated the opportunity to engage in Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), allowing them time to focus in more detail on those competencies they are still working to master.

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