From Aspiration to Attainment: Practices that Support Educational Success

Los Angeles Universal Preschool's Child Development Workforce Initiative

By Marcy Whitebook, Diana Schaack, Fran Kipnis,
Lea J.E. Austin, and Laura Sakai

Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Institute for Research on Labor and Employment
University of California at Berkeley
2521 Channing Way #5555
Berkeley, CA 94720
(510) 643-8293

http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) Child Development Workforce Initiative (CDWFI) project, funded by First 5 LA, seeks to create a pipeline of degreed early childhood education (ECE) practitioners by providing services aimed at fostering academic success among child development and ECE students enrolled in associate (A.A.) degree programs.[1] Across the CDWFI projects, located in seven community colleges in Los Angeles County, support services intended to promote A.A. degree completion and/or transfer to a Bachelor's (B.A.) degree program include enhanced advisement (e.g., for developing an educational plan), academic assistance (e.g., tutoring), financial assistance (e.g., scholarships and stipends), mentoring, career counseling, and networking opportunities.

In order to direct resources toward effective services, it is important to understand which supports are most helpful to various groups of students. This study, conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California, Berkeley, seeks to understand what distinguishes students who are successful at earning degrees or transferring to four-year institutions from those who are stalled in their progress or who dis-enroll from school. The study also explores the perceived effectiveness of supports that different student groups have accessed through their CDWFI projects and community colleges.

This evaluation explores the issue of student success from two perspectives: from CDWFI staff who support students toward degree attainment and transfer-ready status, and from students themselves, representing different categories of student progress. CDWFI staff perspectives were gathered through a series of focus groups conducted in January 2013. Students from each of the seven CDWFI projects were interviewed from February through April 2013.

For the purposes of this study, successful students are defined as students who had graduated with an A.A. or associate degree transfer (A.A.T), and had transferred or attempted to transfer to a B.A. program in 2012, or students who would be attempting to transfer or graduate in 2013. Stalled students are defined as those who either repeatedly failed general education courses, took classes that diverged from their educational plan, or continued to take classes at the community college level without initiating the transfer process. Students who did not sign up for classes during the spring or fall 2013 semesters are considered dis-enrolled. For an in-depth description

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[1] CDWFI projects also provide support to high school students who are interested in studying child development, and to students moving from an A.A. to a bachelor's degree. In some cases, CDWFI projects also provide support to students for graduate education in ECE or child development. This study, however, focuses exclusively on students in community colleges and the support services they receive from their CDWFI projects. The CDWFI project is one of the many partners of the Los Angeles County Early Care and Education Workforce Consortium, managed by LAUP and funded by First 5 LA. For more information, see: http://laup.net/workforce-professional-development.aspx

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of the student perspectives reported below, including student comments, see the Final Report, Appendix B: CDWFI Student Perspectives on Their Educational Success.

Findings

CDWFI Services

Each CDWFI is required to provide core services, including dedicated counseling and advising, mentoring, financial aid, facilitated peer support, and academic tutoring and workshops to help students succeed in attaining degrees. Individual CDWFI projects varied in when and how often these are structured for students, whether they are mandated, and how they are supplemented with other support. There was agreement among CDWFI projects, however, that these core services were all necessary for meeting the varied and complex needs of the student population. Further, there was general agreement that students use certain services, such as counseling, more often at the beginning or end of their academic careers, while others are used throughout, and that all CDWFI projects could use additional resources to expand or deepen some aspect of their programs (Section 1 Final Report, Focus Group Finding 2).

Student perceptions of CDWFI services mirrored those of CDWFI staff. All student groups identified academic support, particularly educational counseling, as their main reason for joining the CDWFI, and considered it invaluable to have access to someone knowledgeable about the courses they needed for transfer or graduation. Many students also mentioned CDWFI financial support as a reason for joining the CDWFI, and viewed it as essential to their school progress. While students may not have joined the CDWFI because of other services, such as tutoring or academic or career workshops, most students credited these services with helping them improve their academic skills and learn how to navigate the college environment. Mentoring and/or peer support provided by CDWFI projects were widely used and valued. Additional services offered by some projects, particularly lending libraries and one-stop resource centers, were well used and appreciated by students. A minority of students, most frequently those considered dis-enrolled, found it difficult to access some CDWFI services, typically due to scheduling conflicts and time constraints (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 1).

General Education Requirements

All CDWFI staff identified general education classes as gatekeepers to students' ability to remain in school, earn degrees, and/or achieve transfer status. CDWFI staff reported that successful students, as well as their stalled and dis-enrolled peers, found math requirements particularly challenging, but the former were more realistic about their limitations, took advantage of tutoring services, and allocated the necessary study time to pass general education classes. Stalled and dis-enrolled students, by contrast, did not develop strategies for overcoming general education barriers. According to CDWFI staff, certain institutional barriers also increased many students' difficulties with general education; these included insufficient spaces in classes, incorrect advisement, and policies that prevented students from retaking failed classes at their home college (Section 1 Final Report, Focus Group Finding 3).

Paralleling the responses of the CDWFI staff, two-thirds of student groups reported that general education requirements prevented them from making steady progress toward their degrees. Students found math requirements for transfer or degree attainment most daunting, and successful students cited tutoring services, study groups, seeking out well-regarded professors, and their own perseverance as their primary strategies for completing required math courses. But students with inflexible work schedules, or greater financial and family responsibilities outside of school—most often, those who had dis-enrolled from college—found it difficult to take advantage of the same services and strategies. Additionally, all students cited inability to access general education classes, as well as misguided counseling, as institutional obstacles affecting their ability to fulfill general education requirements (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 2).

Employment and School Success

All CDWFI staff agreed that low-paying jobs with inflexible schedules created additional stress for many students, and that successful students tended to work in more supportive environments that allowed them to take classes, attend CDWFI-sponsored events, and even, in some ECE settings, receive help with school

assignments. For many less successful students, frustration with ECE jobs, and especially with pay, served as a disincentive to pursue their educational goals or to stay in the ECE field. All CDWFI projects offered a variety of services to help students obtain jobs when they graduated, or find more supportive working environments while enrolled in school (Section 1 Final Report, Focus Group Finding 4).

Students concurred with the CDWFI staff on these work-related issues. Three-quarters of interviewed students were employed, most of them in early childhood settings. While most students identified encouragement and support from colleagues as contributing to their school success, nearly one-half of employed students identified work as an obstacle to their progress, with dis-enrolled students twice as likely as successful students to report work-related obstacles. Lack of support, inflexible schedules, and job demands often led these students to suspend their studies (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 3).

Family Circumstances

All CDWFI staff identified students' relationships with their families as playing a major role in how they navigated their educational careers. CDWFI staff reported that successful students typically received emotional and daily living support from family members, which contributed to their school success. Some family members of less successful students were equivocal about the value of education and its impact on the family, and consequently offered less support. The majority of CDWFI projects emphasized the importance of providing services to help garner family support for students, such as family resource rooms and family social events. CDWFI staff recognized that multiple and sometime unpredictable factors, such as illness or job loss, played a powerful role in students' lives that shaped their academic journeys (Section 1 Final Report, Focus Group Finding 5).

Students' perceptions of the importance of family reflected those of CDWFI staff. Nearly three-quarters of the students identified encouragement and practical support from family members as contributing to their progress in school. Nearly one-half of students, however, also identified family responsibilities, such as child care, household chores, and financial pres-

sures as challenges to school success. Successful students were as likely as stalled and dis-enrolled students to mention such family challenges, but dis-enrolled students often mentioned a family crisis, such as illness, death, divorce, or job loss, as having led to the decision to suspend their studies (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 4).

Managing the Financial Aspects of Going to School

All CDWFI staff identified finances as critical to student success. CDWFI staff reported that some successful students benefited from family financial support that enabled them to persist in their studies, while others were particularly savvy about leveraging scholarships and financial aid resources to augment their low incomes and remain in school. Most viewed the lack of organization and follow-through as a reason why less successful students failed to access certain sources of financial support offered by the college or government. However, some noted that financial aid course load requirements limited students' ability to take fewer classes as a strategy to balance the demands of work, school, and family. (Section 1 Final Report, Focus Group Finding 6).

Students similarly emphasized the importance of financial assistance to their success. Most students reported that they were eligible for financial assistance for school costs from the government, their college, and/or the CDWFI project and some received help with living or school expenses from their families. When financial assistance was insufficient or they were ineligible, students pursued other strategies, often reluctantly, such as increasing their work hours, limiting the number of courses they took, or suspending their schooling until they had amassed sufficient funds. Three-fifths of dis-enrolled students reported that finances had played a role in their decision to leave school, and many stalled students identified financial issues as slowing their academic progress (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 5).

Balancing Work, Family, and School

Students across all groups reported being overwhelmed by the competing demands of college, work, and family responsibilities. Support from family members, friends, colleagues, and CDWFI projects played a critical role in helping students manage these multiple

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claims on their time and energy. Students also spoke of learning coping strategies, and/or help from CDWFI personnel and services, that enabled them to make steady progress toward their educational goals. A sizeable proportion of students considered to have stalled or dis-enrolled had done so intentionally in order to preserve their well-being, resolve untenable conflicts, or fulfill work or family obligations (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 7).

Student Attitudes and Attributes

Most CDWFI project staff agreed that almost all students, whether successful, stalled, or dis-enrolled, came to their A.A. degree programs academically under-prepared. All CDWFI staff, however, noted that successful students exhibited better school success skills, such as managing time efficiently and setting priorities, from the onset of college attendance; had a clearer sense of their academic and career goals; and participated more actively and consistently in CDWFI support structures and services. All CDWFI staff also identified individual student attributes that they felt contributed to or hampered students' ability to accomplish their educational goals. CDWFI staff viewed successful students as dedicated, resourceful, and optimistic about themselves. In contrast, they felt that less successful students tended to lack motivation, procrastinated, avoided seeking or accepting help, and suffered from low self-esteem. CDWFI staff held differing opinions about how age influenced student success (Section 1 Final Report, Focus Group Finding 1 and 7)

By contrast, the vast majority of students identified personal attributes and skills that they believed helped them to progress in school. Contrary to CDWFI staff perceptions, students who were categorized as successful or stalled both identified persistence and motivation, good study skills, and commitment to the child development profession as contributors to their school success, more frequently than did dis-enrolled students. Slightly more than one-half of interviewed students, across all student groups, also mentioned personal attributes and behaviors that they believed inhibited their progress, such as procrastination, an inability to prioritize, a lack of study skills, and low self-confidence. Students across all student groups identified strategies to overcome these unhelpful behaviors, such as using a planner, participating in CDWFI study skills classes, and seeking encouragement and guidance from others (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 6).

The Impact of CDWFI Projects, and Students' Future Plans

Many students, across all student groups, described participating in the CDWFI as a transformative personal and professional experience, leading them to view themselves and their futures more positively. In addition to helping them make progress toward their educational goals, students described personal changes stemming from participating in the CDWFI, such as increased feelings of self-confidence and responsibility, improved communication and organizational skills, and a new sense of professional pride and ability. Most students expressed the intention to continue their education beyond the community college—in the overwhelming majority of cases, in early childhood studies. Notably, four-fifths of students designated as stalled were satisfied with the progress they were making toward their degrees, and nearly 90 percent of dis-enrolled students reported intending to return to their studies (Section 2 Final Report, Student Interview Finding 8).

Discussion

Currently operating at seven community colleges in Los Angeles County, the CDWFI will expand to three new colleges[2] in 2013-14. To determine how best to direct resources to established and new CDWFI projects, this evaluation sought to identify which supports were most helpful to different groups of students. Specifically, the evaluation was designed to identify how students who appeared to be struggling to meet their educational goals might be better served.

To explore these issues, the perspectives of both CDWFI staff and students were examined. A striking finding that emerged from this investigation is the parallel perspectives of CDWFI staff and students with respect to the challenges students face in achieving their educational goals, and the success of the CDWFI core services in helping students overcome these challenges. Another finding, however, points to the divergence of staff and student perspectives with respect to why students did not participate in all available services, and how they assess student progress. Both the alignment and divergence of CDWFI staff and student perspectives are discussed below, as well as their implications for program design.

CDWFI project designs reflect the extant evidence and professional wisdom regarding services that promote educational success among community college students, particularly those considered nontraditional. They reflect a deep understanding of the academic, personal, financial and workplace challenges that students face, including a recognition that multiple and often unpredictable factors, such as illness or job loss, play a powerful role in shaping students' academic journeys. The core services offered by the CDWFIs (dedicated counseling and advising, financial aid, mentoring and facilitated peer support, and academic tutoring and workshops) have been identified in the research literature as contributing to student retention, progress, and in some cases, degree completion and transfer (Dukakis, Bellm, Seer, & Lee, 2007). For example, sufficient financial assistance is among the strongest factors likely to increase ECE student retention (Dukakis et al., 2007; Whitebook et al., 2008; Whitebook, Sakai, Kipnis, Bellm, & Almaraz, 2010) and working adult student success (McClenney,

Marti, Nathan, & Adkins, 2007). Similarly, research examining the role of dedicated counselors or advisors for community college students indicates that students receiving enhanced advisement are more likely to return to school for the next two semesters, and to earn more credits, than their counterparts who had access only to traditional advisement (Scrivener & Coghlan, 2011).

From the perspective of the interviewed students, whether considered successful, stalled or dis-enrolled, the CDWFI projects were a success. This was particularly true for those who had begun college before CDWFI was established, and who struggled with taking the courses needed for graduation and financing their education. Overall, most students considered the menu of supports and services provided by the CDWFI projects to be well aligned with their needs and interests, and judged them to be of high quality and extremely helpful to their college careers. In addition, almost all students considered their CDWFI experience personally and professionally transformative. They noted that their self-confidence and communication skills had improved, and that they had obtained a greater sense of efficacy and commitment in their work with children. Despite the long and often arduous road that most interviewed students had traveled, they remained committed to their educational journeys, and enthusiastic about the field of early childhood education.

Both CDWFI staff and students, when asked what additional supports would be helpful, talked about expanding existing support, such as extending available hours and locations, rather than proposing new services or supports. The one exception was child care assistance which several students felt would help them with studying and attending more CDWFI events.

CDWFI staff and student perceptions diverged when they were asked about the actual use of services. CDWFI staff shared concerns about stalled and dis-enrolled students who used certain services rarely or not at all. Staff members tended to attribute this lack of participation to student characteristics, such as a lack of direction or poor organizational and time management skills.[3] In a small minority of cases, lack of participation stemmed from students not knowing the full range of services available to them, but most

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[2] The new CDWDFI projects will operate at Antelope Valley College, Southwest College and Pasadena City College.

[3] It is possible that classifying students into three groups, and subsequently asking questions about the students who comprise those groups, biased staff responses to questions about the characteristics of students in those groups.

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students reported that they often did not use particular services due to competing demands on their time and energy. This was particularly true for those considered dis-enrolled. Some students worked off-campus in jobs with inflexible hours, for example, and could not rearrange their schedules to attend CDWFI events or return to campus to access tutoring during the hours it was offered.

These different understandings of why some students did not access services reflect a greater gap between how students and staff define school success. Implicit in the CDWFI staff perspective are expectations about the pace at which students should follow their educational plans. CDWFI personnel and others in the colleges may view "stalled" students as moving too slowly toward their stated goals, but many of these students, instead, assessed their progress as realistic and appropriate to their life situations. Similarly, dis-enrolled students often viewed the decision to leave school as a temporary and rational response to their financial and/or family situations.

Notably, students, perhaps more so than CDWFI staff, also recognized that some situations they faced were beyond the reach of CDWFI services and support. Both stalled and dis-enrolled students reported that they had participated in CDWFI support services whenever possible, but that events beyond their control, rather than a lack of services or direction, were the major factor in determining the pace of their academic journeys. Despite the support and services provided by CDWFI and by family and friends, prioritizing work or family was, for some, their best option for balancing multiple responsibilities, even when it meant reducing one's school load or putting studies on hold. Based on the student interviews, the presence or absence of familial, financial or health crises, rather than demographic characteristics, personal motivation or school skills, emerged as the most telling differences among those categorized as successful, stalled or dis-enrolled.[4]

Thus, in seeking to enhance student support, the issue facing CDWFI projects is less one of revamping what they currently provide by redesigning or adding services, than one of making decisions about membership and who has access to the full complement of services offered. Should the CDWFI programs restrict membership to students who show greater likelihood of progressing at a steady pace? Should the CDWFI establish two membership levels, with different expectations and supports, based on a more realistic assessment of what different students can confidently accomplish? Certain adjustments to CDWFI services and to home institutions' policies may boost students' utilization of services and their likelihood of success (see recommendations below). But fundamentally, the CDWFI projects can only be reasonably expected to help with some of the multiple challenges facing students who enter college academically under-prepared, must work to support themselves and/or a family, and typically earn very low incomes. In particular, in the absence of better academic preparation in high school, students attending community colleges will continue to face difficulties in completing degrees or transferring in a timely fashion.

Still, CDWFI projects can hone their already impressive track record in helping ECE students advance their education by working closely with other stakeholders seeking to improve high school education, improve ECE and other low wage jobs, and expand services that support families and children. The CDWFI projects themselves and their home institutions might consider the following recommendations.

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[4] In general, we found no indication of differences between interviewed students and all core CDWFI members along the following key characteristics: gender, age, English fluency, and personal income. Students sampled for the interview (49 percent) were somewhat less likely to be Latino/Hispanic than the total CDWFI population (62 percent). Two-thirds of students interviewed for this study (67 percent) reported that they were employed in early care and education, compared to 37 percent in the total CDWFI population. This difference reflects an intentional sample recruitment strategy, as the study was designed to include at least one student working in early care and education in all student groups (successful, stalled, and dis-enrolled) for each of the seven CDWFI projects. Additionally, differences in work-related variables between the two groups should be interpreted with caution, as student employment status appears to be unstable. When CSCCE made recruitment calls, a number of students reported that they were working, although their student application data suggested that they were not.

Recommendations

1. *Services:*

   Core CDWFI services—dedicated counseling and advising, financial aid, mentoring and facilitated peer support, and academic tutoring and workshops—are well-utilized and highly valued by students, and these should be continued in order to help students meet their educational goals. To the extent possible, all core and supplemental services should be offered at multiple times for students in easily accessed locations. Services available only during the day, such as college tours and job fairs, may need some re-design to accommodate the varied work and school lives of CDWFI students. To ensure better participation in services, all new and returning members should be required to attend a CDWFI orientation to become familiar with the full array of available support. Resources permitting, assistance with students' child care costs should be considered.

2. *Expectations for membership:*

   The CDWFI project should revisit the definition of successful student progress, and develop a process for CDWFI staff and student applicants to jointly assess whether students' financial, employment and familial situations will allow them to meet project expectations during a given semester. Criteria for ongoing membership should include a session with a CDWFI staff member (counselor, advisor or mentor) to re-assess the student's capacity to continue to meet program expectations, and to identify available services that may enhance success.

3. *Relationship with the ECE community:*

   CDWFI projects could assist students who work in ECE settings by providing information to current and potential employers that familiarizes them with the CDWFI project and the potential benefits to their workplace as staff gain additional education. CDWFI projects should forge intentional partnerships with ECE employers who already understand the importance of education and are willing to accommodate students' schedules, offer encouragement and assistance with their studies, and create a supportive adult learning environment where students can apply what they are learning.

4. *Publicizing CDWFI and joining with other stake-holders:*

   CDWFI programs are an important model for colleges, serving both ECE and other nontraditional students, and efforts should be made to share information about promising practices and lessons learned and to engage with others to ensure that higher education institutions implement policies that help, rather than under-mandating placement assessment for all students, regardless of course load, to guide them to classes appropriate for their skill level; reviewing criteria for priority status for general education courses; promoting financial aid options, such as AB540, that can assist students regardless of immigration status; and developing financial aid options for students who attend less than part-time.

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