

Top Ten Four-Year College/University Child Development Programs Outside of California

Marian C. Fritzemeier

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Dr. Kaetlyn Lad

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### Applied Research Project Selection

As a new faculty instructor at Merced College in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Department, the researcher had the opportunity to learn more about the University of California, Merced, being constructed two-miles from the community college.

Merced County is one of five counties in California to implement a grant funded universal preschool for four-year-old children. Universal preschool teachers will be required to have a Bachelors' degree in child development; whereas now pre-school teachers are required to have an A.A. degree.

As the newest UC, the administration wants to offer innovative and unique programs, especially with a focus on math and science. University officials have asked the Merced College ECE instructors to help them create a four-year degree in Child Development in response to this grant. They are also working with Merced College Child Development Center's Director to build an on-campus child development center for their employee's children.

As a California instructor, the researcher is familiar with the child development related programs throughout California. As one of three Merced College ECE instructors involved in this process, the researcher wanted to discover what the best four-year United States colleges and universities outside of California are offering using qualitative research methods.

### Stages of Applied Research Project

With the anticipated opening of the University of California, Merced in the fall of 2005, the university staff is focusing much of their recruiting in the Central Valley. Of the 1,000 students being recruited for the first class, 600 of these students are to be from the Central Valley since it is an underserved population in the UC system. Because of the Central Valley focus, the

researcher decided to ask early childhood and child development instructors in the valley to recommend the top three four-year child development programs outside of California via E-mail. Instructors at the following colleges were E-mailed: CSU Sacramento, CSU Fresno, CSU Stanislaus, Fresno City College, San Joaquin Delta College, Modesto Junior College, and Merced College.

Over a six-week time period, 15 instructors responded. CSU Sacramento – 2 responses; CSU Fresno – 2 responses; CSU Stanislaus – 1 response; Fresno City College – 2 responses; San Joaquin Delta College – 3 responses; Modesto Junior College – 1 response; and Merced College – 4 responses. Two of the fifteen responders indicated that they taught in another area and were unable to answer the question. One of the fifteen ECE responders was unable to identify any child development programs outside of California. Of the fifteen responders, two of the initial responders forwarded the researcher's request to a colleague who then replied.

A total of twenty-two colleges were recommended by E-mail responses. When there were few colleges recommended by a majority vote, the researcher contacted her St. Mary's College advisor, Dr. Katelyn Lad for advice. It was then decided to select colleges regionally: West Coast; Mid West/South, and East Coast. Refer to Table 1 for the distribution of colleges regionally. Since there were not any colleges recommended for the West Coast, the researcher selected Oregon State for a total of twenty-three colleges to select the top ten from.

### Data Collection

As information was obtained through web sites on each of the top colleges selected, the researcher discovered that four of the recommended colleges only offered graduate degrees, not bachelor's degree. Therefore, the following colleges were eliminated from the study: Bank Street College, Erikson Institute, Columbia Teachers College, and Yale. A fifth college,

Harvard, did not offer a degree in child development and was also eliminated from the study. Only one college was included in the West Coast Region; five were selected from the Mid-West/South Region, and four were selected from the East Coast Region for a total of ten colleges.

The researcher then obtained information from each college's web site. The appropriate division or department was contacted via E-mail to request printed information that the program would send a prospective student and a copy of the four-year degree plan. Finally, the researcher located a contact person from each department or division to ask three interview questions via an E-mail interview. The questions were: describe the strengths of your program; what is unique about your program that draws students; and if another college wanted to implement a similar four-year degree, what would you recommend? A file folder was created for each program to contain the program information, contacts, and researcher's notes.

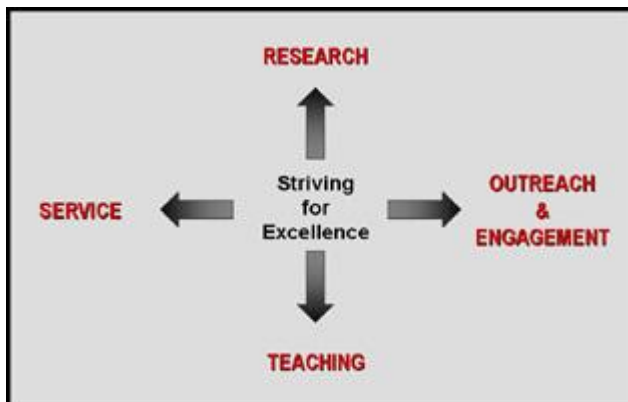
#### Data

The researcher began collecting information from programs about their four-year degree programs. Much of the information originally discovered about these programs did not directly relate to the four-year degree, but the researcher began to observe some patterns. For example, when the researcher first found information about graduate level programs, they were ignored. After several of the programs being studied featured both master's and doctoral programs in child development, the researcher began including that information thinking that perhaps that was one feature that made their program a top program.

After information was assembled and analyzed, nine themes began to emerge in the majority of the programs. The researcher discovered the following repeated themes that seemed to make a program a top program. A chart was created featuring the ten areas that seemed to be repeated. Refer to Table 2.

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First, the programs have a concise mission, vision, and/or values featured on their web site. Several of these were creative in presentation, like the poem and pictures featured on Penn State's Human Development & Family Studies Home page. Oregon State's mission and vision is guided by the values of four key words: creativity, connection, culture, and caring. Ohio State features a graphic representation of their Human Development and Family Science program's vision pictured below.



The second theme involves innovative names for degrees and programs as opposed to the more traditional “child development” only. Some of the programs are called: Human Ecology; Human Development; Human Services and Health Professions; Family Studies; Adolescent Development; Juvenile Justice & Youth Advocacy, and Institute of Child Development.

A third theme is that all ten programs offer core courses with specializations in a variety of areas, providing students more variety in programs and career options. For example, the Child & Family Studies Division at Wheelock College offers professional concentrations in Child Life, and Juvenile Justice and Youth Advocacy. They also offer a professional certificate in Community Based Human Services.

Additionally, the University of Minnesota offers an undergraduate degree in foundations of education: early childhood; initial licensure in early childhood and early childhood special

education, and a certificate in early childhood policy. Penn State's Human Development and Family Studies degree program offers four options: Children, Youth, and Family Services; Adult Development and Aging Services; Life Span Human Development and Family Relations; and Community Human Services. The University of Illinois' Human Development and Families Studies program offers a concentration in family studies and one in child and adolescent development.

Cornell University's Human Development degree requires students to complete foundation courses in three areas: Cognitive; Social/Personality; and Life Course, Social Contexts, & Social Policy. Then students can choose from among four concentrations, including: Cognitive Development; Biology and Human Development; Social and Personality Development; or Life Course, Social Context, and Social Policy.

An interdisciplinary approach is the fourth theme discovery. Seven of the ten programs offer students the opportunity to expand their knowledge through the integration of other fields and departments as part of their major requirements. For example, Syracuse University requires that students take courses in nutrition, psychology, ethnic minorities, and philosophy. Penn State students take courses in adult education, biology, sociology, nutrition, educational psychology, nursing, counseling education, and exercise as part of their four-year degree.

As a fifth theme, nine of the ten programs offer both a master's degree and a doctoral degree. Wheelock College only offers a master's degree. The graduate programs also offer various concentrations and interdisciplinary approaches.

On-campus child development center laboratories are the sixth theme observed by the researcher as all programs offer labs. Cornell University, Syracuse University, and the University of Minnesota offer multiple on-campus programs.

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Another theme is that all the programs offer internships and/or community service as part of their four-year degree. Wheelock College integrates field placement throughout all four years of their program. Ohio State offers a practicum in infant-toddler child care; a preschool/day care practicum; child and family studies practicum; group care practicum; practicum in family relations and human development research; supervised teaching; field work; and advanced field work.

The eighth theme is the observation of profession-related student organizations offered at seven of the ten programs. Iowa State University lists the most clubs, including the Family & Consumer Science Education and Studies Club; Family Resource Management Club; and the Family, Career, Community Leaders of America Collegiate Association. The researcher did not find these types of students organizations at Cornell University, the University of Michigan, or Penn State.

The final theme is that all ten institutions have a strong research focus. Research driven endeavors focus on current trends and information in critical areas. Some programs have specific research programs within their departments, such as Cornell's Family Life Development Center; Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center; Youth and Work Program; Cognitive Studies at Cornell; Cornell Language Acquisition Lab; and The Cornell Early Childhood Program. Other programs do research for Cooperative Extension Programs, such as Iowa State University. Instructors are widely and frequently published in books, scholarly journals, and/or for the general public. Many colleges list each faculty member's research interests and/or published research.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Primarily the fifteen people who responded to the E-mail regarding the best child development programs are colleagues the researcher personally knows. Relationships do pay off! Two colleges each received three votes: Bank Street College and Wheelock College. Unfortunately, after using their web site and calling, Bank Street College only offers a graduate degree and was eliminated from the study. Penn State, Columbia Teachers College, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, and Syracuse University all received two votes each. Columbia Teachers College was also eliminated because they only offer graduate degrees.

One of the original ten areas that the researcher thought a theme would emerge did not. At first it appeared that the information mailed to the researcher representing what the programs send to prospective students includes many career options for students. However, four programs did not send any information. The program at the University of Michigan is being suspended due to the death of a faculty member and another instructor is on loan to the U.S. Department of Education. Even though all the programs were requested to send printed information on their four-year degree, several only sent information regarding their graduate programs.

Despite multiple requests and requests to more than one person per program, only two people responded to the interview questions via an E-mail. One was to let me know that the University of Michigan's program is suspended. Unfortunately, the researcher can't locate the other response in all the papers she has.

Tracking down program specific information was more challenging than anticipated by the researcher. Everything seemed to take more time than allotted. Oregon State was the most difficult program to obtain information from. Their web site refers a person from one area to another while never answering questions a person may have. A phone call was returned by the



college. Wheelock College was the easiest program to obtain information from, followed by Syracuse University and Penn State.

Of all the programs evaluated, the researcher selected Wheelock College and Cornell University as the best overall child development programs. Strengths of Wheelock's program include integrated field experience throughout all four years of the degree; a brand new Juvenile Justice & Youth Advocacy concentration; the focus on social advocacy for children and families; and the interdisciplinary approach.

The longevity of Cornell's Human Development Department, founded in 1925, provides a strong research base. The multiple research facilities support the widely published research. Students have the opportunity to study abroad and participate in faculty members' projects and initiatives. The department's four areas of concentration offer students a diverse and interdisciplinary approach to their education.

#### Recommendations

To substantiate which child development programs are considered the best programs outside of California, a researcher will need to collect more than fifteen responses. It would be ideal if every child development instructor in California community colleges, state colleges, state universities, and private colleges could be surveyed. Any programs that are highly recommended based on a larger number of responses that were not included in this study should be studied before a final recommendation is made to the University of California, Merced.

Since trying to E-mail contacts regarding the interview questions only resulted in two responses, perhaps phone contact would result in more information. Ideally, if the University of Merced is serious about implementing the best child development program, at least the top three

colleges should be visited with appointments set up with people representing various facets of the programs.

Additionally, the researcher noticed a few areas that were not looked at in all ten programs but should be considered. The researcher should find out whether or not the programs offer a minor in a child development related area, such as the minor offered by Syracuse University.

Cohorts were also mentioned on the University of Michigan and Oregon State's web sites. Which other programs offer cohorts and how are the cohorts used in the programs?

The researcher should also spend more time looking for profession-related student organizations at the three programs where none were found.

Another aspect that should be researched is which programs offer summer fellowships, courses, and/or internships for professionals who are not currently enrolled students? With the programs' strong research focus, how are researchers disseminating their research to colleagues in the field in addition to publications?

Overall, much valuable information was obtained about ten four-year child development degree programs outside of California. As the researcher helps make program changes at Merced College, the information will be useful. Hopefully, the researcher will have the opportunity to share the information obtained with University of California, Merced officials.

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