

Case Study

As part of our landscape research on *Micro-credentials for Social Mobility in Rural Postsecondary Communities*, Digital Promise conducted case studies in partnership with four innovative postsecondary institutions that are using micro-credentials. Learn more about how these institutions are leveraging educator-industry partnerships to create real-time pathways for rural learners in their region.



Tennessee State University's Center of Excellence for Learning Sciences – ClearPath ECE



Introduction

As one of the oldest Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the nation, Tennessee State University has a storied history of significantly contributing to the educational journeys of generations of Black populations across the urban and rural south. An increasing population of Latina/Latino residents has contributed to the cultural and social context of the region. Amid the rural regions saturated with opportunities in factory and agricultural jobs (growing of tobacco, corn, and cotton), among the most common career paths is the field of education. While early childhood education (ECE) is a profession that requires consistent continuing education, some believe that those within the field are not viewed as professionals and are notably underpaid.

Spread throughout the expansive state of Tennessee, early childhood educators may have a range of educational and experiential qualifications as they pursue the noble work of caring for and teaching the youngest of citizens. However, challenges persist in the form of limited options for internet access and transportation. The ClearPath ECE initiative has been designed to help early childhood educators obtain credentials that reflect their past experience and recognize existing knowledge in a methodical way that can be shared with potential employers in an ever-expanding field with persisting limitations for growth and upward mobility. Given the prevalence of traditional experiences taking precedence over credentialing, some stakeholders maintained concerns about the acceptance of micro-credentials as an alternative pathway to traditional education, by local organizations and state entities, as well as concerns to motivate early childhood educators of the need to recognize the importance of furthering their education.

“The hope is that COVID has taught us enough of a hard lesson in a very practical way: How important it is to have someone care for our children properly so that we can work full-time – and work in fields that take us away from home. It changed how we view childcare, as more than just an added benefit to working additional hours, but a necessity for large-scale economic improvement for people of all socioeconomic groups. Even CEOs had to deal with their five-year-olds at home as much as admin assistants.”

– Celeste Brown (Developer)
Associate Research Director, Center of Excellence for Learning Sciences; Co-Project Manager, ClearPath ECE

Micro-credentialing Initiative Description

“The Early Childhood educators we serve had many barriers to overcome during the pandemic. Primarily, they had challenges with setting aside time to engage in ClearPath ECE. They were just trying to figure out what’s going to happen each day, ‘Am I going to have a job tomorrow? Are they going to call me?’ A lot of people didn’t have personal leave. A lot of people were not going to get paid if they didn’t work. Other educators worried about benefits, worried about their own childcare. When those childcare arrangements folded, they had the problem that a lot of their clients were having. So, it’s been an extremely emotional time and an extremely scary time for early childhood educators. They’ve done amazing things to make sure that their program still existed and that they serve their families. But, I will tell you the extra micro-learning was on the bottom of their list.”

– Paige Holmes (Developer)

Assistant Director, Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA); Co-Project Manager, ClearPath ECE

In an effort to specifically increase the preparedness and compensation of those in the field of early childhood education (ECE), The Center of Excellence for Learning Sciences (COELS) at TSU coordinated with Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA) and its Early Head Start Programs, launching the ClearPath ECE online learning community to promote college and career pathways in ECE through micro-credentialing. In support, the Tennessee Board of Regents awarded the COELS its Student Engagement Retention and Success grant to build an online community that educators could readily access; an effort to circumvent the lack of available college courses in rural areas. As a feature of the pilot, ClearPath ECE, along with TECTA, developed a state-wide program providing free training and academic tuition support to childcare providers. They base the competencies on the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) requirements. The aim is to create a means by which ECE participants can increase technical and soft skills, allowing them to become better educators, earn higher pay, and garner elevated recognition, thereby leading to better quality of life.

Paige Holmes, Assistant Director of TECTA and Co-Project Director of ClearPath ECE, stated that a six month delay to accessing grant funding – compounded by COVID-19 cases on campus – affected their ability to generate a timely and robust communications campaign to reach potential participants, significantly impacting program outcomes. However, recruitment was focused on reaching ECE professionals broadly via social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as referrals from TECTA, COELS Early Head Start Programs, and other higher education institutions in Tennessee. The program conveyed that earners would benefit from micro-credentials at multiple levels, as college students or seasoned professionals, from sharpening their skills and adopting new competencies. While early childcare providers have expressed interest in the program, the burden of competing obligations during a global pandemic—employment, academic, and personal— left less room for participants to substantively engage with micro-credentials.

Administrators will continue to focus efforts on developing the micro-credentialing platform to more fully support competency-based learning for current and prospective students, emphasizing a renewed focus on adjusting timelines, building out micro-credentialing platforms, translating modules to into Spanish to increase accessibility, and establishing additional strategic partnerships.

Collaborating Organizations

ClearPath ECE is a partnership of Tennessee's leading education and workforce development organizations, including:

- Tennessee State University's Center of Excellence for Learning Sciences
- Tennessee Early Childhood Training Alliance (TECTA)
- TSU Early Head Start Child Care Partnership & TSU Tennessee CAREs Early Head Start programs
- Tennessee Department of Human Services

Understanding the Value of Micro-credentials for Early Childhood Education Providers in Tennessee

"I think that micro-credentials are a great way to allow people to have the opportunity to achieve things that maybe otherwise they couldn't. I go back to the whole concept of making it micro, making it smaller, condensing the information so that you experience success quicker versus having a string of courses and months before you can see any gratification that comes from being able to successfully complete it. I think that part of it is great and new. I know for me and traditional classroom settings, when you talk about a semester, that's a long time. But if I can meet small goals and feel accomplished, then that might give me what I need to go on and not quit, and see that it's attainable."

– Yolando Ingram (Learner), Genesis Family Child Care Owner/Operator

Program participants engaged in the program identified as Black/African-American and Hispanic or Latina/Latino women between ages 18–45 with previous experience in the field. For these groups, time was of the essence. The participants who completed micro-credentials in the initial pilot cohort were explicit in conveying the challenges they faced completing modules alongside professional and personal responsibilities during the ongoing pandemic. In a field that often requires a tremendous amount of energy and attention to care for and educate young children, there is noted hesitation and a lack of energy – as well as attention – toward unfamiliar programming. However, given that many micro-credentials take less time to complete than other forms of credentialing, the successful completion of an initial module can be motivation to continue. Tabitha Bass, an earner from the second cohort of pilot participants, echoed those sentiments.

"It is an opportunity to learn information for professionals in our field to brush up on things that we should know. Technology is here. Everybody needs to do their part to become better at what we do and how we do it, by taking notes. We need to not only read, but check out other information, so that we have a wealth of knowledge of other things – not just early childhood information. We need to continue to grow and learn. You've got to start with basics. Everybody has to start with the basics. This particular program helps people to not only understand in little increments and be rewarded in increments. With each module that you complete, you get a little certificate. And it might be little to someone, but the more they add up, the more you can do with them."

– Tabitha Bass (Learner), Teacher/Coordinator, Breakfast Club; Extended Care. Woodmont Christian Preschool

Having recently earned her bachelor's degree, she initially perceived no need to complete micro-credentials, especially given her taxing schedule and limited time outside of work. However, her motivation came in the form of a desire to verify the program as potentially beneficial to colleagues in the field. Completing multiple micro-credentials reinforced for participants that they were effective and were convenient; thus, generally beneficial for their colleagues. However, they remained confident that while micro-credentials may reinforce resume credentials, their previously earned credentials and years of experience would serve as most beneficial for career advancement. Such a sentiment may explain the difficulty when recruiting participants from a professional field that demands significant amounts of attention and energy.

What's Next?

Considering the concerted effort across the nation to increase rates of pay and economic mobility for a field of predominantly women belonging to marginalized groups, TSU's Center of Excellence remains committed. To further establish a sense of community building, the program intends to develop a platform for ECE providers and educators that will allow them to network, connect, and support one another based on their shared experiences.

Administrators believe that there is a need for more micro-credentials that recognize critical thinking, problem solving, career planning, communication, and digital literacy skills. To assist in accomplishing this goal, the center aims to involve university faculty, along with ECE educators in the development of additional micro-credentials. Additional micro-credentials are in the process of development focused on leadership skills, infant toddler care, and eight NACE competencies.

In an effort to recognize the growing ethnic diversity of the region, the program is considering generating a substantive number of Spanish language modules for those unable to access the content in English. Most recently, the initiative has created and launched an orientation entirely in Spanish, an effort to accommodate the significant number of early childcare providers for whom Spanish is their first language.

Moving forward, Clearpath ECE also has plans to collaborate with non-profit organizations that will ensure the advancement of program and edtech data interoperability.

"In our past experience, the population determines. If we don't step up to meet the populations that we want to service where they are, we're going to totally lose them. If the ultimate goal is to increase the education, knowledge, and skill set of individuals, we're going to have to continue to find ways that are feasible and makes sense for the end-user. I think micro-credentialing is growing in a positive trajectory, and it's only going to continue and expand."

*– Dr. Kimberly Smith, (Recognizer)
Director, Center of Excellence for Learning
Sciences, Tennessee State University*