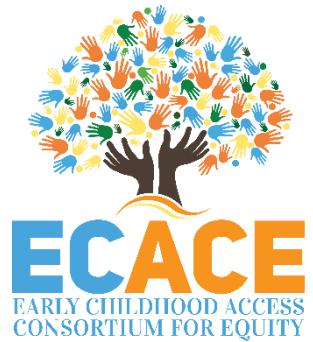


EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCESS CONSORTIUM FOR EQUITY

GOVERNOR JB PRITZKER

ILLINOIS BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION Chair Pranav G. Kothari • Executive Director Ginger Ostro

ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE BOARD Chair Lazaro Lopez • Executive Director Brian Durham



December 19, 2025

TO: Governor JB Pritzker
Senate President Don Harmon
Senate Minority Leader John Curran
Speaker of the House Emanuel "Chris" Welch
House Minority Leader Tony McCombie
Secretary of the Senate Tim Anderson
Clerk of the House John W. Hollman
Senate Higher Education Committee Chairperson Mary Edly-Allen
Senate Higher Education Committee Spokesperson Dale Fowler
House Higher Education Committee Chairperson Katie Stuart
House Higher Education Committee Spokesperson Dan Swanson
ECACE Advisory Committee

FROM: Ginger Ostro, Executive Director, Illinois Board of Higher Education
Brian Durham, Executive Director, Illinois Community College Board

RE: ECACE Third Annual Report (Public Act 102-0174)

On behalf of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE), we are pleased to submit the 3rd annual ECACE report. The ECACE Act ([Public Act 102-0714](#)) created the Consortium, comprising 62 colleges and universities and charged with collaborating to advance equity, support the upskill of the incumbent early childhood workforce, and to create seamless and streamlined pathways to higher education in Illinois.

The Act requires the Consortium to report annually on a variety of data and activities related to supporting working adults to access, persist, and complete credentials and degrees. We have also included an update on the ECACE Scholarship, which provides up to the full cost of attendance for eligible members of the Early Childhood incumbent workforce. We hope this report provides insight into the work, accomplishments, and challenges experienced by the Consortium for AY 2023-24. Due to technical issues, data on enrollment, persistence, and completion will be reported in a supplement.

Please feel free to contact Linda Ruhe Marsh, Senior Associate Director of Early Childhood Programs, IBHE (marsh@ibhe.org) or Marcus Brown, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success, ICCB (marcus.brown@illinois.gov) with questions, comments, or for additional information.

Sincerely,

Ginger Ostro, Executive Director

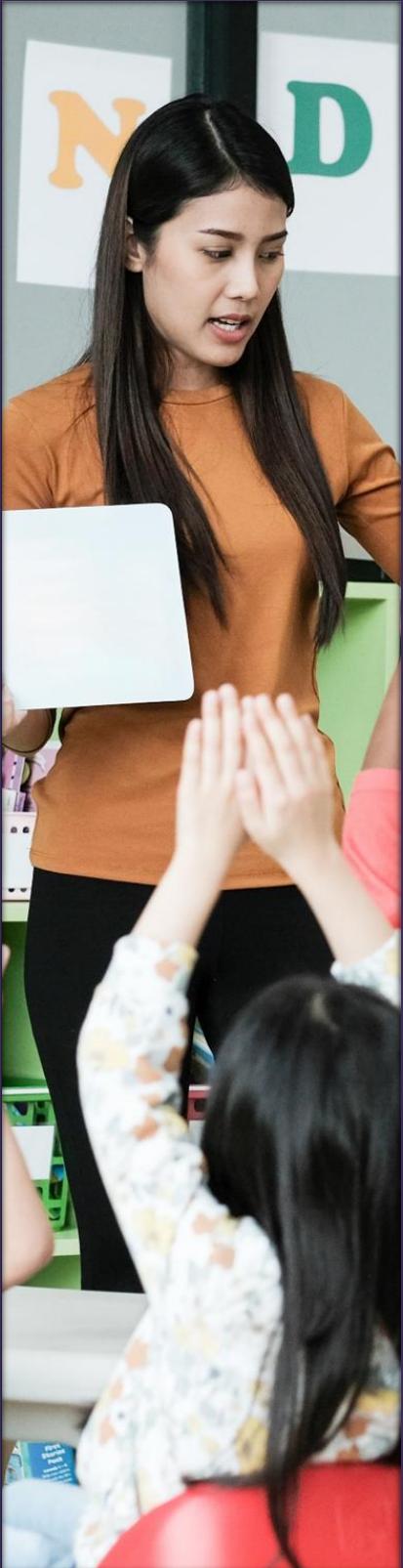
Brian Durham, Executive Director



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THIRD ANNUAL REPORT

of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
State Agency Partners	4
Executive Summary	5
Findings in Brief.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Consortium Infrastructure.....	8
ECACE Vision, Guiding Principles, and Goals.....	8
ECACE Advisory Committee	8
Consortium Working Groups and Communities of Practice	9
Reporting Working Group	9
Creative Course Delivery Working Group.....	10
Communities of Practice (CoP).....	10
ECACE Facilitating Collaboration Within and Across Institutions	11
Consortium Funding and Budget	12
Agency Funding and Budget.....	12
Grants to Institutions.....	12
Grants to Community Colleges and Universities	12
Consortium Member Contributions.....	13
Student Financial Support	14
ECACE Scholarship	14
ECACE Scholarship Recipients	14
Significant Growth in Scholarship Awards and Broad Reach by Sector	15
Demographic Consistency Among Scholarship Recipients	16
Tuition and Net Price Data to Demonstrate Cost of Attendance.....	17
Debt Relief	18
Transforming Higher Education	20
Program Change to Increase Access.....	20
Course Modalities	20
Illinois Community Colleges Online (ILCCO).....	21
Supervised Field Experiences	21
Pathways for Student Advancement.....	22
AAS Transfer	23
Child Development Associate (CDA).....	24
Credit for Prior Learning (CPL).....	25
Academic and Holistic Student Support.....	26
ECACE Mentors.....	26
Early Childhood Faculty Preparation (ECFP) Grants	27
Outreach and Engaging Employers	29
Outreach by Workforce Development Navigators and Workforce Participation	29
Outreach by Higher Education Institutions.....	30
Evidence of Engagement and Responsiveness to Employers	31
ECACE Marketing Campaign - The ECACE Effect	32

Look Ahead: Consortium Sustainability in Phase 2	34
References	36
Appendix A. Legislative Requirements for ECACE Annual Reporting	37
Appendix B. ECACE Members and Institutional Representatives, AY 2023-24:	38
Appendix C. ECACE Advisory Committee Members, as of 12/31/24:.....	40
Appendix D. Creative Course Delivery Working Group Recommendations	41
Appendix E. ICCB Institutional Grant Expenditures.....	42
Appendix F. IBHE Institutional Grant Expenditures	44

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

State Agency Partners

ECACE is administered by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and supported by a steering committee that additionally includes the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC), Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC).



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The [Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity \(ECACE\)](#) was established under 110 ILCS 28 ([Illinois Public Act 102-0174](#), the ECACE Act) in July 2021 with the purpose of upskilling the early childhood incumbent workforce to meet the demand for well-qualified early educators in the state.¹ This report covers successes, challenges, and outcomes for Academic Year (AY) 2023-24 to meet Section 30² requirements of the ECACE Act.

This report includes legislatively required reporting, including the Consortium administration; tuition by enrolled members of the incumbent early childhood workforce; institutions' work to redesign the programs to support working adults; outreach to incumbent workforce members and employers; and evidence of engagement and responsiveness to the needs of employers. Data on enrollment, persistence, and completion will be included in a supplementary report. For the full legislative reporting requirements, see Appendix A. This Executive Summary provides limited data; more information can be found in the full report and in the appendices.

Findings in Brief

During AY 2023-24, ECACE achieved many notable things in service of upskilling early childhood incumbent workforce in Illinois. Key work included the following:

- **Financial Supports:** Removed financial barriers to higher education by distributing **\$76.4 million in scholarships to 4,694 recipients** and removing **outstanding debt for 1,509** total students.
- **Program Design and Modality:** Redesigned early childhood postsecondary programs and courses to be more accessible to the early childhood incumbent workforce. Over **86%** of Consortium institutions offered Online Asynchronous coursework.
- **Transfer Pathways:** Transferred **over 1,009 students** into four-year early childhood education programs, 29.6% percent of whom held an AAS degree; and provided credit for Child Development Associate to **278 students**, most of whom enrolled at community colleges.
- **Student Supports:** Offered holistic student supports, including mentors, coaches, and tutors to meet with each student **two to three times per term** on average and provide guidance and assistance to enrolled early childhood students; navigators to recruit and direct students to institutions, and other academic and wraparound supports to ensure persistence and completion.
- **Outreach and Engagement with the Workforce and Employers:** Conducted outreach through over **1,000** events with **over 20,000 members** of the incumbent workforce participating. Engagement with employers (reported over 850 unduplicated connections) to be more responsive to their hiring, retention, and professional development needs. The digital marketing campaign, 'The ECACE Effect,' used video testimonials from ECACE scholarship recipients to inform the workforce about the benefits of continuing their education, show how ECACE supports their goals, and highlight to stakeholders the program's positive impact and the need for their continued support.

In addition, this report provides a retrospective on ECACE outcomes **over the three years** since the Consortium's launch, using comparable data where available. From AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24, increased funding drove growth in scholarship awards, the number of scholarship recipients, and students receiving debt relief — enabling more early childhood educators to pursue higher education. See the "Student Financial Support" section on page 14 for details.

¹ "'Incumbent workforce' means an individual or a group of individuals working or having worked in the early childhood industry, including family child care and center-based care settings, Preschool for All school-based settings, and HeadStart, that serves children from birth to age 5 and includes teachers, assistant teachers, directors, family child care providers, and assistants" (Illinois General Assembly, 2021).

² 110 ILCS 28/30.

At the same time, not all outcomes followed the same trend. AAS transfer enrollment, reported employer outreach by the Consortium member institutions, and workforce outreach by navigators decreased in AY 2023–24 despite higher funding levels. AY 2023–24 also marked the second full academic year of scholarship access and redesigned programs, as well as the final year of federal funding. Funding uncertainty beyond June 30, 2024, likely limited institutions' and navigators' capacity to expand efforts and may have discouraged some students from enrolling or persisting in programs.

As the federal funding that supported the Consortium's work throughout its first three years come to an end, ICCB, IBHE, and institutional partners have led the consortium in reflecting on lessons learned and identifying sustainable practices that can inform future work of supporting early childhood educators in higher education. Building on these reflections, ICCB and IBHE have led the development of strategic plans at the institutional level and will oversee their implementation.

The Consortium will support the incumbent early childhood workforce through the following strategic priorities:

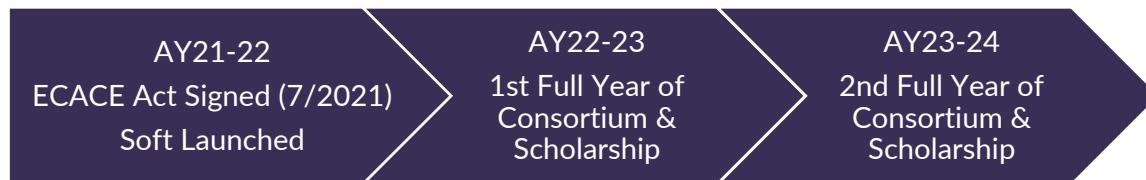
- **Seamless Pathways:** Higher education institutions will continue to redesign courses and implement transfer policies, creating seamless pathways for working adults in ECE.
- **Scholarships:** Scholarships will remain an essential component of ECACE to help students persist and complete their studies.
- **Mentors:** Institutions are encouraged to sustain the position or function of the mentor to maintain student support when possible.
- **Internal Collaborations:** Consortium members are encouraged to sustain their institutional teams, monitor students' progress, and ensure sufficient student support.
- **Cross-Consortium Partnerships:** Continued cross-consortium collaboration will strengthen professional networks and promote the sharing of best practices.
- **Data-Driven Progress Monitoring:** The Consortium will continue to collect and analyze data on a regular basis to measure the progress and impact of ECACE.

INTRODUCTION

The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE or Consortium) is a key strategy in the state's higher education strategic plan, "[A Thriving Illinois](#)," and codified in legislation as the [ECACE Act \(Illinois Public Act 102-0174](#), 110 ILCS 28). The rationale for the ECACE is based on evidence about the importance of well-prepared early childhood education professionals in providing high-quality programs for young children and their families; higher education pathways to upskill and retain the incumbent Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce; and a focus on providing working adults and others historically marginalized supported access to higher education degree and credential programs.

ECACE was "soft launched" in Academic Years (AY) 2021-22 with federal funding provided by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). Throughout this report, we will refer to "Phase 1" of the Consortium as the time period between AYs 2021-22 and 2023-24. During Phase 1, IDHS allocated over \$200 million in federal childcare funding to support ECACE activities, including funding for state agencies, institutional grants to build and develop their programs; and to provide for the immediate upskill of the early childhood workforce through scholarships and academic and holistic supports.

Figure 1. Timeline of the Consortium Launch and Implementation – Phase 1



As of June 2024, the Consortium comprises 62³ higher education institutions – 41 community colleges, 11 public universities, and 10 private non-profit institutions – working together to remove barriers for early childhood workers to enroll, persist, and complete credentials and degrees. See Appendix B for a full list of Consortium institutions in AY 2023-24 (visit [ECACE website](#) for the most up-to-date information). ECACE is administered by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) in partnership with other state agencies and is also supported by an Advisory Committee of early childhood employers, advocates, state agency partners, and others. IBHE and ICCB are jointly responsible for convening and providing administrative support to the Consortium. In AY 2023-24, the Consortium met five times--twice in-person and three times virtually. Meeting materials can be found on the [ECACE Website](#).

Data for this report was compiled from various sources, including quarterly grant reports IBHE and ICCB collected from institutions, navigator monthly reports, surveys of institutions, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission's (ISAC) ECACE Scholarship data, meetings, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and other sources. The federal funding ended in June 2024, moving ECACE into Phase 2 with significantly less financial support. While the Illinois General Assembly appropriated \$5 million in scholarships for students for AY 2024-25, there was no funding provided for institutional support. As ECACE enters Phase 2, this report looks back on AY 2023-24 and provides a look into some of the changes and growth that has happened in the last three years since the Consortium launch.

³ As of AY 2024-25, this number has changed to 60 because Rockford University is no longer part of the Consortium, and St. Augustine College has merged into Lewis University.

CONSORTIUM INFRASTRUCTURE

In addition to the 62 member institutions, an appointed Advisory Committee of diverse stakeholders provides guidance to the Consortium. Consortium members collaborate in ad hoc working groups to address issues that arise in ECACE program implementation and to put into action initiatives that are designated in the ECACE legislation. Members also participate in Communities of Practice to share best practices, problem solve and learn from each other. In AY 2023-24 there were two working groups and four communities of practice and their activities are described below. The Consortium also plays a key role in facilitating collaborations within and across its member institutions.

ECACE Vision, Guiding Principles, and Goals

The vision of the ECACE Initiative is to provide equitable access to higher education for the ECE workforce, enabling them to persist and complete their degrees. Importantly, the number one guiding principle is Centering Student Success. The other guiding principles of the Consortium are:

- Sharing leadership
- Fostering equality and respect among members
- Simplifying student navigation

More detailed information on the principles can be found on the [ECACE Website](#).

In Phase 1 of ECACE, the collective goal of the Consortium was to have an additional 4,933 incumbent early childhood students enroll and persist or complete a credential or degree by September 2024. Additionally, each Consortium member institution, in consultation with Consortium staff, set its own goals for Phase 1. We will report on the progress of meeting Phase 1 goals in the upcoming supplement to this report.

The ECACE Act requires the Consortium to set new goals for Phase 2 of this work. This work is currently ongoing with the member institutions being asked to provide feedback on proposed goals at the September 2025 in-person Consortium meeting. We will report on any new goals set in the annual report covering AY 2025-26.

ECACE Advisory Committee

The ECACE Act charges five state agencies – IBHE, ICCB, ISBE, IDHS, and IDEC – with jointly convening and co-chairing the Advisory Committee of the ECACE Consortium. The Advisory Committee exists to provide guidance on the operation of the Consortium.

The Advisory Committee's member composition, as defined in the legislation, includes representation from child care providers, school districts, early childhood advocates, legislators, other state agencies, labor unions, public and private colleges and universities, and other experts. The Advisory Committee's unique membership brings together cross-sector stakeholders that provide different and representative perspectives on issues facing the field of early childhood. Members are appointed by legislatively designated co-chairs of the Committee, state agency members, or the chairperson of the Illinois Senate and House Higher Education Committees. For the AY 2023-24 list, please see Appendix C. Visit the [ECACE website](#) for the most up-to-date information.

The Advisory Committee fosters dialogue between statewide partners and ensures Consortium members recognize a myriad of perspectives – including employers, institutions of higher education, incumbent worker students, advocates, and state agencies – as institutions of higher education develop policies and processes to implement ECACE legislation that supports the incumbent workforce as they upskill and earn degrees, endorsements, credentials, and certificates.

The Advisory Committee has formally adopted the following responsibilities:

- Act as champions for the Consortium and purposes of the [ECACE Act](#).
- Review and provide input on reports submitted by the Consortium.
- Provide advice and recommendations to the lead agencies and higher education institutions as they meet their responsibilities as detailed in the Act.
- Provide a forum to bring together employers in the early childhood care and education industry, higher education, and other stakeholders to share perspectives to best support the work of the Consortium.

As of July 1, 2024, the Advisory Committee, in response to legislative amendments to the ECACE Act, made changes to its processes. The Advisory Committee established term appointments for its members, determined by lottery, with overlapping 1-, 2-, and 3-year terms (see [Advisory Committee Members](#)). The Advisory Committee also moved from meeting quarterly to meeting twice a year. In addition, the Advisory Committee provided a clearer description to its members of how they are to advise agencies on Consortium matters. In AY 2023-24, the Advisory Committee met twice formally and two other times on an ad hoc basis to discuss ECACE Scholarship updates and to provide feedback for the new Department of Early Childhood. Beginning in AY 2024-25, the Advisory Committee will consult and provide feedback to the state agencies charged with setting new metrics and goals for the Consortium.

Consortium Working Groups and Communities of Practice

Working Groups were created to develop strategies, metrics, and implementation plans for discrete projects of the Consortium. In AY 2023-24, the Reporting Working Group and the Creative Course Delivery Working Groups were established. Additionally, ECACE established Communities of Practice (CoP) as a place for Consortium members to share challenges, uplift best practices, and engage in collective problem solving. CoP explored Curriculum Redesign, Debt Relief, Early Childhood Faculty Preparation, and Mentoring.

Reporting Working Group

The ECACE Act requires the Consortium to report on a variety of information. As such, IBHE and ICCB collect information from Consortium institutions. While institutions are receiving federal grant funding, their quarterly reports have included information beyond that which was required for statute (i.e., [ECACE Act](#)), and reporting has been required quarterly to allow for regular monitoring, technical assistance, and sharing of best practices. With the end of federal funding on June 30, 2024 (i.e., Phase 2), comes the opportunity to rethink Consortium reporting, including what and how information is collected, clarification of data definitions, and approaches for simplifying report submissions.

IBHE and ICCB convened a working group of the Consortium comprising both two- and four-year institutions to rethink future Consortium reporting. The charge of the committee was to advise on a plan to address required reporting requirements in a way that both elevates the great work of institutions and seeks to minimize time and effort. The working group met four times from April to June 2024. Together, the working group made recommendations on reporting questions that can be eliminated (e.g., debt relief), sections that can be simplified (e.g., program design), and data terminologies that need to be more clearly defined. It also included recommendations on the frequency, format, flexibility, and differentiation of the reports.

Based on the recommendations, the ICCB and IBHE teams finalized the program report, switched to an online submission system, shifted reporting dates to align with institutional term ends, and started collecting streamlined reports in the fall of 2024.

Creative Course Delivery Working Group

The Creative Course Delivery Working Group was convened in March 2024, with the charge to explore programmatic and student support needs where inter-institutional collaborations could provide streamlined and student-centered experiences and strengthen and enhance programs. The working group discussed how to address those needs most effectively, considering the impact on students and participating institutions. They then made recommendations for collaborative arrangements that would address student and programmatic needs. This group was charged with thinking about the transition in Phase 2 when ECACE funding would end and how the Consortium could come together collectively, with creative course delivery options a focus/frame for collaboration. The working group charge follows the intent of the ECACE Act, which stipulates that course sharing and inter-institutional collaboration should be available to collectively support students by ensuring that students have access to programs and courses and can progress in their programs in a timely manner.

The working group consisted of representatives from community colleges and public and private four-year institutions. They met biweekly via Zoom from March 15, 2024, to June 7, 2024. The working group identified and discussed student and programmatic needs that could be addressed by collaboration among Consortium members. They brainstormed potential projects focused on collaborations in program content and delivery and student support needs. Speakers from Illinois Community Colleges Online (ILCCO) and Great Plains-IDEA addressed the group, explaining structures that were available for course and program sharing. The working group also considered asset mapping as a tool for creating strength-based collaborations among Consortium institutions.

The working group identified criteria that would inform decisions on collaboration and developed recommendations for potential projects that met recognized student and programmatic needs. The recommendations were presented to the Consortium and approved on June 26, 2024. The full recommendations are in Appendix D.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

As noted above, the CoPs were utilized by the Consortium to provide members with an opportunity to share best practices and challenges. All CoP discussed below took place throughout AY 2023-24.

The Curriculum Redesign CoP was established in May 2023, to provide a space for interested four-year programs to explore options to redesign their programs-and offer more streamlined pathways to the BA degree for AAS and other transfer students. This community of practice had four focus areas: competency-based programming, course modularization, variable credit courses, and credit for prior learning. A retreat in June was followed by biweekly Zoom sessions, July through August, on each of the focus areas, facilitated by Consortium faculty with expertise in those areas. In fall of 2023, the community of practice came together to hear guest speakers from the Competency Based Education Network discuss changing faculty roles in redesigned programs and institutional impacts of alternative programming (financial aid in particular).

In December 2023, Consortium four-year program members were surveyed about their program redesign efforts. All 21 programs indicated that they had done or were engaged in program redesign. All had modified their instructional delivery modalities; 75% were redesigning curriculum, either modularizing courses, offering variable credit or utilizing competencies as a curricular basis. 85% had incorporated credit for prior learning into their programs.

Debt Relief CoP meetings were held in early March 2024 to discuss how to use the funds available for student debt relief. Both two and four-year programs participated. Institutions discussed strategies for identifying students who would be eligible for this assistance and the procedures followed in disbursing the funds.

The Early Childhood Faculty Preparation (ECFP) CoP met through the winter of 2024. Four Consortium institutions – Illinois State University, National Louis University, Lewis University and the University of Illinois Chicago – were funded to prepare cohorts of graduate students to become Early Childhood education faculty at community colleges and universities. The CoP brought the faculty and administrators from the four programs together to describe the vision and structure of their programs, discuss their practices in recruiting and selecting students, and compare strategies in implementing the program. The community of practice also considered barriers and challenges, both students' and institutional. Success strategies were also shared, and the community of practice looked ahead to the conclusion of their programs when the funding period ended.

The Mentoring CoP for the Consortium four-year programs met through the summer and into the fall of 2023. Members discussed the challenges with enrollment growth and being able to support students. They also described the varieties of roles they held as mentors: academic and success coaches, advisors, guides and interfaces for students with institutional offices such as financial aid and the registrar. Many mentors helped students prepare for the Early Childhood content test required for teacher licensure.

ECACE Facilitating Collaboration Within and Across Institutions

Institutions have indicated throughout the first three years of the Consortium that important benefits of the Consortium include that it has strengthened relationships, collaboration, and the sharing of ideas across institutions. In a 2023 survey, 94 percent of institutional respondents believed the Consortium had increased collaboration across Illinois' higher education landscape. In a 2024 survey, institutions indicated an interest in continued regular Consortium meetings and an interest in continuing to have state agencies convening communities of practice and working groups to support ongoing collaboration.

Institutions also reported that ECACE increased collaboration and work within institutions. Institutional representatives were deemed to be liaisons between the Consortium and their individual institutions; institutional representatives for the Consortium were charged with convening an institutional team at their campus, with whom they would work to complete ECACE and Consortium work. Institutional teams often included a mentor, department head, early childhood faculty, financial aid officer, and more. Through these regular meetings and communications, institutions shared that relationships were established or made stronger, and they learned more about other work in the institution. Some institutions said that the collaboration led to better systems to track data on student enrollment and completion. Others mentioned that the collaboration led to a more student-centered focus, with more meetings and engagement around supporting student success.

CONSORTIUM FUNDING AND BUDGET

This section reviews the Consortium funding and budget, institutional grants, and member contributions as required by the ECACE Act.

Agency Funding and Budget

When the ECACE Act was signed, Governor JB Pritzker announced funding to establish the Consortium, aimed at supporting higher education in creating continuous pathways for working adults and upskilling the early childhood incumbent workforce over three years (AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24). IDHS allocated over \$200 million in federal childcare funding to support this initiative. The majority of this funding, over \$177 million, was distributed to IBHE, ICCB, and ISAC to administer ECACE. See Table 1 below for details on the expenses for each agency.

Table 1: Phase 1 Consortium Budget by Agency, AY21-22 to AY23-24

Agency	AY21-22 Expenses	AY22-23 Expenses	AY23-24 Expenses	Three-Year Total Expenses
IBHE	\$319,372	\$7,681,089	\$18,891,662	\$26,892,123
ICCB	\$576,365	\$10,484,124	\$19,938,407	\$30,998,896
ISAC	\$6,162,053	\$33,001,012	\$74,671,105	\$113,834,170
IDHS	\$583,000	\$2,564,327	\$2,572,940	\$5,720,267
Total	\$7,640,790	\$53,730,552	\$116,074,114	\$177,445,457

The purpose of funds going to IBHE and ICCB was to provide grants and support to higher education institutions and navigators, convene and support the Consortium and Advisory Committee, and “backbone” the Initiative. ICCB and IBHE provided grant funding, which includes both a base amount and per-student funding, to all Consortium institutions to fulfill the intentions and requirements of the ECACE Act. ICCB additionally provided grants to all community colleges for Illinois Community Colleges Online (ILCCO).

The purpose of the funds allocated to ISAC was to administer and distribute the ECACE scholarship, and the purpose of funds spent by IDHS was to employ regional higher education navigators.

Grants to Institutions

IBHE and ICCB provided grants to community colleges and universities to further this work by funding institutional goals. Additionally, IBHE offered Early Childhood Faculty Preparation (ECFP) grants to four universities to prepare diverse graduate students to become faculty for early childhood higher education programs. See more details about ECFP grant in the section “Transforming Higher Education” on page 20.

20

Grants to Community Colleges and Universities

Community colleges and universities were awarded grants that included both base funding and supplementary per-student funding based on institutional goals. The purpose of the institutional grants was to provide three years of funding (AY 2021-22, AY 2022-23, AY 2023-24) for institutions to:

- Support the development of a long-term, sustainable infrastructure tailored to meet the needs of working adults;
- Provide mentors and other academic and holistic supports to ensure persistence and completion;
- Develop pathways and programs to increase access, persistence, and completion of credentials and degrees and improve transfer; and
- Participate in the Consortium as active and collaborative members.

The most common use of funding by institutions was for personnel – creating new positions and subsidizing time for current positions to work on ECACE-related activities, including program development, mentoring, advising, and community outreach. Institutions also used grant funds towards debt relief, upgrades to classrooms (i.e., technology, lab spaces, furniture), tutoring, content test preparation, supporting students' professional development through conferences, and instructional supplies.

Appendix E and Appendix F include grant spending for the Consortium member institutions sub-awarded from IDHS through ICCB and IBHE.

Consortium Member Contributions

Institutions are required by the ECACE Act to report on “member contributions, including financial, physical, or in-kind contributions, provided to the Consortium.”⁴ Large contributions were not anticipated given the substantial grants received by institutions, the reduced timeframe institutions had to spend the grant money (e.g. two years versus three years), and initial challenges with the reporting structure.

In AY 2023–24, thirty-seven institutions reported providing contributions. Of these, 28 community colleges reported a collective contribution totaling \$2,118,960, while nine four-year institutions (comprising five private and four public institutions) reported a combined total of \$277,637. Nearly 58% of these contributions supported personnel and fringe benefits. An additional 12% was allocated to direct student aid, 13% to indirect costs and miscellaneous expenses, and 10% to supplies and equipment.

At the institutional level, contributions ranged from \$247 to \$594,501. Ten institutions reported contributions exceeding \$50,000; another ten contributed between \$10,000 and \$50,000; six institutions contributed between \$5,000 and \$10,000; and eleven institutions reported contributions below \$5,000. See Table 2 below for full details.

Table 2: Member Contributions Provided to the Consortium by Category, AY23-24

Category	Community College	Private Colleges & Universities	Public University	Grand Total	4-year Total	Category %
Personnel	\$1,031,498	\$62,372	\$44,814	\$153,068	\$107,187	48%
Fringe Benefits	\$239,577	\$2,552	\$5,700	\$17,804	\$8,252	10%
Travel	\$24,371	\$270	\$2,500	\$5,610	\$2,770	1%
Equipment	\$104,327	\$0	\$200	\$200	\$200	4%
Supplies	\$127,980	\$20,274	\$7,200	\$30,980	\$27,474	6%
Contractual Services	\$44,347	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$324	\$0	2%
Occupancy	\$35,733	\$24,700	\$0.00	\$24,700	\$24,700	3%
Training and Education	\$500	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	0%
Direct Aid to Students	\$248,258	\$0	\$47,000	\$47,000	\$47,000	12%
Other/Miscellaneous	\$142,533	\$167	\$0.00	\$167	\$167	6%
Indirect Costs	\$119,838	\$59,885	\$0.00	\$59,885	\$59,885	7%
Total	\$2,118,960	\$170,222	\$107,414	\$338,893	\$277,637	100%
# Made Contribution	10	5	4	37	9	
Count by Sector	41	10	11	62	21	

⁴ 110 ILCS 28/30(8).

STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT

This section highlights the development, impact, and reach of the ECACE scholarship program from AY 2021-22 through AY 2023-24. The program has supported over 7,200 scholarship awards to a total of 5,390 unduplicated⁵ incumbent early childhood workforce students, helping cover cost of attendance (COA). The data show consistent growth in participation, institutional reach, and funding, while the distribution of scholarships across racial and ethnic groups remained relatively consistent from AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24.

This section also explores the out-of-pocket costs—including tuition and fees—and potential debt incurred by incumbent early childhood workforce members. In AY 2023-24, students from community colleges and public universities got scholarships that covered up to their full COA, resulting in a net price of \$0. Most ECE students enrolled in nonprofit private universities likely had at least their tuition and fees covered.

Consortium institutions were encouraged to use ECACE grant funds to eliminate outstanding balances and financial holds that might prevent students from continuing, returning, or completing a degree or certificate. Across AYs 2022-23 and 2023-24, institutions provided debt relief to 2,166 students.

From AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24, the ECACE Scholarship was funded through federal COVID-19 relief funds to support incumbent early childhood workforce members pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees or certificates at Consortium institutions in Illinois. The scholarship covered up to the total cost of attendance after other grants and scholarships were applied, including not only tuition and fees, but also expenses such as books and supplies, housing, and transportation.

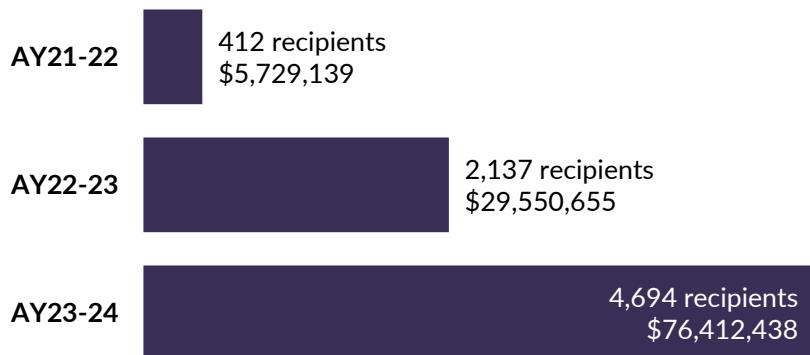
ECACE Scholarship

As noted on above, ISAC received federal funding for the ECACE Scholarship. Since AY 2021-22, ISAC has provided over \$111 million in scholarships to over 5,000 recipients. Unless otherwise specified, all the charts in this section were created based on reports and data from ISAC, as detailed in the References section on page 35.

ECACE Scholarship Recipients

In its first three years, the ECACE Scholarship saw substantial interest and participation, providing about 7,240 awards⁶ (5,390 unduplicated recipients count) totaling over \$111 million. The program expanded significantly each year: total scholarship awards increased from \$5.8 million for 412 students to \$29.6 million for 2,137 students, and then to \$76.4 million for 4,694 students in AY 2023-24.

Figure 2. Expenditures and Recipients of ECACE Scholarship, AY21-22 to AY23-24



⁵ The same students may have received scholarship awards for more than one year.

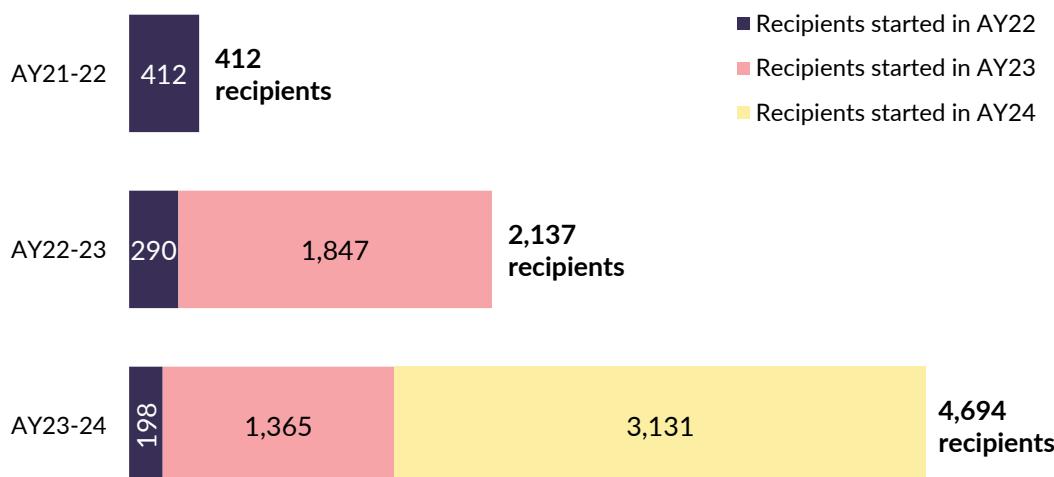
⁶ The same students may have received scholarship awards for more than one year.

A closer look at scholarship recipients over the years reveals that a total of 5,390 **unduplicated** students received ECACE Scholarships during the grant period from AY 2021–22 to AY 2023–24.

- Recipients Started in AY 2021–22
Among the 412 recipients in AY 2021–22, 70.4% (290) received the award again in AY 2022–23, and 48.1% (198) received it for a third year in AY 2023–24. This group corresponds to the left segments (in purple) in Figure 3.
- Recipients Started in AY 2022–23
An additional 1,847 students began receiving the scholarship in AY 2022–23, with 73.9% (1,365) continuing in AY 2023–24, indicated by the middle segments (in pink) in Figure 3.
- Recipients Started in AY 2023–24
In AY 2023–24, 3,131 students received the scholarship for the first time, these students make up the right segment (in yellow) in Figure 3.

The high renewal rates suggest that the ECACE Scholarship, along with its holistic support model, may have contributed to student persistence in their programs. Students who did not receive the scholarship in subsequent years may have completed their degree or certificate programs.

Figure 3. The Unduplicated Counts of ECACE Scholarship Recipients by Cohort, AY21-22 to AY23-24



The smaller number of recipients and expenditures in the first year was expected, as AY 2021–22 served as a soft launch and scholarships were not disbursed until March 2022. During that year, only 51 of the 61 Consortium member institutions had scholarship recipients. This number increased to 60 in AY 2022–23, and by AY 2023–24, all 62 member institutions were represented—highlighting the program’s expanding reach. The following sections present scholarship awarding data using **duplicated counts**, as the analysis focuses on trends by academic year. The available snapshots reveal clear trends of substantial growth in the number of awards and institutional reach, as well as shifts in recipients’ academic level and enrollment status—while the demographic profile remained relatively consistent.

Significant Growth in Scholarship Awards and Broad Reach by Sector

From AY 2021–22 to AY 2022–23, all sectors experienced substantial growth in recipient counts: a 7.5-fold increase at community colleges (from 127 to 949), a 4.5-fold increase at public universities (from 119 to 544), and a 4-fold increase at private institutions (from 166 to 644). The recipient count more than doubled across the sectors in AY 2023–24. See Table 3 for more details.

Table 3. Number of ECACE Scholarship Recipients by Sector, AY21-22 to AY23-24

Sector	AY21-22	AY22-23	AY23-24
Community Colleges	127	949	1,930
Public Universities	119	544	1,142
Private, Nonprofit Institutions	166	644	1,622
All Consortium Institutions	412	2,137	4,694

Note: The counts of scholarship recipients included duplicated counts that received scholarships in multiple years from AY 22 to AY 24.

Despite overall growth in scholarship recipients, the distribution of funds remained relatively steady for public universities, holding between 31% and 34% of total awards. Community colleges saw a significant increase in their share of funding—from 15% in AY 2021–22 to 28% in AY 2022–23, and 25% in AY 2023–24—while private institutions experienced a decline, from 54% to 39%, then slightly rising to 41%. Community colleges not only demonstrated the largest percentage increase in award counts but also gained a greater share of total funding. See Table 4.

Table 4. Expenditure of ECACE Scholarship by Sector, AY21-22 to AY23-24

Sector	AY21-22	AY22-23	AY23-24
Community Colleges	\$874,28 (15%)	\$8,150,169 (28%)	\$18,991,428 (25%)
Public Universities	\$1,770,688 (31%)	\$9,988,00 (34%)	\$26,021,054 (34%)
Private, Nonprofit Institutions	\$3,084,271 (54%)	\$11,412,482 (39%)	\$31,399,956 (41%)
All Consortium Institutions	\$5,729,139	\$29,550,655	\$76,412,438

Demographic Consistency Among Scholarship Recipients

A closer look at recipients' race/ethnicity profiles shows that the distribution of scholarships across racial and ethnic groups remained relatively consistent. Approximately 45% of recipients were White, 20% Black or African American, 18% Latino, 2% Asian, and about 15% from other ethnic backgrounds. This racial makeup closely mirrors that of Illinois' early childhood workforce in licensed childcare centers, as reported in 2020.⁷

Table 5. The Distribution of ECACE Scholarship Recipients by Race/Ethnicity, AY21-22 to AY23-24

Race/Ethnicity	AY21-22	AY22-23	AY23-24
White	43%	46%	43%
Black or African American	21%	19%	21%
Hispanic/Latino	17%	18%	17%
Asian	2%	1%	2%
More than one race/ethnicity	5%	4%	5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	<1%	<1%
Prefer not to answer	2%	2%	2%
Unknown race/ethnicity	10%	10%	10%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%	<1%

⁷ Whitehead, J. (2021). *Illinois' Early Childhood Workforce 2020 Report*. Bloomington, IL: INCCRRA.

The age and gender distribution of ECACE scholarship recipients remained relatively consistent from AY 2021-22 through AY 2023-24. Recipients tended to be older than traditional college students, with the percentage of students over age 30 increasing from 44% to 46%, and then to 50% – a trend that aligns well with the program’s target population. Most recipients were women, with approximately 90% identifying as female. From AY 2021-22 to AY 2023-24, the geographic distribution of recipients shifted toward more incumbent ECE students living in downstate areas, increasing from 39% to 50%, then slightly declining to 43%. In the same period, the collar counties accounted for 41%, 33%, and then 36% of recipients, respectively. The percentage of recipients living in Chicago fluctuated between 17% and 21%.

Academic Level and Enrollment Status Shifts

In AY 2023-24, ISAC expanded ECACE Scholarship eligibility to include freshmen and sophomores at four-year institutions, as well as graduate students pursuing a professional educator license or endorsements in early childhood, special education, bilingual, or ESL education. As a result, there was a notable shift in recipients’ academic standing: juniors decreased from 37% of total awards in AY 2022-23 to just 13% in AY 2023-24, while graduate students appeared for the first time, accounting for 18% of recipients. Additionally, the share of part-time students increased significantly—from 46% to 64%, which is likely to reflect a growing number of community college recipients, as well as the inclusion of graduate students.

Taken together, these trends highlight the program’s substantial growth, broader institutional reach, and expanded eligibility, while maintaining demographic consistency among recipients throughout the grant period. Please refer to the previous reports and briefs for more details.

Tuition and Net Price Data to Demonstrate Cost of Attendance

Section 30 of the Act requires reporting on “tuition rates charged, and net prices paid, reported as including and excluding student loans, by enrolled members of the incumbent workforce” (Illinois General Assembly, 2021). This reporting requirement helps to understand out-of-pocket costs, including tuition and fees, and potential college debt incurred by incumbent Early Childhood workforce members.

For AY 2023-24, the Consortium used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to estimate out-of-pocket costs for students in early childhood education programs at Consortium institutions. During AY 2023-24, the scholarship was generously funded, enabling nearly 4,700 eligible students who applied to receive awards. At community colleges and public four-year institutions, students were eligible for up to the full cost of attendance (COA)^{8,9}, resulting in a net price of \$0. Consequently, it was unlikely that many students would take out additional loans.

At private institutions, the scholarship was capped at \$33,558 (up to COA), the COA for full-time students at the most expensive public four-year institution in AY 2023-24. The average ECACE Scholarship awarded at private institutions was \$19,359. With 64% of private institution recipients attending part-time (46% half-time and 18% enrolled in at least three credit hours), and some institutions supplementing scholarships with institutional grants, tuition discounts, and alternative scholarships, out-of-pocket costs were significantly reduced. Most students likely had at least their tuition and fees covered.

Some private students, especially those enrolled full-time, may have experienced a gap between the scholarship amount and their full COA. Six of the ten private, nonprofit institutions had tuition rates lower than the scholarship cap, and two had a COA lower than the cap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025).

⁸ Total cost of attendance (COA) is the sum of published tuition and required fees (lower of in-district or in-state for public institutions), books and supplies, and the weighted average for room and board and other expenses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

⁹ The ECACE Scholarship Award Caps for two-year institutions was \$18,262 in AY 2023-24.

IPEDS data show the estimated costs students might have incurred without the ECACE scholarship. Table 6 shows, by sector, tuition, COA, net price, and student loans incurred by full-time students at Consortium institutions. Without the ECACE Scholarship, full-time students would have faced an average net price ranging from approximately \$6,200 to \$22,000.

Table 6. Estimated Average Cost for Full-Time Students without Scholarship, by Sector

Sector	Average Tuition & Fees for Full-Time Students, AY23-24	Average Cost of Attendance for Full-Time Students, AY23-24 *	Average Net Price** for Students Awarded Grant or Scholarship Aid, AY22-23	Average Loan** for Full-time First-time Students, AY22-23
Community Colleges	\$4,473	\$19,990	\$6,194	\$4,864
Public Universities	\$13,640	\$30,511	\$13,969	\$6,522
Private, Nonprofit Institutions	\$29,176	\$45,445	\$21,676	\$7,040
All Consortium Institutions	\$10,084	\$25,887	\$10,071	\$5,531

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2023, 2024 IPEDS Data Center.

*Data in the table represents cost of attendance (COA) for full-time students living off campus, without family, in-district/in-state.

** Since net price and average loan data for AY 2023-24 are not available as of December 2025, we are using the AY 2022-23 net price as a proxy.

Debt Relief

Consortium institutions were encouraged to use ECACE grant funds to eliminate outstanding balances and financial holds that might prevent students from continuing, returning, or completing a degree or certificate. Over AYs 2022–23 and 2023–24, institutions provided debt relief to 2,166 students: approximately 76% (1,650) from community colleges, 15% (333) from private nonprofit universities, and 8% (183) from public universities.

Implementing debt relief required coordination across departments and, at times, between institutions; and new administrative processes were established to facilitate this effort. Institutions encountered several challenges, including but not limited to privacy concerns, debts already sent to collections, and potential impacts of debt relief on students' scholarship payments, according to the periodic program reports (PPRs) from member institutions.

Institutions reported that initially, many students were unaware of the availability of debt relief. Some students hesitated to engage due to embarrassment regarding unpaid balances or concerns about potential future tax liabilities. Additional obstacles included confusion over required documentation and perceptions that the process was overly complex. Through more intentional communication efforts, including engagement with navigators, institutions began to identify more students in need of support.

In addition, four-year institutions were encouraged to broaden their debt relief efforts during the final six months of the grant period (i.e., January–June 2024). They were advised to consider using funds to reengage former students with financial holds and to support repayment of balances that could pose a financial burden or impede continued education. To support these efforts and address reported challenges, IBHE facilitated a Community of Practice, enabling institutions to share strategies for identifying debt, engaging students, and managing the debt relief process effectively.

In response, several institutions established dedicated cross-functional teams—often comprising financial aid offices, registrar offices, and ECACE program staff—to oversee implementation and provide direct support to students. These teams employed multiple outreach methods, including surveys, targeted emails, telephone calls, and interest forms. However, response rates were sometimes limited due to outdated contact

information and students' concerns about scams. Institutions kept working to update contact records and build trust to improve student engagement.

For example, at the University of Illinois at Chicago's College of Education, the ECACE team implemented a comprehensive strategy involving feedback loops with university partners, the assignment of specialized staff to provide individualized assistance, and diverse communication channels to clarify requirements and foster trust.

These collaborative efforts contributed to a significant increase in the number of students served from AY 2022-23 to AY 2023-24. The total number of students receiving debt relief rose by 130%, from 657 to 1,509. The number of students who received debt relief in AY 2023-24 (compared with AY 2022-23) was as follows:

- Community colleges: 1,111 students (a 106% increase from 539);
- Public universities: 165 students (an 817% increase from 18);
- Private four-year institutions: 233 students (a 133% increase from 100).

Table 7. The number of Students Who Received Debt Relief, by Sector, AY22-23 and AY23-24

Sector	AY22-23	AY23-24	Total
Community Colleges	539	1111	1,650
Public Universities	18	165	183
Private, Nonprofit Institutions	100	233	333
All Consortium Institutions	657	1509	2,166

The Consortium has made great strides in removing barriers for the incumbent early childhood workforce members to access, persist, and complete their higher education journeys. Institutions have focused on adjusting their programming to increase access; developing pathways for student advancement; providing academic and wrap-around supports to students; collaborating within and across institutions.

Program Change to Increase Access

The number one guiding principle of the Consortium is to center on student success. To do this, Consortium institutions refined their early childhood programs and curriculum in response to what they had learned about their students' learning styles, preferences, and prior knowledge. The sections below describe some of these changes to make them more accessible and to address the needs of the incumbent workforce and the rationales for making them.

Course Modalities

By the third year of the grant, most of the institutions had adjusted the way they offer courses to better fit the schedules and preferences of working adults. This included the creation of new online courses, full online degree programs in both synchronous and asynchronous formats, hybrid programs and more evening and weekend course options (see Table 8). Illinois State University hired instructional designers to develop online interactive modules that ensure consistent learner experience and high student engagement. Other institutions, including St. Augustine, Harper College and others, adopted Hy-flex technology, which allows students to choose whether to attend a class in person or virtually at a scheduled time. Harper College reported high student satisfaction with the Hy-flex option¹⁰. In some institutions, this shift in the modality of course instruction was expanded beyond early childhood programming. 63% of the four-year public programs and all the private four-year programs reported that general education courses were available in online synchronous and asynchronous and hybrid instructional delivery systems.

Although asynchronous online delivery of courses was available for most programs, there was a recognition that students desired the social and interactive aspects of taking classes. Twenty-two of the two-year programs, nine of the public four-year programs and five of the private four-year programs offered synchronous online classes at least once a week. More than half of the public and 60% of the private four-year programs offered courses in-person in the evenings and weekends, as did 61% of the community college programs. Some made traditional daytime, in-person classes available at ECACE students' requests or to create a better fit with students' learning needs. The College of Lake County held classes onsite at a provider location for a cohort of the center staff, during lunch and naptimes. These creative strategies allowed students to network, build a supportive community, and often provide peer mentoring to one another.

In addition to class meetings, many programs featured in-person office hours (online, at the institution, or even in the community) and synchronous online discussion sessions. National Louis University pioneered this programming with synchronous online meetings called the Coffee House where students received support from faculty, advisors and peers for completion of competency-based coursework and retention in the program.

Some institutions offered accelerated courses (eight-week, instead of 16-week) and summer courses to help students graduate sooner; others, such as Rockford University, found students struggling with all eight-week courses and are shifting back to 16-week courses to better fit students' needs.

¹⁰ In spring 2024, ICCB and IBHE co-hosted information sharing and best practices in online and HyFlex course development and delivery.

Table 8. Percentage of Institutions Offering Various Course Modalities to the Incumbent Workforce, by Sector, AY23-24

Sector	In Person	In Person Evening or Weekend	Online Asynchronous	Online Synchronous	Hybrid
Community Colleges	83%	61%	85%	54%	N/A ¹¹
Public Universities	92%	54%	92%	85%	46%
Private, Nonprofit Institutions	80%	60%	80%	50%	70%
All Consortium Institutions	84%	59%	86%	59%	N/A

Note: The available course modalities didn't change much from term to term in AY23-24, and the data from Fall23 term were used to represent the whole academic year.

Illinois Community Colleges Online (ILCCO)

Central to the Consortium is cooperation among the members in ensuring that students at all member institutions have access to programs and are able to persist and complete a degree or credential in a timely manner. The ECACE Act says that:

The members of the Consortium shall operate jointly and in cooperation to provide streamlined paths for students to attain associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, certificates, and Gateways Credentials and other licensure endorsements in early childhood education. The priority shall be to focus on the incumbent workforce, which includes working adults who require programs of study that offer flexibility in the times courses are offered, location, and format.¹²

To aid in making community college courses more accessible to incumbent workers, the ICCB in conjunction with campus-based online and distance learning staff, supported the development of ECE online course offerings through [Illinois Community Colleges Online](#) course exchange. ILCCO spearheads the online and technology-enhanced education leadership for the Illinois Community College System. Thirty-nine Illinois community college districts can use the course exchange system to promote access to quality online learning and equitable learning opportunities for community college students.

ECACE online course offerings through ILCCO have been added to a section of the [ILCCO website ECACE](#). The site provides a link to the Online Course Exchange (OCE), where community college partners may log on with an email address and password. The OCE is designed to provide community college consortium members who are Gateways entitled to provide early childhood programs coursework online. Twenty-six of the Consortium community colleges offer one or more courses in their Early Childhood programs through ILCCO.

Supervised Field Experiences

All Consortium institutions include supervised field experience as part of their degree programs, allowing students to gain hands-on experience to supplement their academic coursework. Guided by the goals of ECACE, institutions made improvements to their field experience, student teaching and practicum requirements to better meet the needs of the incumbent workforce.

¹¹ At least three community college institutions qualitatively reported offering hybrid courses. This choice was not an option in two-year institutional reporting forms.

¹² 110 ILCS 28/20(b).

ISBE has created new flexibility for students pursuing teacher licensure, including allowing student teaching to be completed at the students' workplace, (provided their employers met ISBE standards¹³), and allowing student teachers to be compensated. As of June 30, 2024, all 21 four-year institutions allowed students to complete at least some of their clinical experiences at their workplace. Some institutions have assisted students in finding paid student teaching options. Olivet Nazarene University reported that some local school districts were hiring their students who had earned 90+ credits as long-term substitute teachers while they continued their coursework. Those students would be offered a paid student teaching position on-site. Similarly, Rockford University reported partnering with school districts to create positions for student teaching on a substitute license. Rockford students, however, would graduate without a teaching license and then student teach as post-baccalaureate students.

Additionally, ISBE has interpreted the requirement that Early Childhood students have experiences with all age ranges so that student teaching can be completed in a single placement, if field placements have included experiences with infants and toddlers, preschool-aged children and grades K-2. These flexibilities have been a boon for incumbent workforce students to balance education and employment. Institutions have also been responsive to student needs and preferences. For example, Illinois State University modified their student teaching protocols to provide greater flexibility to students. Students currently employed in a preschool setting had the option of doing eight weeks of on-the-job student teaching and eight weeks of student teaching in a kindergarten through second grade setting or doing three days a week of student teaching at their workplace and two days a week in a K-2 setting. Western Illinois University reported a video and discussion option for those who cannot leave their job to complete field placement hours at another age/grade level. Western Illinois University also used grant funds to hire a mentor teacher who met ISBE requirements to supervise student teachers as an option in-home daycare settings.

Northeastern Illinois University and Chicago State University offer credit for prior learning for work experience that can be applied to field experience credits and/or student teaching. Northeastern has modularized their field experience courses so students can apply their prior experience to meet the course requirements. Chicago State University added a portfolio course for students who are currently in the early childhood workforce. These students receive 3 credits for prior teaching experience and earn the other 3 credits by creating a professional portfolio.

Overall, institutions recognize the value of these changes to field experiences and student teaching in helping students persist and complete but also acknowledge that there are challenges. Governors State University described the difficulty faculty had in traveling to different workplaces to observe student teaching. To offset this challenge, the institution hired onsite staff who were trained to complete student teacher observations. They, and Blackburn College, have also evaluated videos of student teaching in lieu of some supervisory visits using programs like GoReact.

Pathways for Student Advancement

Early childhood education programs at Consortium institutions also expanded student advancement in ECE through providing pathways for AAS transfer, granting credit for the Child Development Associate (CDA) Consortium-wide, and awarding credit for prior learning at individual institutions.

¹³ Section 25.620 of the Illinois Administrative Code says that student teaching must be done under the active supervision of a cooperating teacher who is licensed and qualified to teach in the area, has three years of teaching experience, has received a proficient or above performance rating in the most recent evaluation, and is directly engaged in teaching subject matter and conducting learning activities in the area of student teaching. For early childhood students completing student teaching in a community-based early childhood setting, charter school, or non-public school, the cooperating teacher may hold a Gateways Level 5 credential while meeting other requirements (Illinois Administrative Code, 2022).

AAS Transfer

ECACE provides a pathway for individuals with an applied associate degree (AAS) degree to seamlessly advance to a baccalaureate degree program. Historically, the AAS was designed to be a terminal degree leading directly to employment. More recently, research has highlighted the benefit that teachers with higher degrees have on young children's development and education, sparking a national push for early childhood teachers to pursue their bachelor's degrees¹⁴. Section 130-10 of the ECACE Act requires Consortium four-year institutions to transfer the AAS degree in its entirety, ensuring that all general education and professional coursework in the AAS Early Childhood major are applied to the bachelor's degree. The ECACE Act states students transferring the AAS degree are admitted as juniors and cannot be required to take more credits for graduation than a student who began their studies at the institution as a freshman.¹⁵ This legislation is an innovative approach to guaranteeing credit mobility for AAS transfer students. The AAS Transfer is supported by the efforts of community college and four-year faculty and academic advisors, and mentors. Transfer pathways are supported by other statewide partners who collaborate with ECACE Consortium schools, including Grow Your Own – Illinois (GYO-IL).

From July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, four-year Consortium institutions reported transferring in 299 students with an AAS degree, representing 30 percent of early childhood transfer students. National Louis University, a private, urban institution, enrolled 54 percent of the AAS transfers, and Illinois State University accounted for 15 percent. Incumbent worker students enrolling in Consortium four-year institutions also transferred Associate of Arts (AA) and Associate of Science (AS) degrees (27 percent and 3 percent, respectively). A significant percentage, 27 percent of the transfer students, had at least 60 credits but no degree.

Table 9. Number of Transfer Students Reported by Four-year Consortium Institutions, AY22-23 and AY23-24

Degree	AY22-23		AY23-24	
	Number of Transfer Students	Percentage of Transfer Students	Number of Transfer Students	Percentage of Transfer Students
AAS	419	33%	299	30%
AA	372	29%	275	27%
AS	53	4%	27	3%
60+ credits	280	22%	276	27%
Other	144	11%	132	13%
Total	1,268	100%	1,009	100%

Comparing the numbers of transfer students enrolled from AY 2022-23 to AY 2023-24, there is an overall decline of 20%. For AAS transfers, that includes a 29% drop and for AA transfers, a 26% drop. AS transfers, a small proportion of the overall transfer population, dropped by 49%. The "Other" category, which could include transfers with less than 60 credits and no degree, dropped by 8%. Only those transfers with 60 or more credits and no degree remained about the same (a decline of about 1%).

This data is puzzling, since the numbers of those students in four-year programs receiving scholarships soared from 285 in AY 2022-23 to 2,735 in AY 2023-24. We can only speculate as to why numbers of transfer students fell, based on anecdotal evidence gleaned from institutional reports and check-ins with institutional teams. We had heard from some institutions that new transfer students were more reluctant to enroll, knowing that the grant was ending in June 2024 and scholarship funds and other supports were much less likely to be available to them. With just a year of funding guaranteed, students who anticipated needing two or more years

¹⁴ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.

¹⁵ 110 ILCS 180/130-10.

to complete their programs were understandably hesitant to make the financial commitment. Some institutions, recognizing the transfer students' dilemma, shifted focus in recruiting students and as scholarship eligibility expanded to other student populations, more new students were enrolled in graduate degree and certificate programs. Finally, the nature of the AAS degree may have been a factor in the decline of those numbers. Considered a terminal, professional degree, students choosing the AAS are preparing for the workforce and may not be considering transferring or even completing a BA degree. It's not unusual for AAS students to work for a few years and then return to school to improve their skills and their job mobility. The numbers seen in AY 2022-23 may have been as high as they were because they reflected a population deciding to return to school because of the scholarship, an atypical opportunity that incentivized them to continue their education.

All Consortium four-year institutions complied with the stipulations of the ECACE Act and created at least one pathway to the BA and often the Professional Educator License (PEL) for students transferring with an AAS degree. These pathways typically incorporated two main features: they applied the AAS early childhood coursework to the bachelor's program, either as meeting specific course requirements or as electives; and, in line with ISBE's more flexible teacher licensure requirements, restructured general education to be able to stay within the credit hour cap. Some four-year institutions modified their early childhood programs to create a better alignment with the AAS: dropping courses to stay within the credit hour cap (Chicago State University), separating preschool and primary content in courses to align more closely with the community college courses (Roosevelt University)⁸; modularizing courses according to learning objectives, competencies or course content and offering variable credit so that students do not need to repeat content covered or competencies attained at the two-year level.(Governors State University modularized their entire Early Childhood curriculum and rolled it out in Spring 2024.)

A few of the four-year programs used the Gateways competencies as the basis for curriculum and program organization (University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and National Louis University). In these cases, the pathway for the AAS degree transfer student was designed as building on the Gateways to Opportunity Level 4 competencies that are aligned with the AAS degree. The program at the four-year level was focused on the level 5 competencies plus any additional content and skills required for the PEL for students pursuing state licensure.

Even as the [ECACE Act](#) guaranteed smooth transfer of the AAS, the varieties of educational background and experience students brought to Consortium programs required greater flexibility in designing learning pathways for students than anticipated. Students transferring an AA degree generally were able to move seamlessly into the four-year ECE program, transferring all their general education coursework and the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) approved Early Childhood courses. Students with an AAS or coursework but no degree required more personalized advising and program plans. In year three, several four-year programs began a closer examination of their early childhood courses, modularizing content and providing variable credit that would allow recognition of prior learning through transferred coursework and work experience.

Child Development Associate (CDA)

In AY 2023-24, Consortium institutions provided credit for the Child Development Associate (CDA) to 52% more students (278) than in AY 2022-23 (183). The increase is not surprising, as the Consortium agreement to offer credit went into effect in January of 2023, mid-year of AY 2022-23, and indicates an increase in student awareness about the CDA policy. The CDA is a national industry credential that recognizes foundational competencies acquired through work experience and training, as demonstrated through an assessment, observation, and a portfolio.

In AY 2023-24, most students with a CDA (266, 96%) were provided credit through the community colleges; this is to be expected, as these institutions are often where many incumbent workforce members (re)start their educational journeys.

Table 10. Number of Students Awarded Credit for the CDA by Sector, AY22-23 and AY23-24

Sector	AY22-23		AY23-24		Total # of Students Provided Credit
	# of Students Provided Credit	# of Institutions that Awarded Credit	# of Students Provided Credit	# of Institutions that Awarded Credit	
Community Colleges	162	30	266	27	428
Public Universities	5	3	4	1	9
Private, Nonprofit Institutions	16	4	8	3	24
All Consortium Institutions	183	37	278	32	461

The Consortium adopted a policy to accept the Preschool CDA for credit as of January 31, 2023 and the Infant Toddler CDA as of January 31, 2024. The adopted policy requires institutions to award at least six semester hours (or the equivalent number of quarter hours) of meaningful early childhood credit to active CDA holders without contingencies. In other words, students are not required to be reassessed to receive the credit.

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)

The awarding of credit for prior learning (CPL) is a key strategy for programs working with adult, working students. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines credit for prior learning as the term used to describe various methods of recognizing and evaluating student learning from nonacademic sources (i.e., work experience, professional development, professional credentials earned on the job or in non-academic training programs) for the purpose of granting college or university credit and/or advanced academic standing. Research conducted by CAEL and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) has shown that adult students who participate in CPL save time (on average, 9-14 months in earning a degree) and money (depending on sector, adult students saved between \$1,500 and \$10,200) and are 17% more likely to complete their programs, compared to those without that experience.

All consortium institutions provide CPL through the alignment of credit-bearing coursework with the CDA. The ECACE Act requires all Consortium member institutions to offer 6 college credits equivalent to identified courses in the Early Childhood program to holders of a current CDA credential.

However, many of the two- and four-year ECACE programs also offer credit for work experience, professional development, and other credentials. A survey of the four-year programs that was completed in October 2023 showed that 85% of the programs provided Early Childhood course credit for prior learning. After the CDA, work experience was the most common source of prior learning credits, awarded by 60% of the respondents. Professional development was another source of credit, awarded by 25% of the respondents. 80% of the respondents said they used portfolios or other assessment tools in the credit-awarding process. The INCCRRA simulation protocol (the Mursion simulation) was used by 30% of the respondents; many of the ECACE institutions at both the two- and four-year levels were involved in the design and piloting of the instrument. The survey indicated that most frequently CPL credits were applied to introductory early childhood courses (65% of the respondents) and field experience courses (70% of the respondents). Less frequently the credits were applied to teaching methods courses (55% of the respondents) and student teaching (25% of the respondents).

Interest in CPL is high among all the Consortium institutions. An Afton Partners survey of Consortium members in April 2024 found that consistency in credit for prior learning policies and practices among Consortium programs was in the top three recommendations for the Consortium to pursue. This led to a Credit for Prior Learning working group being formed in AY 2024-25. The CPL working group will explore where consistencies exist in Consortium institutions' policies and procedures and where that consistency might be developed, while still respecting the autonomy of individual institutions.

Working group members will come from the two and four-year Consortium institutions, both public and private. For the first time, the working group will be led by co-chairs from a community college and a university. The working group outcome will be a set of recommendations for providing consistency in CPL/PLA policies and procedures; that will be reviewed for approval by the Consortium as a whole.

Academic and Holistic Student Support

In its third year, ECACE Consortium institutions continued to provide academic and holistic support to ECE workforce members returning to school to assist them in their successful transition to higher education and progress to a degree. Incumbent worker students may have been out of school for long periods and need to refresh skills such as academic writing, math, and time management. Some members of the ECE workforce face challenges returning to school, particularly as the workforce comprises primarily women who are often balancing fulltime employment, family needs, and other responsibilities.

Therefore, during AY 2023-24, many schools in the ECACE Consortium invested in hiring additional academic support to help students achieve their academic goals of degree, certificate, and credential completion. Institutions supported incumbent worker students to persist and complete in different ways, including providing targeted academic advising and full access to campus-based resources, including wellness, academic tutoring, and computing support. Ultimately, the primary way institutions provided additional support for early childhood students was through their grant-funded mentors. In addition to mentors, institutions reported coaches and tutors met regularly with ECE students and ECACE scholarship recipients and provided wrap-around support.

ECACE Mentors

The primary role of the mentor was to coordinate academic success across campus departments and with outside partners to advocate for their ECACE students. The coordination often included being in contact with the financial aid office and/or ISAC to ensure students received their scholarship or other funding necessary to continue; being in touch with faculty to identify students who are struggling in class; and being in regular contact with navigators to support recruitment and help students transition onto campus.

Mentors worked closely with faculty to monitor student progress and intervene if there were concerns. Mentors were encouraged to take a proactive role in serving students, including meeting with them regularly throughout the year. Mentors met with Consortium students to provide technical assistance, support, and coaching. While the majority of the mentors met with each student two to three times per term, the average across all institutions was about five meetings per student per term. The caseload also varied based on program size, and the average was 100 students per full time staff with a range from one to 316 in Fall of 2024. varied based on program size, and the average was 100 students per full time staff with a range from one to 316 in Fall of 2024.

Several institutions' mentors regularly tracked data on student progress and provided extra support when they were close to graduation, experienced academic setbacks, or required additional academic support at key points during their educational journeys. Supplemental academic support services included engaging students in myriad ways, from contacts that included text messaging, phone calls, and emails; in-person and virtual meetings; office hours; and group workshops – to engage students in ways that met their preferences and schedules and offered opportunities for students to meet with their mentors/coaches onsite at their places of work to support ease of access.

Many institutions also noted the critical role mentors played in providing emotional support and encouragement for their students. For many of these students, competing commitments of work, home, and their education can result in a level of stress, impeding successful progress towards earning their degree. To

address this, Chicago State University, for example, hired a mentor with a background in social work specifically to provide holistic support.

The role of the mentor at some institutions was more fluid. Some mentors also served as recruiters, frequently visiting childcare centers and high schools. Others served as financial advisors by assisting students with FAFSA and ECACE scholarship applications. In addition, mentors assisted students through the process of enrolling in the Illinois Gateways to Opportunity Registry. Still other mentors offered event coordination planning and support, and administrative support.

During one-on-one meetings, mentors provided a wide range of support including assisting students with scholarship applications, providing academic guidance, offering time management and organization support, making connections to needed resources, and offering study strategies. In some programs, mentors were also the academic advisors, identifying course requirements, the degree that should be pursued (i.e., AAS, AA, BA with PEL or a non-licensure option), selecting courses, providing transfer advice, job search and career options, and more.

Optional or mandatory group sessions that provided students with opportunities for peer networking, mentoring, and support were also offered at four-year institutions. These sessions often had an academic focus. In addition, mentors at 4-year institutions have the added responsibility of helping prepare teacher candidates for the early childhood content test, a requirement for teacher licensure.

Unfortunately, when federal ECACE funding expired on July 1, 2024, many Consortium institutions could no longer maintain the mentor/coach role. Their departure was extremely difficult for institutions due to the invaluable role the mentors played in providing student support. We will discuss the effects of the loss of mentors and coaches in our next annual report.

Early Childhood Faculty Preparation (ECFP) Grants

Four Illinois higher education institutions were awarded competitive grant funding to establish programs to specifically address the need for post baccalaureate-level early childhood prepared instructors/adjunct professors in Illinois. The goal of the Early Childhood Faculty Preparation Grant (ECFP) Grant was to increase the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the ECE faculty pipeline. The programs were rich in diversity and used coordinators or mentors to provide a single point of contact and resources to candidates. Please see Table F-2 in Appendix F for grant spending by institution.

Through specialized programming, mentoring and holistic support, all four Early Childhood Faculty Preparation Programs were all able to retain 100% of their enrolled students in their intensive graduate programs. These 88 students, 66% of whom were reported as diverse candidates⁹, completed their programs and earned either a master's degree and/or an early childhood teaching endorsement that prepares them to teach in a community college, four-year institution, or high school and, in turn, prepare future early childhood educators.

The master's degree programs offered at three of the four institutions – University of Illinois Chicago, Illinois State University, and National Louis University – were designed to prepare early childhood professionals to teach young children in a variety of diverse communities and schools. Unique to these programs was a focus on pedagogy, including preparing teachers for collegiate instruction. Institutions offered opportunities to practice teaching college coursework- either in person or in synchronous or asynchronous online real or simulated environments.

Lewis University provided a program to support high school teachers from high-need and/or diverse schools to teach community college/high school dual credit coursework in early childhood. Students earned a master's degree with licensure and early childhood, ESL, and early childhood special education endorsements or an early childhood endorsement to supplement their current teaching license. Programs included a focus on

pedagogy and mentoring on-site at high schools. Since graduating, the teachers are able to teach dual credit courses, and their high school students are able to earn community college credit.

OUTREACH AND ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

Both higher education navigators and institutions conducted extensive outreach to incumbent workforce members and with early childhood employers and implemented strategies to ensure that their programs and work responded to the needs of employers.

Outreach by Workforce Development Navigators and Workforce Participation

Navigators are employed within regionally based Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) across the state and guided by a cross-agency working group. During AY 2021-22 and AY 2022-23, Navigators and institutions did significant canvassing across the state, and many providers and workforce members were already aware of ECACE and the scholarship opportunity. At the same time, navigators, workforce members, providers, and institutions recognized that federal scholarship funding would expire at the end of the academic year. It was unknown whether the General Assembly would allocate state funding to continue the scholarship, and if so, at what level. However, everyone was aware that the scholarship would likely not continue at current funding levels; in AY 2023-24, over \$68 million had been awarded to scholarship students. Additionally, since the Navigator position was funded through temporary federal funds, it was unclear whether State funding would be able to maintain the Navigator program and how many Navigators would be needed. Concerned about job security, some Navigators found other positions within their agency, while others found other jobs. Many remained in their positions but shifted their responsibilities to meet the other needs of the CCR&Rs during the late spring and summer months.

In AY 2023-24, community-based Navigators continued to provide extensive outreach and technical assistance to workforce members throughout the state to encourage them to advance their professional development and pursue higher education degrees and certificates.

It's not surprising that despite the best efforts, fewer outreach activities were conducted than in AY 2022-23. Fewer potential students submitted interest forms to request contact with navigators, and navigators reported decreased interest in outreach efforts throughout the year. And though email outreach increased 44%, from 29,028 emails to 41,807 emails, this outreach resulted in fewer information sessions, 600 with 11,158 participants attending, compared to 1,181 sessions in AY23. Navigators hosted approximately 863 meetings to engage external partners to discuss opportunities for the early childhood workforce, compared to 975 in AY 2022-23. Navigators additionally conducted significant outreach via mail and social media; this information was not collected in AY 2022-23.

Table 11. Navigator Outreach Activities, AY22-23 and AY23-24

Category	Activity	AY22-23	AY23-24
Outreach Activities	General Information Sessions	1,181	600
	Participants in Sessions	Not available*	11,158
	Outreach Meetings	975	863
	Mailing Informational Materials	Not available*	659
	Emails	29,028	41,807
	Social Media Posting	Not available*	118
	Interest Form Requests	3,460	2,150

*Data not collected in AY22-23.

Navigators continued to play an essential role in providing technical assistance to students, which included supporting scholarships and financial aid applications, answering a myriad of questions, supporting applications to institutions, and handing off students to a mentor at the best-fit institution. Table 12 demonstrates how much technical assistance was provided, including via email (3,923), in person (1,621),

virtual meetings (977), texts (306), and phone calls (1,727). Though the Navigators reported fewer meetings than in AY23, they provided technical assistance to more than double the potential students, 4,882, compared to 2,079 in AY 2022-23. Anecdotally, this was attributed to more outreach via text and phone.

Table 12. Technical Assistance Provided by Navigators, AY22-23 and AY23-24

Category	Activity	AY22-23	AY23-24
Technical Assistance Provided	Technical Assistance Emails	Not available*	3,293
	In-Person Meetings	1,709	1,621
	Virtual Meetings	1,257	977
	Texts	Not available*	306
	Phone Calls	Not available*	1,727
Workforce Members Served	# Workforce Members Receiving TA	2,079	4,882
	# Students Connected to Institutions by Navigators	not available*	1,520
Meetings	Higher Education Meetings	707	1,061

*Data not collected in AY22-23.

Virtually or on campus, navigators reported meetings 1,061 times with higher education institutions. This resulted in many partnerships and “direct handoffs” of students to colleges and universities. In AY 2023-24, 1,520 were directly connected by a navigator to a higher education institution. Connections with navigators and institutions also lead to partnerships such as Navigators recruiting a specialized cohort at Harper College and recruiting enough students for John A. Logan College to offer additional summer courses.

Outreach by Higher Education Institutions

In AY 2023-24, institutions continued their outreach to both employers and the incumbent early childhood education (ECE) workforce. A total of 1,011 outreach events were conducted, engaging 20,128 participants.¹⁶

Compared to AY 2022-23, institutions appeared to have improved their strategies for reaching the incumbent workforce.¹⁷ Although the overall number of outreach events declined, participation among incumbent workforce members increased. Specifically, community colleges reported 592 outreach events targeting the incumbent workforce in AY 2023-24, down from 825 events in the previous year. Similarly, both public and private universities reported approximately 40% to 50% fewer outreach events than in AY 2022-23.

Despite the reduction in the number of events, participation among the incumbent workforce did not uniformly decline. Public and private universities reported increases in the number of incumbent workforce participants. In contrast, community colleges saw a decrease in participant numbers, contributing to an overall 25% decline in incumbent workforce participation compared to the prior year.

An analysis of outreach data by academic term (i.e., fall, spring, summer, and, for some institutions, winter) reveals that most outreach activity occurred during the fall 2023 and spring 2024 terms—the first two terms of AY 2023-24. This pattern suggests that uncertainty regarding future funding may have constrained institutions’ capacity to sustain or expand outreach and recruitment efforts throughout the academic year.

¹⁶ The number of individuals is **not** an unduplicated count.

¹⁷ The inference is limited by the data available because these numbers are not unduplicated counts of outreach efforts.

Table 13. Institutions' Outreach Events, Participants, and Connections with Employers, by Sector, AY22-23 and AY23-24

Outreach	Sector	AY22-23	AY23-24
Outreach to Incumbent Workforce Members	Community Colleges	825	592
	Public Universities	305	184
	Private, Non-Profit Institutions	432	225
	Sub Total	1,562	1,001
Participation of Incumbent Workforce Members	Community Colleges	20,213	12,512
	Public Universities	4,690	5,072
	Private, Non-Profit Institutions	1816	2,544
	Sub Total	26,719	20,128
Connections with Employers	Community Colleges	5,644	7,766
	Public Universities	475	235
	Private, Non-Profit Institutions	419	376
	Sub Total	6,538	8,377

Evidence of Engagement and Responsiveness to Employers

Throughout the 2023–24 academic year, Consortium institutions demonstrated clear evidence of strong, reciprocal engagement with employers as part of a shared commitment to strengthening the early childhood education workforce. Institutions listened closely to employer feedback and responded with targeted actions, resulting in programming and partnerships that supported workforce development, organizational stability, and student success.

Institutions reported connections with 8,377 employers and/or schools over AY 2023-24.¹⁸ Across the Consortium, institutions reported over 850 unduplicated employer connections, reflecting the breadth and consistency of employer engagement throughout the year. Reported from 70% of the member institutions, these connections were established and maintained through site visits, phone calls, virtual meetings, and network events that fostered collaboration and trust.

To support employer recruitment efforts, institutions hosted virtual information sessions, in-person career fairs, and other student-employer networking opportunities. A standout event was the Early Childhood Workforce Career Expo, hosted by the University of Illinois Chicago in partnership with the City of Chicago and community and industry partners. Feedback collected from these employer-facing engagements suggested effectiveness of expanding hiring pipelines and increasing visibility around early childhood careers. Institutions also worked to ensure that employer voices directly shaped the design and delivery of educational programs. 63% of institutions reported active employer participation on advisory boards, where employers offered valuable input into curriculum development and program structure. This ongoing feedback loop helped ensure that training remained relevant, practical, and aligned with real-world workforce needs.

In response to feedback about workforce disruptions caused by student teaching and practicum requirements, especially when placements involved multiple age groups—stitutions made notable adjustments to allow incumbent workers to complete required field experiences at their current workplaces. See more details in the “Supervised Field Experiences” section on page 21.

¹⁸ The number of employers and schools is **not** an unduplicated count.

Similarly, 73% of institutions reported adapting programming to meet student-employees' and employers' needs. These adaptations included asynchronous learning options, evening and after-work courses, instruction held near childcare centers, and virtual evaluations. Triton College explored the feasibility of offering programming onsite at employer locations—an example of proactive responsiveness to employer preferences. See more details in the "Course Modalities" section on page 20.

Language accessibility was another recurring theme—identified by employers serving linguistically diverse communities. Several institutions launched bilingual Spanish-English programming to support Spanish-speaking employees in pursuing credentials. Harper College, for example, implemented a bilingual ECE Level 2 Gateways Credential course, enabling staff to begin earning credentials while continuing to build English fluency.

Institutions also provided professional development (PD) opportunities tailored to the needs of current early childhood providers and their staff. 45% of member institutions reported offering professional development, demonstrating a broader commitment to strengthening the existing workforce. For instance, Western Illinois University delivered free PD through grant funding, while Blackburn College offered continuing education credits in collaboration with employer partners.

Taking together, these actions of engagement with employers and partnerships developed across the state reflect a model of shared responsibility for workforce development—one that prioritizes flexibility, inclusivity, and alignment with field-based needs. Centering employer feedback and implementing data-informed changes, consortium institutions have helped stabilize the early childhood workforce while enhancing the accessibility, relevance, and impact of their programs.

ECACE Marketing Campaign – The ECACE Effect

In collaboration with IBHE, ICCB, and ISAC, and with the expertise of a marketing agency, ECACE ran a paid digital marketing campaign titled "The ECACE Effect." Through "The ECACE Effect," agencies sought to highlight the work of the Consortium to serve the needs of the current early childhood workforce, the employers of early childhood educators, and to advance racial/ethnic equity.

The primary goal of the campaign was to inform members of the early childhood workforce of the benefits of continuing their education and how ECACE can help them reach their educational goals. The secondary goal of the campaign was to educate stakeholders of the positive impact ECACE has had on current ECACE students and how their support will continue to benefit the early childhood education landscape in the state. Overall, the campaign was to ensure members of the targeted audiences have an understanding that the Consortium streamlines pathways to degree completion and increases access to higher education for early childhood. All of these efforts benefit the workforce, employers, and the early childhood education sector.

To best convey the true impact of ECACE, testimonials from ECACE students were recorded and turned into 15 and 30 second video advertisements. Current ECACE students – who were also full-time employees of a school or daycare center at the time – were recruited to participate in the campaign. The selected students provided real-life examples of how ECACE has made a positive impact in their career. Selecting current students allowed the campaign to feel genuine for the audiences, which would ultimately allow for the key messages to be more effectively communicated.

Throughout the testimonials, students expressed that ECACE lifted a financial burden by providing financial assistance through the ECACE Scholarship – making it possible to afford their continuing education given many have families and other financial responsibilities. Students also appreciated the opportunity to enroll in evening classes. This allowed students to continue to work their full-time jobs, tend to their families, and continue to work toward reaching their educational goals as adults.

The campaign, “The ECACE Effect,” ran from April 2024 through June 2024. While stock images were used for some advertisements, the most successful advertisements – those that garnered the most clicks and interactions – were those that highlighted the story of an ECACE student. LinkedIn, search engine marketing, targeted display, cross-device video, and email marketing were the highest performing tactics. Some of these are featured throughout the report. Overall, the campaign’s goals were met, and student testimonials were an important component in meeting those goals.

LOOK AHEAD: CONSORTIUM SUSTAINABILITY IN PHASE 2

As the work of the ECACE continues into Phase 2, sustainability becomes a central focus. IBHE and ICCB devoted considerable time determining how to continue reducing equity gaps and increasing access points in the Consortium's work as the federal funding came to an end.

During the Consortium meeting in February 2024, the members participated in a Padlet exercise to reflect on two key questions:

- 1) What could your institution do to maintain what has been built through the Consortium?
- 2) What could the Consortium do to collectively sustain and support students and programs?

Members expressed strong interest in identifying funding options for both higher education institutions and the Consortium. They emphasized the importance of sustaining the scholarship, strengthening agency messaging to encourage institutional investment, and seeking external resources to ensure effective funding allocation. Members also expressed a desire to maintain the role and functions of the mentors and holistic student supports, advance pathways such as CPL and flexible course delivery, and continue building networks and learning communities.

Following these discussions, ICCB and IBHE guided the development of institutional sustainability plans and will oversee their implementation. The sustainability plans aim to: 1) identify changes needed due to decreased funding; 2) identify opportunities to enhance or expand work that was started with the Consortium; and 3) pinpoint areas where state support will be critical to ensure continued success.

As part of this transition into "Phase 2", ICCB and IBHE worked with Afton Partners, a consulting firm, to assess the perspectives of institutions and state agency leaders and to provide recommendations for the Consortium's long-term sustainability. Between April and June 2024, Afton conducted surveys of institutional representatives, a focus group with Consortium working group members, and interviews with seven state agency leaders. This work identified several key areas to guide the Consortium's Phase 2 efforts:

Vision. The members did not view the vision of the Consortium changing. It would continue to be, *"Collectively and individually address opportunities and barriers for the early childhood workforce to access, persist, and complete credentials and degrees."*

Governance. ICCB and IBHE should continue leading and governing the Consortium. 76% of survey respondents expressed a desire for more shared leadership, but not necessarily governance between state agencies and institutions.

Advisory. The Advisory Committee's charge and operation needs to be made clearer and focus more on actual "advising", particularly from those in the field.

Institutional Engagement. Communities of Practice (CoPs) should continue to operate, fostering more institutional participation, knowledge sharing, and collaboration, while the Working Groups should make the charge and documentation more transparent and accessible for all Consortium members.

Working groups were established to assist with guiding some of the work and make recommendations for revision. For example, the Reporting Working Group reviewed reporting requirements for the Consortium to "elevate the great work of institutions and seek to minimize time and effort". The Creative Course Delivery Working Group was created to "identify and recommend ways Consortium institutions can jointly and cooperatively provide streamlined paths for students." See more details in the "Reporting Working Group" section on page 9 and the "Creative Course Delivery Working Group" section also on page 9.

In addition, new working groups are set to be launched. One will focus on updating the eligibility criteria for the ECACE Scholarship, which will be supported exclusively with state funds and aligned with other education scholarships awarded by the state, as noted by ISAC. Another working group, aligned with legislative priorities, will develop recommendations to standardize the recognition of CPL.

Meeting Cadence. One final change that would impact Phase 2 was a decrease in the number of meetings that the Advisory Committee and Consortium would have. It was recommended that the Advisory Committee meet twice a year (see more details in section “ECACE Advisory Committee” on page 8), while the Consortium meets three times a year, with one meeting held in person.

While AY 2024-25 will prove challenging with the end of federally supported institutional grants, the Consortium remains committed to realizing its vision in a collaborative and sustainable manner. It will continue to maintain student support and program changes when possible and develop additional strategies to make higher education more accessible for the early childhood workforce.

The Consortium will support the incumbent early childhood workforce through the following strategic priorities:

- **Seamless Pathways:** Recognizing that this work requires significant time and staff resources and may involve lengthy approval processes spanning multiple terms, higher education institutions will continue to redesign courses and implement transfer policies, creating seamless pathways for working adults in ECE.
- **Scholarships:** Although scholarship funds have been reduced, scholarships will remain an essential and vital component of ECACE to help students persist and complete their studies.
- **Mentors:** Mentors have played a critical role in supporting students. Institutions are encouraged to sustain the position or function of the mentor to maintain student support and program improvements when possible that enable students to succeed, persist, and complete their studies.
- **Internal Collaborations:** Collaboration across internal institutional teams has contributed significantly to ECACE’s success. Consortium members are encouraged to sustain their institutional teams, monitor students’ progress, and ensure robust institutional support systems remain in place.
- **Cross-Consortium Partnerships:** Continued cross-consortium collaboration will strengthen professional networks, promote the sharing of best practices, and further enhance alignment and pathways for the early childhood workforce.
- **Data-Driven Progress Monitoring:** The Consortium will continue to collect and analyze data on a regular basis to measure the progress and impact of ECACE, while fostering opportunities to network, learn, and share lessons learned across the Consortium.

Through these collective efforts, the Consortium reaffirms its commitment to addressing opportunities and barriers for incumbent early childhood workforce in upskilling, thereby meeting Illinois’ demand for well qualified early childhood educators.

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APPENDIX A. LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS FOR ECACE ANNUAL REPORTING

110 ILCS 28/30

The Consortium shall report to the General Assembly, to the Senate and House Committees with oversight over higher education, to the Governor, and to the advisory committee on the progress made by the Consortium. A report must include, but is not limited to, all of the following information:

- 1) Student enrollment numbers by academic year, retention rates, persistence, and completion in relevant associate, baccalaureate, and credential programs, including demographic data that is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, geography, higher education sector, and federal Pell Grant status, reported annually.
- 2) For students enrolled in early childhood programs, average assessed tuition, average net price, number of students receiving student loans, and average loan amount, reported annually.
- 3) Outreach plans to recruit and enroll incumbent workforce members, reported annually.
- 4) Participation of the incumbent workforce in outreach programs, which may include participation in an informational session, social media engagement, or other activities, reported annually.
- 5) Student academic and holistic support plans to help the enrolled incumbent workforce persist in their education, reported annually.
- 6) Evidence of engagement and responsiveness to the needs of employer partners, reported annually.
- 7) The Consortium budget including the use of federal funds, reported annually.
- 8) Member contributions, including financial, physical, or in-kind contributions, provided to the Consortium, reported annually.
- 9) Information on Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity Scholarships awarded under the Higher Education Student Assistance Act, including demographic data that is disaggregated by race and ethnicity, federal Pell Grant eligibility status, geography, age, gender, and higher education sector, reported annually. Employer type and years worked, as provided by students via the scholarship application, reported annually. To the extent possible given available data and resources, information on scholarship recipients' subsequent employment in the early childhood care and education field in this State.

APPENDIX B. ECACE MEMBERS AND INSTITUTIONAL REPRESENTATIVES, AY 2023-24:

Amy Maxeiner <i>Black Hawk College</i>	Robert Conn <i>Illinois Eastern Community College</i>	Elizabeth Gmitter <i>Malcolm X College</i>
Cindy Rice <i>Blackburn College</i>	Linda Ruhe Marsh <i>Illinois State University</i>	Dawn Katz <i>McHenry County College</i>
Lavada Taylor Inna Dolzhenko <i>Chicago State University</i>	Tammy Landgraf <i>Illinois Valley Community College</i>	Michael Rose <i>Morton College</i>
Jean Zaar <i>College of DuPage</i>	Stephanie Hartford <i>John A. Logan College</i>	Lisa Downey <i>National Louis University</i>
Diane Schael <i>College of Lake County</i>	April Darringer <i>John Wood Community College</i>	Tom Phlion <i>Northeastern Illinois University</i>
Penny McConnell <i>Danville Area Community College</i>	Melissa Szymczak <i>Joliet Junior College</i>	Laurie Elish-Piper <i>Northern Illinois University</i>
Marie Donovan <i>DePaul University</i>	Joy Towner <i>Judson University</i>	Marc Battista Paula Luszcz <i>Oakton Community College</i>
Laretta Henderson <i>Eastern Illinois University</i>	Paul Carlson <i>Kankakee Community College</i>	Brandon Nichols <i>Olive Harvey College</i>
Peggy Heinrich <i>Elgin Community College</i>	Traci Masau <i>Kaskaskia College</i>	Lance Kilpatrick <i>Olivet Nazarene University</i>
Shannon Dermer <i>Governors State University</i>	Shandria Holmes <i>Kennedy King College</i>	Nancy Sutton <i>Parkland College</i>
Laura Schaub <i>Greenville University</i>	Judson Curry <i>Kishwaukee College</i>	Eligie Wilson <i>Prairie State College</i>
Theresa Carlton <i>Harold Washington College</i>	Tanille Ulm <i>Lake Land College</i>	Kim Wilkerson <i>Rend Lake College</i>
Kathleen Nikolai <i>Harper College</i>	Randy Gallaher <i>Lewis & Clark Community College</i>	Patricia Aumann <i>Richard Daley College</i>
Johnna Darragh-Ernst <i>Heartland College</i>	Rebecca Pruitt <i>Lewis University</i>	Megan Broderick <i>Richland Community College</i>
Melissa Johnson <i>Highland Community College</i>	Kalith Smith <i>Lincoln Land Community College</i>	Amanda Smith <i>Rock Valley College</i>
Michelle Weghorst <i>Illinois Central College</i>	Ryen Nagle Cynthia Anderson <i>Moraine Valley Community College</i>	Kimberlee Wagner <i>Rockford University</i>

Jin-ah Kim
Roosevelt University

Jon Mandrell
*Sauk Valley Community
College*

Anna Helwig
South Suburban College

Stacy Thompson
*Southern Illinois University
Carbondale*

Natasha Flowers
*Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville*

Carolyn Beal
Southwestern Illinois College

Robert Kensinger
*Spoon River College
(joined fall 2023)*

Shekeita Webb
St. Augustine College

Suan Campos
Triton College

Kate Connor
Truman College

Kathryn Bouchard Chval
University of Illinois Chicago

Anne Pradzinski
*University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign*

Sharon Garcia
Waubonsee Community College

Eric Sheffield
Lindsay Meeker
Western Illinois University

APPENDIX C. ECACE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS, AS OF 12/31/24:

Co-Chairs

Brian Durham
Illinois Community
College Board

Joyce Gronewald
Illinois State Board
of Education

VACANT
Illinois Department of
Early Childhood

Ginger Ostro
Illinois Board of
Higher Education

Trish Rooney
Illinois Department
of Human Services

Members

VACANT
Senate Higher Education Committee

Alicia Geddis
Danville School District 118

Meredith Palmer
Richland College

VACANT
Senate Higher Education Committee

Francis Godwyll
Illinois State University

Joi Patterson
Governors State University

VACANT
House Higher Education Committee

Rochelle Golliday
Cuddle Care, Inc.

VACANT
Suburban Community College

VACANT
House Higher Education Committee

Ashley Harms
Amity Child Care Center

Jim Reed
Illinois Community College
Trustee Association

Jill Andrews
Kiddie Kollege

Michael Kim
Illinois Action for Children

Martina Rocha
Together for Children Network

VACANT
Union Representing Higher
Education Faculty

VACANT
Illinois Department of Children
and Family Services

Stephanie Schmitz-Bechteler
Illinois Student
Assistance Commission

Jennifer Buchter
Eastern Illinois University

Leslie McKinly
Chicago Public Schools, District 299

VACANT
INCCRRA

Kate Connor
Truman College

Lauri Morrison-Frichtl
IL Head Start Association

Mike Shackelford
Brownstone CUSD 201

Lisa Downey
National Louis University

Stephanie Neuman
Kountry Kids Learning Center

Tom Philion
Northeastern Illinois University

Laurie Elish-Piper
Northern Illinois University

Susan Orozco
East Aurora School, District 131

Ken Trzaska
Community College Presidents
Council and Lewis & Clark
Community College

Emnet Geberhiwet Ward
Eyes on the Future Child
Development Center

Evelyn Osorio
Service Employees
International Union

VACANT
Statewide Advocate

APPENDIX D. CREATIVE COURSE DELIVERY WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

The working group identified criteria that would inform decisions on collaboration and developed recommendations for potential projects that met recognized student and programmatic needs. The recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1: Selection Criteria

Use criteria to guide decisions to explore future collaborative projects around creative course delivery.

Projects should:

- Fulfill an expressed need, either reflected in data or through discussion and recognition that there is a need to be addressed;
- Represent the interests of a subset of the Consortium; all institutions do not have to be interested in or participate in the exploration process;
- Be of interest among institutions, who agree to collaborate to address the need;
- Add value to the academic experiences of students, individually and as a student population, and to our programs.

Recommendation 2: Programmatic

*Explore institutional collaboration in **programmatic areas** where students' access to and persistence in programs will be enhanced and programs will be strengthened.*

Examples of potential collaborations:

- Multilingual programming for non-native speaking students
- Sharing faculty for clinical field experience and student teaching, where travel to visit students is difficult.

Recommendation 3: Students Supports

*Explore potential areas of collaboration in **student support areas** that will address the provision of services needed to support student persistence and completion.*

Examples of potential collaborations:

- Financial toolkit, jointly developed and shared, with links to scholarship and other resources
- Online repository of student support materials (e.g., videos, links to website, content test preparation, resume writing and interviewing skills.)

Recommendation 4: Asset Map

*Develop an **asset map** of Consortium institutions programmatic features and resources that would offer a strength-based context for future collaborative work.*

Examples of institutional assets:

- Program/curriculum design (e.g., competency based; modularized; credit for prior learning)
- Instructional delivery approaches (e.g., online; Hyflex; bilingual)
- Theoretical approaches (e.g., constructivist; nature-based curriculum)
- Faculty areas of expertise
- Assessment practices
- Evaluation and support of student academic and social-emotional (e.g., mentors, advisors)
- Partnerships and external relationships (e.g., Advisory Councils, regional associations)
- Staffing models

APPENDIX E. ICCB INSTITUTIONAL GRANT EXPENDITURES

Table E-1. ECACE Subawards to Community Colleges: Summary of Awarded and Budgets, FY22 to FY24

Grantee	Three Year Expenditure Amount	FY22 Actual Expenditures	FY23 Actual Expenditures	FY24 Actual Expenditures
Black Hawk College	\$552,139	\$56,935	\$216,165	\$279,039
Carl Sandburg College	\$12,000	\$0	\$6,000	\$6,000
CCC – Harold Washington College	\$675,844	\$0	\$279,098	\$396,746
CCC – Harry S Truman	\$876,045	\$0	\$314,573	\$561,471
CCC – Kennedy-King College	\$604,066	\$0	\$187,433	\$416,633
CCC – Malcolm X	\$610,310	\$0	\$116,259	\$494,051
CCC – Olive-Harvey	\$614,378	\$0	\$116,569	\$497,809
CCC – Richard J Daley	\$660,721	\$0	\$123,445	\$537,276
CCC – Wilbur Wright	\$60,417	\$0	\$0	\$60,417
College of DuPage	\$809,164	\$0	\$328,627	\$480,537
College of Lake County	\$897,921	\$0	\$277,497	\$620,423
Danville Area Community College	\$636,672	\$0	\$182,510	\$454,162
Elgin Community College	\$1,257,393	\$0	\$538,723	\$718,669
Harper College	\$1,392,182	\$0	\$497,936	\$894,246
Heartland Community College	\$701,175	\$0	\$366,622	\$334,553
Highland Community College	\$622,225	\$5,395	\$204,268	\$412,563
Illinois Eastern Community Colleges	\$630,285	\$0	\$81,053	\$549,231
Illinois Central College	\$354,303	\$13,763	\$82,812	\$257,729
Illinois Valley Community College	\$656,849	\$467	\$279,212	\$377,170
John A. Logan College	\$606,730	\$0	\$202,316	\$404,414
John Wood Community College	\$677,355	\$0	\$322,750	\$354,605
Joliet Junior College	\$983,519	\$0	\$362,899	\$620,620
Kankakee Community College	\$592,358	\$3,079	\$227,908	\$361,371
Kaskaskia College	\$734,057	\$3,631	\$327,805	\$402,621
Kishwaukee College	\$582,446	\$0	\$225,610	\$356,835
Lake Land College	\$737,077	\$0	\$313,431	\$423,646
Lewis and Clark Community College	\$628,122	\$0	\$117,552	\$510,570
Lincoln Land Community College	\$509,543	\$3,793	\$194,934	\$310,815
McHenry County College	\$707,079	\$6,516	\$449,178	\$251,385
Moraine Valley Community College	\$790,325	\$0	\$261,449	\$528,876
Morton College	\$175,179	\$0	\$64,704	\$110,475
Oakton College	\$1,779,298	\$0	\$260,168	\$1,519,130
Parkland College	\$555,408	\$47,522	\$245,267	\$262,619
Prairie State College	\$743,216	\$0	\$323,143	\$420,072

Grantee, <i>continued</i>	Three Year Expenditure Amount	FY22 Actual Expenditures	FY23 Actual Expenditures	FY24 Actual Expenditures
Rend Lake College	\$593,862	\$19,502	\$243,583	\$330,777
Richland Community College	\$577,440	\$29,229	\$150,216	\$397,995
Rock Valley College	\$674,188	\$0	\$261,270	\$412,918
Sauk Valley Community College	\$563,396	\$14,740	\$131,016	\$417,639
Shawnee Community College	\$21,122	\$0	\$20,965	\$157
South Suburban College	\$603,905	\$0	\$156,026	\$447,879
Southeastern Illinois College	\$48,417	\$0	\$500	\$47,917
Southwestern Illinois College	\$1,264,640	\$0	\$432,917	\$831,723
Spoon River College	\$242,503	\$0	\$0	\$242,503
Triton College	\$799,349	\$0	\$269,793	\$529,556
Waubonsee Community College	\$859,906	\$0	\$427,045	\$432,861
Total	\$29,674,523	\$ 204,573	\$10,191,247	\$19,278,704

APPENDIX F. IBHE INSTITUTIONAL GRANT EXPENDITURES

Table F-1. ECACE Subawards to Four-Year Colleges and Universities:
Summary of Awarded and Budgets, FY22 to FY24

Grantee	Three Year Expenditure Amount	FY22 Actual Expenditures	FY23 Actual Expenditures	FY24 Actual Expenditures
Blackburn College	\$419,500	\$0	\$91,138	\$328,362
Chicago State University	\$1,070,985	\$12,514	\$293,805	\$764,666
DePaul University	\$377,397	\$0	\$84,518	\$292,880
Eastern Illinois University	\$523,354	\$0	\$170,134	\$353,221
Governors State University	\$2,100,427	\$27,131	\$514,173	\$1,559,123
Greenville University	\$307,220	\$47,283	\$90,739	\$169,199
Illinois State University	\$2,268,793	\$6,237	\$798,007	\$1,464,549
Lewis University	\$911,539	\$49,316	\$339,099	\$523,124
National Louis University	\$1,931,389	\$0	\$679,264	\$1,252,125
Northeastern Illinois University	\$921,107	\$0	\$264,538	\$656,570
Northern Illinois University	\$1,513,123	\$13,603	\$347,015	\$1,152,506
Olivet Nazarene University	\$692,060	\$0	\$292,402	\$399,658
Rockford University	\$311,604	\$0	\$111,899	\$199,704
Roosevelt University	\$1,032,089	\$0	\$251,056	\$781,033
Southern Illinois University Carbondale	\$888,934	\$0	\$238,078	\$650,386
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville	\$445,077	\$31,591	\$72,967	\$340,519
St. Augustine College	\$1,015,725	\$0	\$387,325	\$628,400
St. Xavier University	\$3,605	\$2,415	\$1,190	N/A ¹⁹
University of Illinois Chicago	\$1,381,229	\$14,705	\$488,002	\$878,523
University of Illinois Urbana Champaign	\$809,993	\$97,131	\$304,291	\$408,571
Western Illinois University	\$949,626	\$0	\$312,821	\$636,805
Total	\$19,874,777	\$301,925	\$6,132,460	\$13,439,922

Note: Institutions with a \$0 expenditure in FY22 were either not part of the Consortium that year or did not incur expenditures until FY23.

Table F-2. ECACE Subawards to Four-Year Colleges and Universities:
Summary of Budgets for Early Childhood Faculty Preparation (ECFP) Grant, FY23 and FY24

Grantee	Two Year Expenditure Amount	FY23 Actual Expenditures	FY24 Actual Expenditures
Illinois State University	\$906,643	\$258,228	\$648,415
Lewis University	\$354,759	\$128,534	\$226,225
National Louis University	\$1,186,497	\$97,987	\$1,088,510
University of Illinois Chicago	\$1,120,086	\$186,248	\$933,838
Total	\$3,567,985	\$670,998	\$2,896,987

Note: The ECFP Grants lasted for two years, beginning in FY 23.

¹⁹ St. Xavier University was not part of the Consortium in AY 2023-24.