

**TITLE PAGE: FINAL REPORT FOR THE RECEIPT OF FUNDING**

**ATU PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT**

**Spring Semester 2008**

**International National Presentations:**

*Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)*

**Title: *First Job Experiences—Recent Online Graduate Views of the Overall Program of Study, Perceived Use of Best Teaching Practices, and Job Opportunities***

**Submitted to:**

Head of the Department of Curriculum & Instruction  
Dean of the School of Education  
Vice President for Academic Affairs

**Final Report by:**

Byra L. Ramsey

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**FINAL REPORT FOR THE RECEIPT OF FUNDING  
ATU Professional Development Grant**

**Arkansas Tech University  
Professional Development Grant**

The Arkansas Tech University Professional Development Grant Committee granted funding for a professional conference for the spring semester of 2008.

The conference was hosted by the *Association for Childhood Education International* (ACEI) March 25-30, 2008.

Presenter: Byra Ramsey

Following Results:

**TITLE of Presentation**

*First Job Experiences—Recent Online Graduate Views of the Overall Program of Study, Perceived Use of Best Teaching Practices, and Job Opportunities*

**Attendees Received** copies of the research paper and were involved in discussion groups

**Research Question**—What are the perceptions of teachers who have earned their bachelor degrees online regarding: Category A the overall quality of the ECED program of study, Category B their continued use of best teaching practices in the classroom, and Category C job interviews/teaching positions?

**Problem:**

Online learning can be one method for helping to alleviate teacher shortages by providing teachers of quality in specialized fields and/or regions with high levels of need. Concerns after graduation include: (a) satisfaction of graduates, (b) identifying obstacle that might occur when seeking a teaching positions, and graduates sustaining best practices in the classrooms.

**Procedure:**

A qualitative research design was used for this study. Data were collected through online surveys and telephone interviews with recent graduates of the Arkansas Tech University Early Childhood Education Program. Collection occurred during a time span of 3 ½ months. The convenience sample consisted of recent online graduates (N=20) from the Bachelor of Science Degree program in Early Childhood Education (PreK-4<sup>th</sup> Grade) at Arkansas Tech University. The return rate of surveys/interviews was 45%, which was within the recommended one-third response rate when using a convenience sample. Collected data were analyzed using frequencies and narratives from coded telephone interviews.

**Discussions, Findings, and Recommendation:**

The research question addressed three categories:

Perceptions regarding

- the overall quality of the program of study
- the continued use of best teaching practices in the classroom
- graduates having obtained a teaching position.

Category A showed overall positive ratings with 80% in agreement.

Category B showed overall positive ratings with 82% in agreement.

Category C 100% of those responding had teaching positions in some field related to education.

The findings from this study provided areas to be addressed as well as affirmation for the early childhood online program. But, as with many studies that are drawn from a convenience sample, questions linger, what additional insights might have been revealed if other ECED online graduates had taken part in this study?

**Recommendations:** Follow-up studies should be conducted by collecting information from principals and teachers who work with the online graduates.

**Plans:** The next phase of this longitudinal study will address perceptions held by principals and teachers who are work with individuals who earned their teaching degrees online. To conduct this study, precautions must be taken to avoid placing online graduates under unmerited scrutiny.

**Benefit to Attendees:**

Attendees were active in the discussions and provided recommendations for future research. Three repeated issues expressed by attendees included: (a) preparing to launch online programs from their own universities, (b) meeting NCATE Standards, and (c) over all satisfaction of the delivery of the courses as perceived by graduates who completed degree programs online.

(See attached research paper.)

*First Job Experiences—  
Recent Online Graduate Views of the Overall Program of Study,  
Perceived Use of Best Teaching Practices, and  
Job Opportunities*

**Purpose of the Study**—This study is the second phase of a longitudinal effort to provide information that can be used to guide online programs of excellence in the School of Education at Arkansas Tech University. In the first phase, online and face-to-face students' assessment results were analyzed to discover if the online students were achieving at the same levels. In the first phase of this longitudinal study, analysis of collected data showed evidence that online students scored as well, if not better, than did face-to-face students on all of the assessments: (a) PRAXIS II scores, (b) internship evaluations, and (c) exit portfolios.

The impetus for the Online Early Childhood Program was to reach students who might otherwise not have the means to earn a degree in teaching and to provide quality teachers to regions who otherwise might not have access to persons who are teachers of quality and who will remain in the area. As discussed in Ingersoll's (2001) research, teacher shortages are prevalent in rural locations with small populations where schools tend to have difficulty attracting and keeping teachers. Residents, who grow up in rural communities and are able to find jobs, tend to remain in the region; thus, persons from these areas who earn their teaching degrees would provide a source of teachers. Barriers that might face individuals in remote areas who want to earn their teaching degree include: (a) traveling extensive distances to attend a university, (b) the necessity of earning a living and working at the time they should be attending classes, and (c) family responsibilities.

Earning a teaching degree online can be one method for helping to alleviate teacher shortages in rural areas. Harrington and Reasons (2005) found that 90% of the two and four-year institutions of higher education in the United States offer online educational courses. As online degree programs grow in number, it is "imperative that institutions of higher education provide quality online programs" (Kim & Bonk, 2006 p. 23). Establishing appropriate benchmarks for evaluating online degree programs is essential. Research on the quality and benefits of online programs should be of great concern for all educators (Allen & Seaman, 2005; Marx, 2006).

Online programs, as with face-to-face programs, must be pedagogically rigorous and learners should be (a) capable of doing the academic work, (b) have organizational skills, (c) learn to work with others, and (d) show the dispositions to provide safe and encouraging classroom environments for all students. Online learners, who are successful in completing their programs of study, tend to be (a) self-motivated, (b) self-disciplined, and (c) well organized (Roblyer & Marshall, 2002–2003). Characteristics of learners and their ability to collaborate with others can be observed during online group activities, discussions, and essays. These activities provide insights into teacher dispositions and provide an idea of the level of probability that these same individuals will continue to maintain best teaching practices in their future classrooms after graduation.

Earned teaching degrees are beneficial to the community when put into practice. A recent report shared by Carnevale (2007), in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, describes the challenge a Florida State University online graduate encountered when she attempted to apply for a job. She met with several negative interviews where principals questioned her ability to teach based on her online degree program. A study conducted by Huss (2007) found that 59% of the principals that were surveyed on their willingness to hire a teacher who earned his/her degree online "indicated they would be *very* concerned if a teaching candidate applied for a position with a degree garnered wholly or almost wholly online. . . . Ninety-six percent did not agree an online degree was as credible as a traditional degree" (p. 47). These

reports raise concerns as to the reception online graduates might encounter when applying for their first teaching position.

**Research Question**—What are the perceptions of teachers who have earned their bachelor degrees online regarding: Category A the overall quality of the ECED program of study, Category B their continued use of best teaching practices in the classroom, and Category C obtaining a job interview/teaching positions?

**Qualitative Research Method**—The second phase of this longitudinal study used a qualitative research design. Interviews, surveys, open-ended questions, a comment section, and related research provided frequencies and thick descriptions used in the analysis of collected data for this study. The convenience sample consisted of 20 recent online graduates from the Bachelor of Science Degree program in Early Childhood Education (PreK-4<sup>th</sup> Grade) at Arkansas Tech University. The return rate of the combination of surveys/interviews was 70%, n=14. Collected data were analyzed to find frequencies. Narratives from the comment section and telephone interviews were code. Data were collected over a 3-month period via emails and telephone interviews. Some items on the survey were not answered, an option given in the disclosure statement prior to participants taking the survey. On the survey, there were three categories: Category A—The overall quality of the ECED program of study, Category B—Continued use of best teaching practices in the classroom, and Category C—Job interviews/teaching positions. The research protocol was approved by the Head of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the Dean of the School of Education, and the Arkansas Tech University office for the protection of research subjects.

**Instruments for Collecting Data:** A Likert-type survey was used that contained a demographic section, 10 items from three categories, and three open-ended questions with a section for additional comments. Prior to and after the surveys were completed, telephone interviews were conducted. Interviews were based on a protocol drawn from the three categories in the research question.

**Participants**—Participants in this phase of the study were online graduates who received a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Early Childhood Education (ECED) from Arkansas Tech University (ATU) and who were part of the first phase of the study. An attempt was made to contact 20 online graduates, 14 graduates responded to surveys and/or telephone interviews, a response rate of 70%.

**Limitations**—A convenience sample of online graduates from an Early Childhood degree program at Arkansas Tech University was used in this study. Fourteen graduates responded to all or part of the questions. Contacting graduates is an arduous task, after graduation, contact information becomes outdated and response rates tend to be low. The results of this study should not be generalized to larger populations due to the small number of participants and the fact that the participants are from rural areas in Arkansas.

**Survey Instrument**—The survey contained a section for demographics, 10 Likert-type items, and 3 open-ended questions with an additional comment section. The items were adapted from survey questions used by the graduate school of education and a review of current literature. Two “reverse-order-questions” and the randomizing of categories were implemented to discover if there was consistency in participant responses (see attached survey). Content validity was established by reviewing items on a previously given graduate survey from the school of education and a review of current literature. All items were scored on a scale of 1-5, (1) “strongly agree” to (5) “strongly disagree”. Five individuals, who were not involved in the study, established reliability. The process included (a) completing the survey (b) providing feedback with recommendations for modifying items for clarity, and (c) retaking the survey to establish test/retest reliability.

**Result/Discussion**—Data from participant responses to the survey were analyzed and placed in a table. Narratives were coded and thick descriptions were reported in the result section. The finding for this study consisted of 14 online graduates, including 7 graduates who completed the electronic survey (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Likert-type Items**

Participants: N=All Online Graduates (20) n=Those Who Answered the Survey (7)		Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure or Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Category by Color	Category A					
	Category B					
	Category C					
1. Online teaching has given me the knowledge and skills to model best practices in teaching. (Category B)		86% n=6	14% n=1			
2. Earning an online degree in teaching was beneficial in my obtaining a teaching position. (Category C)		86% n=6	14% n=1			
3. My online degree program provided both information and practice that has helped me to feel confident while teaching. (Category A)		86% n=6		14% n=1		
4. If I was just beginning my undergraduate degree program of study, I would still choose to complete my degree online. (Category A)		71% n=5	14% n=1	14% n=1		
5. A great amount of the information I studied, concerning best practices in teaching, I found to be idealistic and not practical in the "real" classroom. (Category B)				29% n=2	29% n=2	43% n=3
6. After having taught for awhile, I realize that there were things that I wished had been emphasized in my online degree program that would have made teaching better for me and for my students. (Category A)		14% n=1	14% n=1			71% n=5
7. After having taught for a time, in the light of maintaining best practices in the classroom I believe that earning an online degree is as beneficial as a degree earned on campus. (Category B)		71% n=5	14% n=1	14% n=1		
8. Due to my experiences in online learning, I have found ways to use computers to enhance my students' learning. (Category A)		57% n=4	29% n=2	14% n=1		
9. Computer work is beneficial to the students I teach. (Category B)		29% n=2	43% n=3	14% n=1		14% n=1
10. I would encourage others, who wish to earn a teaching degree that will help them become teachers of excellence, to earn their teaching degree online. (Category C)		86% n=6			14% n=1	

### *Categories*

The first category, Category A, was to discover graduates' perceptions of the quality of the Early Childhood Program of study, Items #3, #4, #6, and #8.

In Item #3, "My online degree program provided both information and practice that has helped me to feel confident while teaching" showed 86% Strongly Agreed and 14% Not Sure or Neutral. Item #4, "If I were just beginning my undergraduate degree program of study, I would still choose to complete my degree online" showed 85% Agreed with 14% Not Sure or Neutral. Item #6, (reverse order question) "After having taught for awhile, I realize that there were things that I wished had been emphasized in my online degree program that would have made teaching better for me and for my students" showed 28% Agreed (which was negative) and 71% Strongly Disagreed (which was positive). Item #8, "Due to my experiences in online learning, I have found ways to use computers to enhance my students' learning" showed 86% Agreed and 14% Not Sure or Neutral. The lowest positive Agreement was #6, a "reverse order question" asking if there were emphases that should have been made in certain areas of the program of study. Even though 71% of the students strongly disagreed with this statement, 28% agreed that there is a need for additional areas of emphasis. The overall ratings for items in Category A were 80%, showing positive responses.

The second category, Category B, was to discover graduates' perceptions of their continued use of best teaching practices in their own classrooms, Items #1, #5, #7, and #9.

In Item #1, "Online teaching has given me the knowledge and skills to model best practices in teaching" showed 100% Agreed. Item #5, (reverse order question) "A great amount of the information I studied, concerning best practices in teaching, I found to be idealistic and not practical in the "real" classroom" showed 0% Agreed (which was negative), 72% Disagreed (which was positive) and 29% Not Sure or Neutral. Item #7, "After having taught for a time, in the light of maintaining best practices in the classroom I believe that earning an online degree is as beneficial as a degree earned on campus" 85% Agreed and 14% Not Sure or Neutral. Item #9, "Computer work is beneficial to the students I teach" 72% Agreed, 14% Strongly Disagreed, and 14% Not Sure or Neutral. The lowest rated item on the entire survey was Item #9 where two graduates shared the fact that there is not any access to computers; it is simply not an option because computers are not available in the classroom. Several other graduates lamented the fact that the computers they could use were old and outdated. The overall rating for items in Category B was 82%, showing positive responses.

The third category, Category C, involved discovering the perceptions and experiences graduates had when looking for a teaching position, Items #2 and #10.

In Item #2, "Earning an online degree in teaching was beneficial in my obtaining a teaching position" showed 100% Agreed. Item #10, "I would encourage others, who wish to earn a teaching degree that will make them teachers of excellence, to get their teaching degree online" 86% Strongly Agreed and 14% Disagreed. The results in this category are very positive with 100% and 86% in agreement with the degree they earned being beneficial. The demographics, interviews, and open-ended questions provide additional evidence of graduates having been successful in obtaining teaching positions. The overall rating for items in Category C was 93%, showing positive responses.

In the demographics, 90% (n=6) of the graduates were in the age range of 30-40 years, and the remaining individual, 10% (n=1), was in the age range of 20-25 years. Ninety percent, (n=5), of the graduates were female and 10%, (n=1), was a male. One hundred percent of the graduates had positions in the field of education in regular education classrooms as paraprofessionals, daycare owners, K-6 remediation teachers, cooperative professional development centers, and special education teachers. All of the

graduates answering the survey expressed an interest in earning a master's degree online; three have already begun taking online courses.

The first open-ended question asked, "Which areas in the curriculum did you consider to be the program's greatest strengths?" Answers included responses pertaining to the (a) depth of information and the rigorous curriculum in the early childhood program of study, (b) strong content of the science classes with the hands-on activities, and (c) importance of the discussion board in Blackboard when exchanging ideas and opinions. Even with the positive feedback regarding time spent on the computer, one graduate stated what so many others had mentioned, "When I think back to those LONG hours in front of the computer, I even appreciate all of the discussion questions that we used!"

Two areas of the curriculum, literacy and classroom management, were repeatedly praised as having prepared graduates for the classroom. These two areas were also highlighted as being key elements to becoming teachers of best practices. One graduate stressed the fact that he/she did not see one course as being more or less important to becoming a teacher of best practices; he/she felt the entire curriculum had been beneficial and necessary.

The second open-ended question asked, "In which areas of the curriculum would you like to have more emphasis placed?" Responses included affirmation that the courses were well planned, expressions of being pleased with the entire online degree program, the importance of reading in the classroom and the possibility of including the "Reading First" approach, and a desire to have additional emphasis placed on strategies for teaching special children as well as more information on parental involvement.

The third open-ended question asked if the online degree program prepared them well for becoming a teacher of best practices. Responses were positive and included statements about computer use prompting utilization of technology in teaching and that hands-on and multiple intelligence activities were instilled. One student declared, "I made a 200 on the PLT, I was VERY well prepared!"

One of the several students who brought up the need for additional emphasis to be placed on working with special needs learners wrote:

Before I started teaching special education, I really didn't think about students with disabilities and how to teach them in a regular classroom. I guess I thought that they would go to special education and they would not be my problem. (I hope the dear Lord can forgive me for thinking that way.) Boy, was I stupid! But the truth is that after working in a school for almost 2 years, I can see that many teachers do just what I thought was okay and it is NOT okay. It makes me very sad when my kids don't want to go back to their regular classroom and be with their peers. I know these kids can be a behavioral problem and they are not as quick to learn as "normal" kids but they just need someone who understands. I still want to teach in a regular classroom someday but I know that my teaching methods will be different now that I have taught in a special education situation. I strongly suggest that the students in your program be required to observe in a special education classroom. Not just for a day but long enough that they get to know the kids and are able to see them as kids and not see just the disability. I really think this would make them better teachers.

The comment section generally showed affirmation for the quality of the ECED program. Statements were made such as, "I would highly recommend this program to others." Even so, not all comments were positive. One graduate provided a lengthy narrative expressing his/her dissatisfaction with the program.

I felt like I was unprepared for certain aspects of teaching even when I was student teaching. During my student teaching, I felt like Daniel thrown into the lion's den, not at all prepared to teach everyday—All day. I will say that student teaching was far more beneficial than most of the



assignments I had to do. I feel like some of the assignments were “busy work” instead of work to prepare me to become a teacher. Also, some of the instructors did not instruct. They put the assignments online and we had to figure out what was going on and literally teach ourselves. **However**, don’t get me wrong, I am thankful for the program because I would not have been able to finish my degree without it.

**Conclusion**—The research question for this study addressed teacher perceptions in three categories. Category A showed overall high ratings. Item #6, a “reverse order” question did provide some variance in responses. A clearer understanding of the findings for #6 came in the comment section when graduates expressed a desire for additional emphases to be placed on special education and parental involvement. Information on “Reading First” was also requested. Another comment by graduates was a need for additional time engaging students rather than time spent on observations. Category B showed overall high ratings. One hundred percent of the respondents in this category felt that they maintained best teaching practices in their classrooms. The one graduate, who expressed some negative issues related to online learning experiences, still believed that he/she was using best teaching practices in the classroom. Category C contained only two survey statements. Responses on both questions were extremely positive. One hundred percent of those responding to this study are presently working in some capacity as teacher/educators.

The plans for the third phase of this longitudinal study are to address perceptions held by principals and teachers who work with individuals who earned their teaching degrees online. Huss (2007) found that research related to online degree programs tended to focus on universities, faculty, and students, rather than on administrators and/or peer teachers. When collecting data from principals and peers, precautions must be taken to avoid placing online graduates under unmerited scrutiny by principals and their fellow teachers.

The purpose of this study was to raise awareness of strengths and potential weaknesses in the online Early Childhood Education program at Arkansas Tech University. Many positives were discovered, thus providing a time to celebrate the successes of the graduates who use the pedagogy of best practices and who so aptly serve the children of their communities. This reach also provided key areas for consideration when reviewing online programs of study.

## References

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## **ATTACHMENT—Survey**

### **SURVEY FOR ONLINE GRADUATES**

Thank you for taking part in this survey. The information you provide will be helpful in planning online courses for our Early Childhood Education program at Arkansas Tech University. It is through such information that this program can continue to build as a program of excellence. If you have any questions, you may contact one of the persons listed below:

**Dr. Byra L. Ramsey; [bramsey@atu.edu](mailto:bramsey@atu.edu); (479) 970-9519**

**Dr. David Bell; [dbell@atu.edu](mailto:dbell@atu.edu); (479) 968-0392**

### **BEFORE TAKING THE SURVEY, PLEASE READ THE DISCLOSURE FORM:**

This research is being conducted to gain information from recent graduates of the Arkansas Tech University online Bachelor of Science Degree Program in Early Childhood Education. After your survey has been completed and emailed to us, all references to you will be erased; you will remain anonymous. The results from this survey will be used to help develop our online programs. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may choose the questions you wish to answer. This survey should only take a few minutes to complete, depending on what you choose to contribute in the discussion and comment section. Agreeing to take part in this research is appreciated and will benefit to future students. The findings from this study may be published.

### **COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING BY KEYING IN THE APPROPRIATE INFORMATION.**

- **Gender:**
- **Age within a five year age range such as 25-30, 30-35, 40-45, etc.:**
- **If you are presently working, the type of job you hold:**
- **Months or years you have been at this job:**
- **If employed in a school, the name of the school:**
- **Are you working on or planning to work on a Master's Degree:**
- **If so, what is the master's degree you will be seeking and where do you plan to complete the degree?**

### **LIST OF THE DEGREE OF AGREEMENT:**

**1-Strongly Agree**

**2-Agree**

**3-Not Sure or Neutral**

**4-Disagree**

**5-Strongly Disagree**

Place a 1-5 following each of the 10 items below to show the degree of your agreement or disagreement with the item. The degree of agreement can be found in the list above.

1. **Online teaching has given me the knowledge and skills to model best practices in teaching. \_\_\_\_**
2. **Earning an online degree in teaching was beneficial in my obtaining a teaching position. \_\_\_\_**
3. **My online degree program provided both information and practice that has helped me to feel confident while teaching. \_\_\_\_**
4. **If I were just beginning my undergraduate degree program of study, I would still choose to complete my degree online. \_\_\_\_**

5. A great amount of the information I studied, concerning best practices in teaching, I found to be idealistic and not practical in the "real" classroom. \_\_\_\_
6. After having taught for a while, I realize that there were things that I wished had been emphasized in my online degree program that would have made teaching better for me and for my students. \_\_\_\_
7. After having taught for a time, in the light of maintaining best practices in the classroom I believe that earning an online degree is as beneficial as a degree earned on campus. \_\_\_\_
8. Due to my experiences in online learning, I have found ways to use computers to enhance my students' learning. \_\_\_\_
9. Computer work is beneficial to the students I teach. \_\_\_\_
10. I would encourage others, who wish to earn a teaching degree that will help them become teachers of excellence, to earn their teaching degree online. \_\_\_\_

**PLEASE DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Which areas of the curriculum did you consider the program's greatest strengths?
2. In which areas of the curriculum would you like to have more emphasis placed?
3. Do you think that the online degree program prepared you well to become a teacher of "best practices"?

**Additional Comments—In the area below, place additional comments you would like to make.**

**Thank you again for taking the time to complete this survey!**