

Research Notes

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Achieving Center Accreditation: Factors That Impact Success

In 1985, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) launched the first voluntary system for accreditation of early childhood programs. The NAEYC initiative was followed by the introduction of accreditation systems by the National Association for Child Care Professionals (NACCP) and the National Child Care Association (NCCA). Nationwide over 10,000 early childhood programs are currently accredited.

The impact of accreditation has grown steadily.¹ Accreditation is not only seen as a benchmark of quality, it has become one of the most popular strategies for program improvement. Several states now provide higher subsidies to accredited programs and philanthropic and corporate support for technical assistance through the accreditation process has increased dramatically.² Despite accreditation's growing influence, less than one half of programs requesting accreditation materials actually complete the process and become accredited. In an effort to explore why this is the case, the Center for Early Childhood Leadership conducted a study to examine differences between accredited and nonaccredited programs and the obstacles that directors encounter in pursuing accreditation.

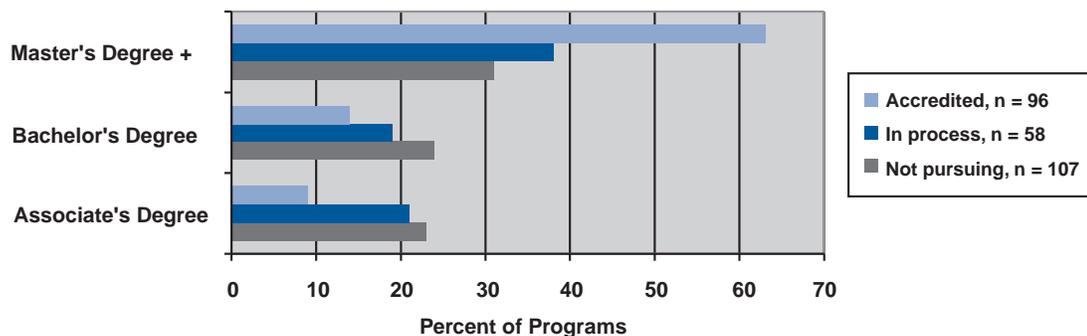
In August 2000, an accreditation survey was sent to licensed child care programs in Illinois. Of the 261 early childhood programs responding to the survey, 37% were accredited, 22% were in the self-study process, and 41% had not pursued accreditation. The sample included public and private, full-day and part-day programs. Participating centers represented the for-profit as well as nonprofit sectors and were located in geographic regions across the state.

Directors are the Driving Force

Since pursuing accreditation is voluntary, it is not surprising that the director appears to be the key variable in determining whether or not a program engages in the process. Of those programs that had pursued accreditation (n=154), two-thirds indicated that it was because of directors' self motivation rather than parental, teacher, or owner/board expectations.

When background characteristics of directors were examined, years of experience administrating an early childhood program did not predict whether or not a director had pursued accreditation. The director's level of education, on the other hand, was found to be a strong predictor of accreditation status. Sixty-three percent of directors from accredited programs reported having a master's degree or higher, compared to 38% from programs engaged in the self-study process or that had been deferred, and 31% from programs that had chosen not to pursue accreditation.

Education Level of Directors in Accredited and Nonaccredited Programs



Program Variables Have Little Impact

Program characteristics of accredited and nonaccredited centers were also examined. No significant differences surfaced for program type (part-day, full-day), legal auspices (nonprofit, for-profit), or sponsorship (e.g., Head Start, faith-based). The data regarding program size were not as definitive. One might expect larger centers to be more difficult to accredit. However, in this study, accredited centers had an

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average enrollment of 129 children, compared to 105 children for programs engaged in the self-study process, and 79 children for programs that had not pursued accreditation. It is possible that larger programs had greater access to resources and a more highly educated administrative staff to facilitate the accreditation process. The three most frequently cited obstacles encountered during the self-study process were time, staff turnover, and lack of staff support. These findings are consistent with those of previous research.³

Pressing Obstacles

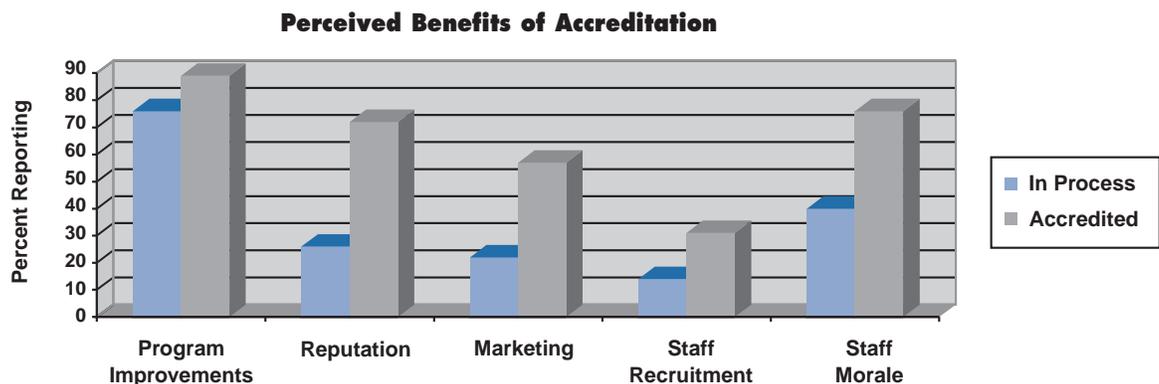
Directors of early childhood programs encounter obstacles when considering whether or not to pursue accreditation. The most frequently cited impediment to initiating the process was time (reported by 65% of all respondents). Those programs that chose not to pursue accreditation also indicated that the cost of accreditation materials (cited by 53% of respondents) and lack of knowledge about the process (cited by 42%) were also important obstacles.

Support Makes a Difference

Given that the cost of accreditation was an obstacle for many programs, it is easy to see why directors felt grants would be the most attractive means for jumpstarting the process. Sixty-two percent of directors who had not pursued accreditation reported an interest in grants. More than half were also interested in receiving support from a consultant. Directors who had pursued accreditation reported that they took advantage of numerous resources to assist their programs during the self-study process. Workshops, grants, and consultant support were all cited as helpful. The type of support that made the most difference in achieving accreditation, however, was mentoring from other directors. Forty-two percent of directors from accredited programs reported that they received assistance from other directors with accreditation experience, compared to 29% of those who had not completed the self-study process.

The Benefits of Accreditation

Despite the obstacles, directors overwhelmingly felt that pursuing accreditation yielded important benefits. This refrain was consistent even for those who had not yet attained their ultimate goal of getting accredited. Program improvement was the most frequently cited benefit, reported by 76% of those in progress and 89% of those who had achieved accreditation. Directors reported making improvements to all areas of their programs, with curriculum (65%) and physical environment (66%) mentioned most frequently. Directors from accredited programs reported additional benefits in larger numbers than those who were still in process. Enhanced reputation in the community, stronger marketing, help in recruiting new staff, and increased staff morale and commitment were all reported significantly more often from accredited programs. It appears that as directors engaged in the self study process, they immediately saw benefits from program improvements. After they had gained accreditation, other benefits became clear as well.



In sum, the word about accreditation is out — fully 96% of respondents in this study reported being somewhat or very familiar with at least one type of accreditation. Directors understand the benefits of accreditation, but struggle with issues of time and lack of staff support. Directors with more formal education and those who receive mentor support from other directors with accreditation experience are most successful in achieving their goal.

1. Bredekamp, S., & Willer, B. (Eds.). (1996). *NAEYC Accreditation: A decade of learning and the years ahead*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
2. Warman, B. (1998, September). Trends in state accreditation policies. *Young Children*, 53(5), 52-55
3. Talley, K. (1997). National accreditation: Why do some programs stall in self-study? *Young Children*, 52(3), 31-37.

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