



Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

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September 2023

- ▶ **Recruitment & Retention Scholarship Program**
- ▶ **Free 1011 and 1031 Coursework**

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*with actionable insights,
synthesis, and editorial support
from the Colorado Lab*



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This evaluation is being conducted on behalf of CDEC under the coordination of the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab's Early Childhood Evaluation Hub to build evidence for stimulus-funded early childhood activities.



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Overview

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) used federal and state stimulus funding to implement [Recruitment and Retention \(R&R\) Scholarships](#) and [Free 1011 and 1031 Coursework](#) to prepare the early childhood workforce to enter the field with the necessary knowledge and competencies and help existing professionals progress through career pathways. These activities support [CDEC's strategic goal #2](#) to recruit, support, and retain highly competent, caring, and diverse professionals across early childhood care and education settings.



- **R&R Scholarships** pay for students attending 22 participating public institutions of higher education (IHEs) to pursue dedicated coursework, certificates, and degrees up to a master's degree in early childhood. Funds were provided to IHEs to administer scholarships to students.
- **Free ECE 1011 and 1031 Coursework** quickly brings new professionals into the field and elevates assistant teachers to lead teachers. Students need these courses as a method to become early childhood teacher qualified and enroll in the courses through the IHE enrollment process. They do not need to be enrolled in an early childhood-related degree program.



We have gotten a couple of notes from students about how much of an impact [this financial support has had] for them to be able to stay in school.

- IHE Financial Aid Officer

Colorado's approach to these activities is unique from other states in the way that they are widely accessible to students. For both activities, students need to be enrolled in coursework and the Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System (PDIS) but do not need to be employed.

CDEC partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to coordinate the evaluation of stimulus-funded activities. The Colorado Lab selected the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver to evaluate the activities described above.



What We Will Learn by the End of the Evaluation

- How IHEs chose to implement the R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework.
- Who was served by R&R Scholarships and/or Free Coursework, including how many were already pursuing an early childhood degree and/or working in the field.
- Whether R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework recruited a diverse group of students.
- Whether R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework were related to enrollment in or completion of a degree-based early childhood program.
- Whether students participating in these opportunities ended up working in the early childhood field.

This brief represents early insights from the initial phases of evaluation work. Interim findings will be communicated in Spring 2024 and final findings will be delivered in Fall 2024.



Actionable Insights



- The quick roll out of R&R Scholarships led to a focus on retention of existing students rather than recruitment of new students. There is an opportunity now to build thoughtful engagement strategies for new students.
- IHEs had a wide range of implementation strategies for the R&R Scholarships which may shed light on which approaches showed greater promise for advancing a diverse group of students through higher education and into the early childhood field.
- The Free Coursework showed more uptake among new students than R&R Scholarships, but also required more intensive individual support for first-time students in higher education.
- The scholarship and free coursework would have benefitted from a universal application that gathered critical data in a timely way.
- There is an opportunity for the new Career Advance Colorado initiative to take lessons learned from the R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework to ensure greater success.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Evidence-Based Decision-Making (EBDM) recognizes that research evidence is not the only contributing factor to policy and budget decisions. EBDM is the intersection of the best available research evidence, community needs and implementation context, and decision-makers' expertise. Actionable insights across these domains are highlighted in the box above, with supporting evidence and additional information detailed for each in the sections that follow.



Best Available Research Evidence

Data in this section come from interviews with IHE faculty and staff responsible for administering the R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework.

As of Fall 2022, 2,175 R&R Scholarships had been distributed, with approximately 5,000 enrollments in free ECE 1011 and 1031 courses. Course enrollments include students multiple times if they were enrolled in both courses. Some students received both scholarship funds and free ECE 1011 and 1031 courses.

The quick roll out of R&R Scholarships in 2021 led to a focus on retention of existing students rather than recruitment of new students. There is an opportunity now to build thoughtful

engagement strategies for new students. Early interviews with IHE staff suggest that the primary reason for focusing on retention was the timing of when they learned about the funding amounts and any associated eligibility requirements. A faculty member at an IHE shared that their focus has been on setting up the institutional processes for distributing the awards but would like to turn their attention to thinking creatively about recruitment now that those processes have been established.



We have not used this scholarship for recruiting people into this profession...We don't know what we are going to be bound to so we can't roll out a recruitment campaign. Students who are already in the program...are the ones who are really getting to know about [this scholarship opportunity].

- IHE Financial Aid Officer

Community Needs & Implementation Context

Data used in this section come from interviews with IHE faculty and staff responsible for administering the R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework and CDEC stimulus program leads.

IHEs had a wide range of implementation strategies for the R&R Scholarships which may shed light on which approaches showed greater promise for advancing a diverse group of students through higher education and into the early childhood field. The Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) offered guidance to IHEs about how to implement the R&R Scholarships, such as prioritizing diverse, bilingual students to reduce barriers to obtaining qualifications in early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood special education (ECSE), in accordance with goals set by CDEC. According to conversations with CDEC program leads, CDHE provided additional guidance to IHEs that the scholarships are not need-based, and the funds could be used to cover costs associated with attendance beyond tuition and fees. Nonetheless, each IHE's early childhood department and financial aid office had flexibility to decide specific criteria for which students receive the scholarship funding. Early findings indicate that IHEs varied markedly in these decisions and implementation strategies. Some sample decisions for the R&R Scholarships included:

- **A 60/40 split between ECSE & ECE:** Allocate 60% of the scholarship funding to students in the ECSE program and 40% to the general ECE program.
- **Covering more costly courses:** Apply scholarships to courses that have practicum, field experience, or student teaching components.
- **Individualized funding:** Select individual courses to apply scholarship funding based on student degree plans.
- **By application:** Rarely, some IHEs funded any student in the early childhood program who applied while prioritizing bilingual students and applying remaining funds to students who still had a cost of attendance.

The Free Coursework showed more uptake among new students but also required more intensive individual support for first-time students in higher education. A couple of the IHEs offered 1011 and 1031 courses in partnership with early childhood programs like Head Start or a public school site. Students enrolled in these courses are often not degree-seeking, which presents some logistical challenges. A faculty member at one of these IHEs described how there is a short

window to enroll students for these courses that is made more complicated by the fact that they have not applied to the university and often have never been a college student. This free coursework pathway may end up being critical for students having the greatest difficulty engaging with IHEs, and this early finding means that IHEs also require additional support bringing these students into an unfamiliar setting and supporting their continued path forward.



But these are exactly the students that we most want to help, or the assistant teachers that the state wants to get into the workforce...And if they haven't checked all of the right boxes and met the deadlines and this, that and the other, then we end up with...lots and lots of communication.

- IHE Faculty Member

Decision-Maker Expertise

Data in this section come from meetings with CDEC stimulus program leads.

- **The scholarship and free coursework would have benefitted from a universal application that gathered critical data in a timely way.** Of primary importance is the need for more timely data about who is participating in scholarships and coursework as well as completion and passing rates from IHEs through CDHE, a key partner in implementation. Data are critical to understanding whether these opportunities are increasing equitable access among students. This is also important to see whether funding is too widespread and students who have no intention of pursuing an early childhood career are taking ECE 1011 and 1031 just because the courses are free. Ultimately, CDEC hopes to use the data to learn how to focus spending on students who intend to enter the early childhood field, how to better support those students, and improve the implementation of these activities to achieve the goal of preparing an early childhood workforce.
- **There may be value in building awareness of early childhood development outside of those seeking a career in the field.** The free coursework may have reached a broader swath of students outside of the early childhood field, which CDEC leadership does not necessarily view as negative. These students may eventually become parents who benefit from this foundational knowledge or advocates—including business owners—for early childhood. This wider reach among students could translate into unforeseen benefits.
- **There is an opportunity for the new Career Advance Colorado initiative to take lessons learned from the R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework to ensure greater success.** A recently-passed legislative initiative, [Career Advance Colorado](#), focused on offering free community college training for several high-demand fields including early childhood education. CDEC program leads might consider how the current stimulus-funded R&R Scholarships and Free Coursework might be partially sustainable with support through this new initiative, and the learnings from this evaluation can provide actionable information for the roll out of Career Advance Colorado.