

Examining Perceived Barriers to Access and Success in Higher Education

Issue Brief 4: *Successfully Passing Praxis I or II Exams*

Background

The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® (T.E.A.C.H.) initiative, operating in more than 20 states, provides [comprehensive scholarship support](#) to help the incumbent early childhood workforce take courses leading to two- and four-year degrees in early childhood education. Scholarship recipients are early childhood educators working with children from birth through 5 years of age, often making poverty-level wages, who represent the diversity of young children in our nation, may be the first in their family to go to college and work full time while going to college part time. Each T.E.A.C.H. recipient is supported by a T.E.A.C.H. counselor who helps them navigate college, work and family commitments and helps them meet the expectations of the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship.

In fall 2018, the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® National Center](#) (National Center) began a three-part study to examine what T.E.A.C.H. counselors, T.E.A.C.H. associate and bachelor's degree scholarship recipients and their faculty in community colleges and universities believe are the biggest barriers to access and success. Respondents include 61 counselors, 2,071 scholarship recipients and 170 faculty members. Surveys were offered in Spanish and English to scholarship recipients. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which 49 different items were perceived as difficult. These items covered six basic categories: College Application and Admission Processes; T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship Application Processes; Meeting College Expectations for Coursework and Degree Completion; Services for Dual Language Learners; Special College Requirements or Accessibility Issues; and Work/Life/School Balance. Questions about college affordability were not included on this survey, because recipients are all receiving scholarship support that allows for graduation from college with no debt.

Issue: Successfully Passing Praxis I or II

Licensure exams are another important step in certification of early childhood educators. Praxis I exams test basic skills such as reading, writing and mathematics, while Praxis II exams are specific to a course of study. Many potential [teachers have varying levels of preparation](#) that may make it hard to pass Praxis I or Praxis II exams or even find time to study; in addition, this same report found a disconnect between test materials and preparation book material, making it harder to prepare for the actual exam. These exams, according to many faculty of color, often [lack questions with content relevant to minorities](#) or non-traditional students, which may result in [lower passing scores for minorities](#). Test anxiety also plays a part in the difficulty of passing Praxis I or II. However, not all states use these tests of knowledge.

Findings

Across all three survey populations, successfully passing Praxis I and Praxis II are both in the top 10 barriers facing T.E.A.C.H. recipients.

- T.E.A.C.H. counselors (63%) and a higher percentage of college faculty (nearly 80%) rated passing Praxis I as difficult or very difficult. A smaller percentage of T.E.A.C.H. scholarship recipients (32%) rated passing Praxis I as difficult or very difficult.
- On the difficulty ratings of Praxis II, a similar number of counselors (61%) and recipients (33%) rated passing it as difficult or very difficult. Sixty-four percent of faculty rated passing Praxis II as difficult/very difficult.

“I haven’t taken the Praxis test yet and I am nervous about it. I have been studying but it has been hard to study for that and work and do other coursework.”

Nebraska T.E.A.C.H. Recipient

Promising Practices

Higher education faculty identified practices being used to address the barriers faced by T.E.A.C.H. recipients. This issue brief identifies three potential strategies.

Strategy #1: Employ tutors, success coaches and staff for students to meet with in preparation for Praxis I and II exams. Utilizing available help in the form of tutors or other staff members allows students to prepare for the Praxis I and II exams. Dr. Dawn Mollenkopf (mollenkopfdl@unk.edu), an ECE Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska-Kearney, said their program offers tutors (online through Zoom and in person) and success coaches to help students pass the PRAXIS exams. The [University of Wisconsin-Superior](#) also offers tutoring and writing support to help students pass both Praxis I and II exams.

Strategy #2: Provide practice preparation courses (online or in person) for students to access in order to develop the skills necessary for Praxis I and II completion. Some colleges, such as [Metro Community College](#) and [Alverno College \(WI\)](#), offer preparation courses for Praxis I exams. In these courses, students take practice tests and conduct learning activities related to [math, reading and writing](#). According to Dr. Amy Hnasko (email: amy.hnasko@wilkes.edu), an Assistant Professor at Wilkes University (PA), their program offers an online practice site and evening sessions where students can prepare for the exams as well as take various practice exams. Other colleges, such as the [University of Nebraska-Kearney](#), also have study guides, practice tests and other online material that alert students to what to expect on the exam.

Strategy #3: Make Praxis exams only one part of the screening process for teacher licensure. Another promising strategy, though perhaps more difficult to implement, includes waiving the Praxis exams and using GPA or degree completion as an equivalent marker for comprehension. For instance, the [University of Wisconsin-Whitewater](#) requires students to either pass the Praxis II exam or to have at least a 3.0 GPA in ECE coursework in order to waive the exam. They also have similar waiver requirements for the Praxis I exam. Waiving the Praxis exams in lieu of other measures will hinge on the degree licensure requirements set by the licensing bodies in a state.

The National Center is creating an expanding [list](#) of resources that address specific barriers in higher education.



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